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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| PROLOGUE: A BOY AND HIS FAIRY | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1: KOKIRI VILLAGE | 3 |
| CHAPTER 2: INSIDE THE DEKU TREE | 8 |
| CHAPTER 3: THE RANCH, THE MARKET, AND THE MAIDEN | 16 |
| CHAPTER 4: MEETING THE PRINCESS | 22 |
| CHAPTER 5: THE ROAD TO DEATH MOUNTAIN | 31 |
| CHAPTER 6: GORON CITY | 37 |
| CHAPTER 7: DODONGO'S CAVERN | 42 |
| CHAPTER 8: THE GREAT FAIRIES | 48 |
| CHAPTER 9: ZORA'S DOMAIN | 55 |
| CHAPTER 10: INSIDE JABU-JABU | 59 |
| CHAPTER 11: THE CALM AND THE STORM | 65 |
| CHAPTER 12: THE TEMPLE OF TIME | 69 |
| CHAPTER 13: NUMB | 76 |
| CHAPTER 14: HOME | 82 |
| CHAPTER 15: THE POE SISTERS | 88 |
| CHAPTER 16: SAGE OF THE FOREST | 97 |
| CHAPTER 17: REBORN | 103 |
| CHAPTER 18: WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO | 107 |
| CHAPTER 19: MOVING ON | 113 |
| CHAPTER 20: HAMMER OF JUSTICE | 118 |
| CHAPTER 21: VOLVAGIA | 125 |

| | | |
|---|-----------------------|------------|
| CHAPTER 22: SAGE OF FIRE | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 131 |
| CHAPTER 23: SEPARATE WAYS | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 136 |
| CHAPTER 24: WHEN HELL | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 145 |
| FREEZES OVER | | |
| CHAPTER 25: MORPHA | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 152 |
| CHAPTER 26: THE EVIL WITHIN | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 159 |
| CHAPTER 27: SAGE OF WATER | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 164 |
| CHAPTER 28: NOCTURNE OF SHADOW | ▲▲▲▲ | 168 |
| CHAPTER 29: DEAD HAND, DEAD END | ▲▲▲▲ | 172 |
| CHAPTER 30: SAGE OF SHADOW | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 178 |
| CHAPTER 31: BEFORE YOU GO... | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 183 |
| CHAPTER 32: HIDDEN FORTRESS | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 187 |
| CHAPTER 33: EVERYTHING YOU NEED | ▲▲▲ | 194 |
| CHAPTER 34: BACK IN TIME | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 199 |
| CHAPTER 35: ANCIENT TIES | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 205 |
| CHAPTER 36: SAGE OF SPIRIT | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 209 |
| CHAPTER 37: ZELDA | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 216 |
| CHAPTER 38: THE HERO AND THE SAGES | ▲ | 222 |
| CHAPTER 39: A CYCLE INCOMPLETE | ▲▲▲▲▲ | 226 |
| CHAPTER 40: SACRIFICIAL DIVIDE | ▲▲▲▲▲ | 231 |
| EPILOGUE: YOUR REWARD | ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲ | 237 |



PROLOGUE

A BOY AND HIS FAIRY

In the vast, deep forest of Hyrule... Long have I served as the guardian spirit... I am known as the Deku Tree... The children of the forest, the Kokiri, live here with me. Each Kokiri has his or her own guardian fairy.

However, there is one boy who does not have a fairy...

The Great Deku Tree stood in the center of his clearing, watching over the forest. The children of the forest were all asleep, the early morning sun having only just peeked over the distant trees on the horizon.

"Navi..." the Deku Tree called. "Navi, where art thou? Come hither..."

A tiny blue fairy fluttered out of the trees around the clearing. She was nothing more than a ball of light with four glistening wings -- should you look without a second glance, that is -- but if you looked closer you'd see the frail elven body the light hid. This was Navi, a young fairy. She flew up to hover before the Deku Tree, answering his call.

"Oh, Navi the fairy... Listen to my words, the words of the Deku Tree... Dost thou sense it? The climate of evil descending upon this realm... Malevolent forces even now are mustering to attack our land of Hyrule... For so long, the Kokiri forest, the source of life, has stood as a barrier, deterring outsiders and maintaining the order of the world..."

The Deku Tree took a deep breath, Navi waiting patiently for him to continue. "But, before this tremendous evil power, even my power is as nothing... It seems the time has come for the boy without a fairy to begin his journey... The youth whose destiny it is to lead Hyrule to the path of justice and truth... Navi... go now! Find our young friend and guide him to me... I do not have much time left. Fly, Navi, fly! The fate of the forest, nay, the world, depends upon thee!"

Navi nodded vigorously, already flying down the path to the village hidden in the forest. She was so excited to finally be paired with one of the Kokiri! It was something every fairy waited for. Navi thought she was still too young, but the Deku Tree seemed to think otherwise and Navi wasn't going to argue!

She zipped through the trees, shooting out of the trees and then rising to get a look at the houses. Each was made from a large tree,

hollowed out and chopped down. The ingenuity of the children of the forest never ceased to amaze her. Some of the children waved to her as she flew over them. Navi spun to greet them, saying hello to them as they got up for the morning.

Then she realized she was lost. She knew who she was going to see, but she'd gotten herself turned around.

There it was! The tall tree with the ladder up to a small porch. She flew straight for it, but in her excitement she hadn't noticed the fence in her way. She smacked right in to it. Laughing as she shook herself off, she finally arrived at the home which belonged to the boy without a fairy.

She hovered above the little boy still snoring on his bed. "Hello, Link!" she said cheerfully. "Wake up!"

CHAPTER 1

KOKIRI VILLAGE

Link barely cracked his eyes open, hearing someone calling for him. He ignored it and rolled over. More than likely it was either Mido yelling at him for something stupid again, or Saria calling him to get up early which he hated.

"The Great Deku Tree wants to talk to you!" Navi told him, thinking Link was still just asleep. "Link, get up!"

The Deku Tree? Link thought, pressing his face to the pillow. *Did Mido get me in trouble again?*

"Hey! C'mon!" Navi yelled louder, a little annoyed that Link wasn't responding. "Can Hyrule's destiny really depend on such a lazy boy?"

Hyrule's destiny? Link wondered, rolling back the other way. *Who's talking?* He forced himself to sit up, stretching his tired limbs.

Then he spotted the fairy that was bouncing up and down in excitement. "Wh-what?" Link mumbled. He didn't recognize this fairy, so it clearly wasn't any of the Kokiri's. "Who are you?"

"You finally woke up!" Navi exclaimed. "I'm Navi the fairy! The Great Deku Tree asked me to be your partner from now on! Nice to meet you!"

Link stared at her in wonder. *What an odd pairing,* he thought. Most children got their fairies when they were younger, and most fairies came to children when they were older. He'd thought he'd never get a fairy, but here she was, hovering around his room.

He held out his hand and she landed on his fingers. "Nice to meet you Navi," he said, smiling. "I'm Link."

She curtsied, then jumped back into the air. "The Great Deku Tree has summoned you!" she repeated. "So let's get going, right now!"

"Right!" Link nodded, jumping out of bed. They ran to the door, but suddenly Link stopped. "Eh, aha... Uh, could you wait outside for a moment?"

"Hm?" Navi fluttered by the doorway.

"I gotta get dressed," Link said.

"Oh!" Navi flew outside and Link closed the curtain door.

A moment later Link stepped outside, dressed in the traditional

Kokiri garb. Leather boots, sturdy belt, green tunic and matching hat. Everyone did something different clothes in the village, but Link liked to keep things simple.

"You ready?" Navi asked.

"Yeah!" Link beamed. "Let's go!"

He reached the edge of the porch and was about to step down on the ladder when Saria came running down the path. She waved up at him, her own fairy flying by her side.

"Yahoo! Hi Link!" she called.

Link smiled, waving back.

"Hello!" Navi said, sitting on Link's hat.

"Wow! A fairy!!" Saria said in amazement. "Finally, a fairy came to you, Link! Wow that's great news! I'm so happy for you! Now you're a true Kokiri Link!"

Link laughed, not letting show how much that stung. He'd lived in this forest with everyone else his whole life, he thought he *was* a Kokiri. The only difference between him and everyone else was that he'd gone without a fairy for so long.

But Saria was his friend, and he knew she meant well so Link let it go, dropping down the ladder and greeting her on solid ground.

"She woke me up this morning," Link said. "Said the Deku Tree wanted to see me! So we're heading there now."

"Is that right?" Saria asked. She was the most informed person in the village, so she was confused as to why she was only just now hearing of this. "The Great Deku Tree has summoned you? It's quite an honor to talk to the Great Deku Tree! I'll wait for you here. Get going!"

Link nodded and hurried off. He ran under the rickety bridges that crossed over the main dirt road, then passed the house of the twins. One of them peaked her head of the door, waving to her sister who was headed to the shop house. Link then crossed the small river that ran near the edge of the forest, and finally arrived at the path to the Great Deku Tree's clearing.

The only problem, was that Mido was standing in his way.

He stood there with his arms crossed, glaring at Link. "Hey, you!" he spat, pointing an accusatory finger at Link. "'Mr. No-Fairy!' What's your business with the Great Deku Tree? Without a fairy, you're not even a real man!"

Link shook his head. "Mido, I don't want to deal with you today." He put his hands on his hips and stared Mido down. "Mido, this is Navi. She's my fairy!"

Navi fluttered around Link's head, finally resting on Link's

shoulder. "Hello!" she smiled. "I was sent by the Deku Tree to retrieve Link! Please step aside."

"What?!" Mido scoffed. "You've got a fairy?!" Then he realized what the fairy said. "Say what? The Great Deku Tree actually summoned you? Whaaaaaaat?! Why would he summon you and not the great Mido?"

Every word this kid said made Link want to punch him in the face. They always got into fights like this -- Link would just be doing what he was supposed to be doing, and then Mido would act like he was better than everyone else. But this time, Link didn't feel like now was the time for a fight, so he forced himself to bite his tongue.

"This isn't funny..." Mido continued, looking honestly disappointed. "I don't believe it! You aren't even fully equipped yet! How do you think you're going to help the Great Deku Tree without a sword and shield ready?"

"I don't even know what he wants me for," Link answered, glaring at him. "And besides, it's not like you have those things either!"

"What?" Mido squeaked. "You're right-- I don't have my equipment ready, but... If you want to pass through here, you should at least equip a sword and a shield! Sheesh!"

"C'mon Link!" Navi said, tugging Link away from Mido.

Link grudgingly followed, stepping away. "Stupid Mido."

"I think he might be more right than he knows, Link," Navi told him. "The way the Great Deku Tree spoke made this sound urgent. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to bring something you think might help."

"... I'm only doing it because you suggested it," Link agreed. "Not because Mido suggested it."

Navi laughed, spinning around Link's head. "C'mon! Let's go find a sword and a shield!"

He'd thought about grabbing them before he left, but decided against it. Link had a sword and shield back in his room that he'd made himself, but figured he wouldn't need them. If only he'd ignored himself.

So he headed home, running back along the path. Saria was still near his house, drawing in chalk on the base of the tree it was made of.

"What is that?" Link asked, startling her.

"I don't know," Saria shrugged. "Something I saw in my dream last night."

Link looked at the image, unsure what to make of it. It looked like some kind of lizard with spikes on its back. Looked scary. "Why'd you draw it on *my* house?" Link mumbled. "Whatever, Mido said I needed my sword and shield to see the Great Deku Tree, so I'm gonna grab those real

quick."

"What?" Saria huffed. "Mido won't let you go to see the Great Deku Tree?" She put her hands on her hips and glared at the grass. "Ohh... that *bum!* I don't know why he's always so mean to everyone!" Then she turned back to Link. "What he said is true, though. The forest... Strange things have been happening here lately... You need to be ready for anything. You'd better find a weapon!"

Link wasn't aware of anything dangerous happening in the forest, but he knew Saria would know than he did. So he hurried back inside and opened the small chest he put his stuff in. He had a bunch of different tools -- like most Kokiri -- mainly meant for building their houses and things like that, but he and a few others had a sword and shield, just in case.

Once he'd strapped on his sword and his shield firmly on his back, Link set out once again. This time, there was no *way* Mido would be able to stop him!

Waving goodbye to Saria again Link ran back through the village and across the lake, stopping and standing in front of Mido.

"Eh, what's that?!" Mido asked, the stupid look on his face trying to compute with what Link had. It's like he didn't think anyone could carry out simple tasks. Probably because Mido himself often couldn't. "Oh, you have a Deku Shield... And what's THAT?!"

Link took out the sword. Mido wanted one, but it was only Link, the Know-It-All brothers, and the shop keeper who had one.

"Is that a Kokiri Sword?!" Mido exclaimed. "GOOD GRIEF!" He crossed his arms, pouted, and looked the other way. "Well, even with all that stuff, a wimp is still a wimp, huh?" He pointed at Link again, more determinedly this time. "I, the great Mido, will never accept you as one of us!"

Mido pouted again, walking away. He kept talking though, thinking Link couldn't hear him. "Shoot!" he hissed. "How did he get to be the favorite of Saria and the Great Deku Tree? Huh?!" He kept grumbling like that, but Link had already moved on.

Link was ready to talk to the Great Deku Tree, and now that he had everything he needed, he started down the narrow path to the Great Deku Tree's clearing.

Right around the corner however, under the arching trees, something lashed out at him.

Link threw up his shield as a reflex, but he was glad to have it, staring at the tall Deku Baba that snapped at him. It's sharp teeth and

sickly purple head bobbed up and down, watching him. It was scarier than it looked, but Link saw two more behind it. What's more, the Great Deku Tree's magic protected the forest... but if these things were this close to him...

"Something's wrong," Link hissed.

"These weren't here before," Navi noticed. "I came this way when the Great Deku Tree sent me to get you!"

Link cut them down, and hurried ahead. He kept his sword out as he stepped into the Deku Tree's clearing. He looked up at the giant tree, a face carved from the side of it. He looked sad today... he never looked sad...

"Great Deku Tree!" Navi exclaimed. "I'm back!"

"Great Deku Tree," Link said, looking up at him. "Are you okay?"

"Oh... Navi... Thou hast returned," the Great Deku Tree looked down at them. "Link... welcome... Listen carefully to what I, the Deku Tree, am about to tell thee..."

Link nodded, sheathing his sword and taking a seat in front of the tree.

"Thy slumber these past moons must have been restless and full of nightmares..." Link thought about the monster Saria was drawing, and admitted to himself that his own dreams haven't exactly been much better. "As servants of evil gain strength, a vile climate pervades the land and causes nightmares to those sensitive to it... Verily, thou hast felt it..."

Link nodded.

"Link... The time has come to test thy courage... I have been cursed... I need thee to break the curse with thy wisdom and courage. Dost thou have courage enough to undertake this task?"

Link got to his feet. "Yes," he nodded. He didn't have to think about his answer. His whole life the Great Deku Tree watched over him and his friends. Though that life has not been long, he would do what he had to help him.

"Then enter, brave Link," the Great Deku Tree said. "And thou too, Navi..." now he spoke directly to the fairy. "Navi the fairy... Thou must aid Link... And Link... when Navi speaks listen well to her words of wisdom..."

Link nodded, drawing his sword again.

The Great Deku Tree opened his wooden mouth, revealing a large open doorway.

Link stepped inside.

CHAPTER 2

INSIDE THE DEKU TREE

Link crept into the wooden cavern inside the Great Deku Tree. It was dark, and cold. He could feel the old tree shivering, he heard the creaking of the ancient infrastructure. Webs covered the walls and floor, strands of it dangling from the ceiling as well. When the Deku Tree had told him he'd been cursed, Link hadn't expected something this... serious.

Navi shimmered beside him, clearly scared of what they would find in this place. "At least my glow will help light the way!" she stammered, keeping her voice quiet but trying to stay positive.

"Glad to see *one* of us is keeping their cool," Link mumbled, tucking his arms at his sides. He and the other Kokiri grew up in the forest, so they were used to dealing with bugs and the occasional large critter. That didn't change the fact that this place was terrifying. "Come on... do you know where to go?"

"As big as he is he's still a tree," Navi said. "There can't be much to search through... right?"

"I do *not* want to be in here forever," Link sighed. "So let's hope we... can... Whoa..."

Navi hid behind Link's head as Link stared up to the giant spider. It was bigger than him... and looked to have an enormous skull as a shell.

"A Skulltula," Navi squeaked. "Massive spiders!"

Link drew his sword and held his shield firmly in front of him. "So... I just hit it?"

"That skull looks hard Link, you might just make it angry."

"... I have a plan," Link said. He didn't stop for a second to explain, because he knew if he did he'd chicken out of it. So he dashed forward, slashed at it as it dangled from its web, and spun it around. Then he stabbed it through its underbelly.

It wriggled and hissed, almost screaming. Link screamed back, startled, and stabbed it again. He kicked it off of his sword and it fell to the ground on its back. Link then turned around, threw his sword on the floor, and slammed his shield against the wall, leaning against it.

"You okay?" Navi asked.

"Yup," Link nodded. "Would have been great if *anyone* bothered to prepare me for this though." He took a deep breath, calming himself. "I'm fine though... let's just keep going."

Navi nodded and sat on his shoulder. He continued across the small room, stopping near the center of it at the edge of a pit that was covered in webs. The chamber seemed to stretch upwards into the darkness, but looking at the covered pit, it felt like something was trying to keep him out.

"That's where we need to go," Link said. He knelt by the pit and started cutting at the webs, but it wasn't doing much. He'd hoped to just slash through it, but this didn't seem to be ordinary webbing. Sawing at it was the best he could do, and did little to nothing.

"Do you need help?"

"No," Link hissed, gritting his teeth and sawing harder.

"Webs are flammable," Navi suggested.

"There's no torches here," Link told her.

"You could jump from a high place and fall through it," Navi suggested.

"Yeah or bounce off it and slam into something," Link chuckled. "Or I *do* go through it and slam into something."

Navi pouted, staring at the webs. "I think I see water down there!" she exclaimed. "And as strong as they are, I don't think they'd hold you. Try jumping on it."

Link knelt closer to the webs. She was right, there was water beneath it, and it wasn't too far. "Okay," he said, sheathing his sword. "Let's hope *this* works."

He walked out into the middle of it, moving cautiously to keep his balance. When he reached the center, he started bouncing until he gained momentum enough to jump. The webs stretched and shook, and suddenly they all started snapping. The force of Link's weight sent him flying straight them.

Link screamed, trying to grasp for the webs to slow his descent but they kept snapping in his grasp. Then he crashed into the water, sending a wave splashing in every direction. He surfaced, fighting to get the water out of his eyes.

A moment later Navi fluttered down to him. "You fell faster than I thought you would," she said sheepishly. "Sorry..."

Link spit out water, adjusting his hat and giving her a sarcastically disapproving look. "Navi, I fell through it, and slammed into something," he pointed at her. "Your fault."

Navi floated down and sat on his head. "Meh," she shrugged.

"Meh?" Link laughed. "That's the best you got?"

Navi laughed back and they started looking around the room. There was ground nearby for Link to get back onto and dry off, but the path ahead looked scarier than before. Down here there wasn't anything *not* covered in webs. They'd fallen right into a spider's nest, and there were plenty of spiders that weren't too happy about that.

Baby Skulltula's watched him from every direction, staring at him through the darkness, only their eyes reflected by Navi's blue glow. A few of them scurried closer, but only to inspect Link. Most of them seemed to be afraid of the sudden intruder.

Then Link remembered it was the *Skulltula's* that were the intruders. He needed to get rid of them... somehow.

"That hall clearly leads to whatever we're here to stop," Link said, nodding to the tunnel of webs. "But... I don't think I can get rid of all of this."

"Don't worry about that Link," Navi told him. "I'm sure we'll figure out a way! Right now we just have to take care of the cause, and worry about the symptoms later."

Link nodded. He kept his shield above his head as he walked, keeping a low stance as well. The further they went into the tunnel however, the more spiders Navi shed light on. They all skittered away, but he could still hear them, and sometimes felt them near his feet.

Finally they came to a ledge, and Navi's light faded into the darkness beyond. She was unable to light up more than just the immediate area, so they couldn't see much anymore. Wherever they stepped into... there was no way to tell how big it was, or what was in it.

That is, until a new light shone down from above.

At first, Link thought a hole had opened up from this cavern up to the surface... But when he looked up at the small circle of light, he saw the iris in it. It was an eye, and the creature it belonged to was quickly coming towards them.

Throwing up his shield, Link prepared to face whatever it was that was cursing the Great Deku Tree.

And when he could finally see it... he froze.

It was the biggest thing he'd ever seen. Two long arms with sharp claws at the ends of them, a warped tail that seemed to be less of a tail and more an extension of its natural body, two sturdy legs that shook the ground with every step, and its glowing yellow eye that took up the bulk of its body. This... this was a monster.

It looked down at him, pincers snapping, and screeched.

He felt Navi shaking as she tucked herself away inside his hat... but in that moment, staring back at the thing that towered above him... he found himself laughing.

It was funny, he thought. No training, no warning, no preparation... he was just thrown right into this with a dinky sword and a wooden shield.

And yet, he felt calmer now than when he fought the Skulltula only moments ago.

"The Great Deku Tree trusted me to fight you," Link huffed, pointing his sword at the monster. "I have no idea how, but I *will* beat you- *WHOA!!*" Link jumped to the side as the monster spit acid at him.

"*Nope nope nope!*" Link ran, finding a large column of web to hide behind. "Okay, plan time." He looked over his shoulder and saw it watching him. It crept closer.

"It's eye has to be it's weakest point," Link mumbled to himself. "So all I have to do is... Find a way to hit it."

He jumped out. "Hey!" he ducked back behind the column as the monster came running, then ran around it, coming at the monster from behind. He jumped onto it's leg, climbing onto it's back.

It tried to kick him off, spinning in circles and throwing itself back. But Link held on tight, crawling up it's spine and sitting on it's head. Then he stabbed down into the monster's eye, pulling the blade up through the iris.

The monster screeched, grabbing at him. Link slashed at it's claws as well, and eventually the monster stopped, falling to the ground.

Unsure if the beast was dead or just unconscious, Link dug a few more cuts into it. Then the monster's exoskeleton turned back and Link jumped away, surprised. He didn't expect it to explode, so he was late in putting up his shield as bits of shell were thrown at him.

"That," Link mumbled. "Could've gone worse..."

"... You beat it!" Navi gasped, peeking out from under his hat. "Whoa!"

"Yeah," Link huffed, dropping to his knees for a moment and letting his sword fall to his side. "... We need to talk to the Deku Tree... ask him what's next."

"Yeah," Navi agreed. "Let's get out of here."

—

After making their way back up through the Deku Tree, they

arrived outside and stood before him.

"Well done, Link," the Great Deku Tree said. "Thou hast verily demonstrated thy courage... I knew that thou wouldst be able to carry out my wishes... Now, I have yet more to tell ye, wouldst thou listen..."

He heard the same sadness in the Deku Tree's voice that he heard before. But why? The defeated the monster inside him... did he not do enough? "Of course I'll listen," Link said. "Yes."

The Deku Tree took a deep breath, his words slow. "Now... listen carefully... A wicked man of the desert cast this dreadful curse upon me... This wicked man ceaselessly uses his vile, sorcerer's powers in his search for the Sacred Realm that is connected to Hyrule... For it is in that Sacred Realm that one will find the divine relic, the Triforce, which contains the essence of the gods..."

Link wanted to ask so many questions already, but he didn't want to interrupt. The way the Deku Tree spoke... it didn't just feel urgent. It was like he was trying to say everything he could because he wouldn't get another chance.

"Thou must never allow the desert man in black armor to lay his hands on the sacred Triforce... Thou must never suffer that man, with his evil heart, to enter the Sacred Realm of legend... That evil man who cast the death curse upon me and sapped my power... Because of that curse, my end is nigh... Though your valiant efforts to break the curse were successful, I was doomed before you started... Yes, I will pass away soon..."

Link's eyes widened. "No... No, I beat the monster! You should be okay now!"

"But do not grieve for me..." the Deku Tree continued. "I have been able to tell you of these important matters... This is Hyrule's final hope... Link... go now to Hyrule... There, thou shall surely meet the princess of destiny..."

"Princess?" Link asked, growing more confused by the second. "Great Deku Tree I don't understand!"

"Take this stone with you," the Deku Tree told him. "The stone that man wanted so much, that he cast the curse on me..."

A light shone from the Deku Tree's branches, and a small green stone framed in gold slowly floated downwards. It glowed, resting just in front of Link's face. It was no bigger than the palm of his hand.

"This is the Spiritual Stone of the Forest, now entrusted to you by me, the Great Deku Tree... The future depends upon thee, Link... Thou art courageous... Navi the fairy... Help Link to carry out my will..."

Suddenly he began speaking even slower, like every word hurt to speak.

"I entreat ye... Navi... Good... Bye..."

The Great Deku Tree's leaves turned brown, and his bark turned grey. The air felt heavy and still, as the Great Deku Tree took his last breath. A warm chill bristled the leaves of the forest, and then the Great Deku Tree was silent... unmoving... dead.

Link felt his legs shaking and Navi couldn't even feel her wings anymore. She sat on Link's shoulder, staring blankly at the old tree. The watcher of the forest, the protector of the Kokiri, was no more.

But, the Great Deku Tree trusted them with a mission, and it was Navi's job to keep Link Moving. So she jumped off of him and mustered as much energy into her words as she could. "Let's go to Hyrule Castle, Link!"

Link looked up at her. He didn't know what to say, and turned back to the Deku Tree one last time. "I wish I could've done more," he said. "I wish I'd had more time." He tore himself away, turning back to the path to the village. "Good-bye... Great Deku Tree..."

As Link walked away, Navi took her last look at her old friend as well. She bowed. "It was an honor, I'll keep him safe."

She hurried to follow Link.



They stood at the entrance to the village, and all the Kokiri were standing outside their houses. They could feel the winds change, some kind of evil taking hold. And they all turned to Link as he returned.

"Hey, Link!" Mido shouted, working hard not to show his fear. "What did you do?! The Great Deku Tree... Did he... die?"

Link didn't respond. He had no idea what to say.

"How could you let a thing like that happen?!" Mido cried. "It's all your fault!" He ran back to his home, leaving Link standing there amongst the others.

For a moment, none of them spoke, staying away from him. They could tell he was just as upset as they were, but they had questions and thought Link held the answers.

When Link forced himself to keep moving however, the others came closer, asking their questions.

"What? Where are you going?!" one of the twins asked.

"Link, are you going away?" the other twin asked. "Will you come

back?"

Link walked past them, unable to answer.

"Mido is very upset!" Mido's friend said. "Did something happen to him?"

Fado grabbed Link by the arm, momentarily stopping him. "What did you do to the Great Deku Tree?" she asked accusingly.

Link shook her off and kept walking.

He left most of them behind, but it seemed one of them was smart enough to know where Link was headed. Of course, it was one of the Know-It-All brothers. He stood by the exit, staring down Link as he came closer.

"We Kokiri die if we leave the forest!" he said. "You're not going to leave the forest... are you?"

Link stopped for only a moment, but couldn't look him in the eye. The brother didn't try to stop him as Link left the forest.

Walking out onto the bridge that marked the edge of the forest... he made it only half way before one last person stopped him. To be honest, it was the one person he didn't want to see before he left, the one person he didn't want to say goodbye to.

"Oh, you're leaving..." Saria said, standing behind him at the end of the bridge.

Link looked at his feet, not even able to come up with the words for *her*.

"I knew... that you would leave the forest... someday, Link," Saria continued. "Because you are different from me and my friends..."

There you go again, Link thought, feeling that sting in his chest again. *They're my friends too*.

"But that's OK, because *we'll* be friends forever... won't we?"

Link felt his legs shaking all over again.

"I want you to have this ocarina..." Saria said, stepping closer.

Link finally turned around and faced her, eyes burning. He couldn't manage to look her in the eye, but he saw the ocarina she held out to him. The pinkish-tan ocarina that she'd always had. It was her most prized possession.

"Please take good care of it."

Link hesitantly reached out his hand, taking the ocarina.

"When you play my ocarina, I hope you will think of me and come back to the forest to visit."

She stepped back from him, looking off to the side, to the forest.

"... I have to go," Link choked, stepping away. "... I..."

He shut his eyes and ran away, gripping the ocarina at his side.

Saria watched him as he disappeared into the shade of the trees.

Link, only ten years old, child of the forest... entered the world of Hyrule for the first time. He swore that the day he came back would be under better circumstances.

He swore that the evil man the Deku Tree spoke of, the man in black armor... would pay for the curse he'd put on Link's home.



CHAPTER 3

THE RANCH, THE MARKET, AND THE MAIDEN

Link stepped out of the trees, rocky cliffs rising up around him. The wide path before him opened up to a world he'd never thought he'd see. It was grass as far as they eye could see. Hill after hill after hill, no clear roads to mark the way forward.

"Hard to think... this was always so close by, just on the other side of the trees." Link took his first steps into the greater world, feeling a peaceful wind in the air. This place hasn't seen the evil the forest has... not yet at least. "I wonder... why we weren't allowed to come out this far?"

Navi looked around, buzzing around his head. "I don't know," she said honestly. "Us fairies can't leave the forest either. It's just the rules."

"Hm," Link crossed his arms. "Maybe-"

"Hoot hoot! Link! Look up here!"

Link lurched backwards, shocked to see an enormous owl perched high above him. Its head twitched back and forth, but its eyes were focused on Link.

"It appears the time has finally come for you to start your adventure!" the owl said. "You will encounter many hardships ahead... That is your fate. Don't feel discouraged, even during the toughest times!"

"I didn't feel discouraged until you told me not to," Link said blankly, quiet enough that the strange speaking owl didn't hear him.

"If you go straight this way, you will see Hyrule Castle," the owl explained. "You will meet a princess there... All right then, I'll see you around!" The owl launched off of the tree branch, flying away. "Hoot hoot hoot ho!"

"Well, thank you for telling me everything I already knew!" Link sighed, watching as the owl disappeared into the clouds above.

"I'm sure he was just trying to help!" Navi said cheerfully. "We're going that way anyway, so let's just go!"

Link nodded and set out into the field of Hyrule.

After about four hours, Link finally acknowledged he was lost. He'd only been walking in a single direction, like he was told to, but there was nothing but endless grass and hills and the occasional rock wall.

"Okay, you're turn," Link said. "See if you can fly up higher. Maybe you'll see something besides grass."

Navi jumped off his shoulder and fluttered upward. Link lost sight of her almost immediately as her blue light faded into the blue sky, but a moment later she came back down and sat on his head again. "There's some kind of farm nearby. I see the towers of Hyrule castle on the horizon, but we should stop at the farm first to rest up."

Link agreed and they set out once again.

It was late evening by the time they made it there, but the front gate was open. Inside the stone walls that acted as a fence around the farm there were two buildings. They weren't like the buildings in the forest though, the houses made of trees. These were large and square, with most of it being made of wooden planks instead of just a hollowed tree.

"Strange," Link huffed, taking it all in. "I wonder why they'd build buildings like this."

"Not sure," Navi agreed. "Picking a hollow tree seems easier."

"... I guess there's not a lot of trees to choose from out here though," Link realized. He went to the door of the closest building, knocking on it. "Hello? Anyone home?" He cracked the door open, peeking inside.

All the lights were off, and there didn't seem to be anyone inside. So he checked the other building... only to come up empty again. The first building had a bunch of chickens, and the second had cows... but other than that, no people.

"Is Hyrule just full of animals?" Link asked. "Maybe they talk?"

"That owl could," Navi said. "I don't see why the cows can't."

Link entered the building with the cows, walking up to one. "Hello," he waved. "Are you the one who lives here? I need a place to stay."

The cow huffed at him, eating it's grass. The other cow moored, sitting down in it's stable.

"I don't think these animals talk," Link sighed. "Let's check elsewhere."

They left the building and went around to the back of them. There was a oval shaped path around the fenced in farmland, horses plodding along in the field.

But most importantly, there was a person. A man with a mustache

stood outside the fence, walking along the oval path. The Deku Tree told them about how the outside world was full of adults, children who got to grow up, but the forest didn't have of those. He didn't expect they'd be so tall.

"Hey!" Link called, running over to him.

"What?" the man scoffed, giving Link a disapproving look. "What are you doing hanging around here? You little weirdo."

"A-uh, I'm Link," Link said, caught off guard by the sudden hostility. He wondered if all adults were this grumpy. "I was just looking for a place to stay the night on my way to the castle. Are you charge?"

"I am Ingo," the man said proudly. "And I mind the ranch. I've been working at this ranch for a long time for that lazy bum, Talon. Today, for example, he's gone somewhere for a delivery and hasn't come back yet!"

"Clearly you've got a lot on your mind," Link said, taking a step back. "Neverm-"

"So I'm doing all the work around here," Ingo growled, ignoring Link and just wanting to vent his frustration. "Oh well... it's tough to be a working man." He continued walking, dragging his rack behind him.

Link stood there for a moment, not sure what to do now.

"There's lots of hay around here," Navi said from Link's shoulder. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you made a bed somewhere, just for the night."

"Yeah," Link nodded.

They found an out of the corner in the building with the chickens and made the best of it. It was strange sleeping in a new place, but at least it was comfortable. It was colder here than it was in the forest, but they found some spare blankets and made do.

"And tomorrow we'll make it to the castle," Link said.

"Yup!" Navi chirped, laying on her small square of fabric she'd found. "Then we'll can get that stone to the princess the Great Deku Tree spoke of!"

"Yeah," Link nodded. "Princess... I wonder what that means."

Early in the morning they got up and put their beds back where they found them, quietly hiding from Ingo and hoping he didn't see them. He didn't seem like he'd kick them out or anything, but they felt it was best to just avoid him since he seemed so grouchy. They also didn't think he'd

be happy that they took some food too, but it had been too long since they'd eaten.

And when they were ready, they left the ranch and carried on towards the castle.

It took the better part of a day, but at last those distant spires now towered above them from behind the city walls. A great wooden drawbridge was open and villagers came and went as they pleased, most heading east, but plenty of them heading south as well. Towards the ranch Link came from or passed it Link didn't know, but it was a bit overwhelming to see so many people when he hadn't even entered the city yet.

His village in the forest felt so small compared to all this...

"Link!" Navi smiled, tugging at his ear. "C'mon! Let's go! I wanna see the castle!"

Link laughed, leaving his worries about the world behind him. They entered the city, carts carrying edible or wearable goods took up most of the streets, but there were so many people all just standing around or going about their day that Link felt he would get lost in the crowd if the buildings were not so tall that they could be used as landmarks. And all the adults that blocked his view or bumped into him. He felt like he was suffocating.

At the same time, he couldn't help but get excited at the wonder of it all. He'd never seen a place like this before! Let alone *heard* of a place like this! He wondered why the Great Deku Tree hadn't told him more about this world. The great stone brick walls, the towering buildings, the people... something about it, just... felt right.

All the bustling movement, the shops, the noise. The forest was always so quiet, peaceful. Here, it felt like a different kind of peace.

"Hey!" someone called, poking him in the shoulder to get his attention. It was a young girl, no older than him, with long reddish-brown hair and a simple dress. "Your clothes!" she laughed. "They're... different... You're not from around here, are you?"

"No," Link answered. "I'm Link! I and my fairy came from the forest-"

"Ohh..." she nodded. "You're a fairy boy from the forest! My name is Malon! My dad owns Lon Lon Ranch!"

Link figured with all the noise she just didn't hear him properly, but he didn't feel like raising his voice to correct her.

"Dad went to the castle to deliver some milk," Malon continued. "And he hasn't come back yet..."

"I'm going to the castle!" Link said, trying to sound clearer this time. "I was just at th-

"Huh?" Malon asked, looking confused.

"I'm going to the castle!" Link pointed behind him, towards the path to the castle.

"Yeah that's where he went!" Malon smiled.

Link laughed, shaking his head. "C'mon!" he said, grabbing her hand.

They made their way through the crowd and onto the path to the castle. There weren't as many people who came this way, and the farther down the path they got the less people there were. At the point where the road turned the corner around a high cliff overlooking the castle courtyard, they could finally hear each other talk.

"This was where I was headed anyway," Link told her. "And I'm not a fairy myself, I have a fairy *companion*."

"Hello!" Navi waved.

Malon waved back, then elbowed Link in a joking manner. "You were going to the castle all along, fairy boy?" Malon asked. She looked up at the castle they were so close to now. "Would you mind finding my dad?"

"Of course!" Link smiled. "If I see him I'll let him know."

"He must have fallen asleep somewhere around the castle," Malon sighed. "What a thing for an adult to do!" She laughed, putting her hands on her hips. "My dad is really troublesome for an adult, isn't he? Hee hee!"

"Most are it seems," Link joked. "The few I've met anyway."

"What are you going to the castle for anyway?" Malon asked.

"I have to go see a princess," Link answered. "I have to... well, someone asked me do something." He pouted, staring at the ground. "Which reminds me, what's a princess?"

"You... don't know what a princess is?" Malon giggled. "You really *aren't* from around here! She's the daughter of the King, the person who watches over Hyrule."

"Watches over Hyrule," Link mused. "Like the Great Deku Tree..."

"Hm?" Malon tilted her head, confused again. "You're a strange one."

"We should hurry Link," Navi said. "It's already the afternoon again, we don't want to be late!"

"Right," Link nodded. "I'll bring your father back!" he said starting towards the castle. "Don't worry!"

Malon waved as he sped off.

"Almost there," Link smiled, hurrying towards the gate.
"Let's not waste anymore time!" Navi agreed.

CHAPTER 4

MEETING THE PRINCESS

"So you say you want to see Princess Zelda, eh?" the knight standing guard asked. "You probably hear about her in town and decided you had to meet her... Well..." He shook his head, crossing his arms. "Go home! Get out of here! The Princess would never grant an audience to the likes of you!"

"Wha- You don't get it!" Link argued. "I don't just 'want to see her cause I heard about her'! I'm a mission! *I have* to see her!"

"Do you really want to go through this gate that much? Let me think about it..." He pretended to think in a very mocking manner. "Ok, but in return... give me 10 Rupees..."

Link raised an eyebrow, then pulled out a small sack. "I have exactly ten." He handed the guard his rupees.

The guard looked at the money, then opened the gate. "Okay, I'll let you pass, quickly."

Link barely had time to jump through it before it was already closing again. "Thank you!" he said in hushed tones before running down the path.

There were more guards along the main path, standing at attention on every corner. Luckily the courtyard was full of short hill just tall enough for Link to duck down and hide behind. His green tunic allowed him to blend in with the grass, and before he knew it he'd reached the castle's front gate.

Only problem, it was fenced off and guarded.

"We'll need to find another way through," Navi whispered. "I'll sneak up behind 'em and knock 'em out! You make a mad dash for the front-"

"No," Link chuckled, hanging his head. "We'll uh... we'll go around. Can you fly around and see if there's an opening?"

"On it!" Navi kicked off and into the air again. The castle was too big to circle entirely, but paying closer attention to the lowest level of the castle in the immediate area she found something that might work.

She landed back on Link's shoulder, ready to explain her plan.

"So what did you find?" Link asked.

"There's a way over the fence on the far left," Navi started. "Then you swim through the moat, and there'll be a drain around the corner. It's big enough to crawl through! Plus, I found something interesting!"

"Interesting?"

"Yup!" Navi smiled. "C'mon!"

Navi led the way and Link followed her to the vines that grew over the fence. There were no guards in this area, so Link was able to climb his way over. Then he lowered himself into the moat, careful not to make cause any splashing. Continuing with Navi's directions, he was able to make it to the other side of the castle.

There, they found the drain, and the 'something interesting' Navi had mentioned.

"You could have just said you found him," Link whispered.

Navi grinned. "What's the fun in that?"

"What's the fun in *not* telling me?"

"Fair point," Navi nodded. "How do we wake this guy up?"

Malon's father lay splayed out on the ground, crates of bottles of milk staked up beside him. Most likely he'd moved them all here himself and tired himself out. He was a big guy, but he didn't look like he had a lot of stamina. Looking at him, Link kind of understood Ingo's frustration with taking care of the Ranch himself.

Since Malon was still so young and couldn't do a lot of the harder jobs, and her father seemed to be constantly sleeping on the job, then it fell to Ingo to do most of the work.

"Well we can't be noisy about it," Link decided. "We'll alert the guards." He knelt down next to Malon's father and tapped the man's head. "*Wake up... Hey... Hey...*" He kept tapping the man's head and eventually his eyes shot open.

"What in tarnation!" the man yelled, jumping to his feet. "Can't a person get a little shut-eye around here?"

"Shh sh sh!" Link hissed. "Keep your voice down!"

The man looked down at him. "Hello, and who might you be?"

"I'm Link," Link answered. "Are you from the ranch?"

"Yep, I'm Talon," the man said proudly. "The owner of Lon Lon Ranch. I went to the castle to deliver some milk, but I sat down here to rest, and I guess I fell asleep..."

"Well you've been out for a *while*," Link told him. "You're daughter's getting worried."

"What?!" Talon gasped. "Malon was looking for me? I'm gonna catch it from her now!"

"Catch it?" Link asked.

The man was already scrambling to pull himself together. "I messed up bad, leaving Malon behind to wait for me!" He sped off. "She's really gonna let me have it!"

"... Have what?"

"Probably a slap in the face," Navi chuckled. "Sleeping on the job like. *Disgraceful.*"

"Well let's just hope he gets back okay," Link said. "Let's go meet the Princess."

He crawled into the drain, flopping out into a shallow stream. Rolling over on the grass he sat on the ground for a moment to try and dry his clothes. Not being able to do much, he moved on.

Before he could get far though, he noticed that there were guards here too. This looked to be the gardens -- flowers and hedges and statues all decorated and taken care of -- but guards patrolled in circles around it all.

Seemed like a lot of trouble to go through, Link figured, but then again he had no idea how things worked here. Everything was so strange and foreign to him that at this point he decided it was probably best to stop asking questions.

So he used Navi to tell him when the guards were coming his way and hid accordingly. Working slowly, he managed to evade these guards as well. They might have been everywhere, but they didn't too keen on actually watching. It felt to Link like they were just here for show.

But after a moment, that didn't matter.

He hadn't expected any of it to be this easy, but at the end of the gardens he arrived at the entrance to a grand inner courtyard just through a stone hall. And there on the other side of the courtyard, was a girl in a pink dress, looking through a window.

Link pulled the green stone out of his tunic, just to make sure he had it. This had to be the princess, right? He didn't know what a princess was or did or looked like, but most of the people in the city seemed to dress in more faded colors and all the knights in the castle wore armor, so this girl was the only one who stood out.

"Navi, is that the princess?" Link asked, just to make sure.

"I think so," Navi nodded. "It *has* to be, right?"

"Yeah," Link entered the courtyard.

There was a square flowerbed on either side of the circular area, the area itself being surrounded by a moat of it's own. Embroidered tapestry was draped over the walls, but there in the center of it all like

some sort of symmetrical painting, was the girl at the end of the steps looking through the window into the castle.

As Link drew closer the girl turned around, hearing the footsteps in the grass.

"What?" she exclaimed when she saw Link. "Who?! Who are you? How did you get past the guards?"

"A-well I-"

Then the princess noticed Navi floating nearby to Link.

"Oh? What's that?" she asked, getting a closer look. "Is that... a fairy?! Then are you... Are you from the forest?"

"Wh- yeah," Link stammered. "How did you-?"

"Then... then... you wouldn't happen to have... the Spiritual Stone of the Forest, would you?! That green and shining stone... Do you have it?"

There was a scared look in her eyes, but there was determination too. She cupped her hands together, almost pleading.

Link slowly pulled the stone out again, showing it to her. "This stone?"

"Just as I thought!" the princess exclaimed. "I had a dream... In the dream, dark storm clouds were billowing over the land of Hyrule... But suddenly, a ray of light shot out of the forest, parted the clouds, and lit up the ground... The light turned into a figure holding a green and shining stone, followed by a fairy... I knew this was a prophecy that someone would come from the forest..."

"And you knew it was me just by seeing Navi?" Link asked.

"Yes, I thought you might be the one... Oh, I'm sorry!" she hopped as though she surprised herself. "I got carried away with my story and didn't even properly introduce myself! I am Zelda, Princess of Hyrule. What is your name?"

"Link," Link answered, wondering how many times he'd have to introduce himself. There were so many people in this world, he'd hate to have to introduce himself to *everyone*.

"... Link... Strange... It sounds somehow... familiar," Zelda turned away a bit, thinking to herself. Moving on, she turned back to Link, a smile on her face. "Ok then, Link... I'm going to tell you the secret of the Sacred Realm that had been passed down by the Royal Family of Hyrule. Please keep this a secret from everyone..."

Link nodded. "Okay," he said. *It's not like I can say no here.*

"The legend goes like this," Zelda started. *"Before time began, before spirits and life existed... Three golden goddess descended upon the*

chaos that was Hyrule... Din, the goddess of power... Nayru, the goddess of wisdom... Farore, the goddess of courage... Din, with her strong flaming arms, she cultivated the land and created the red earth. Nayru, poured her wisdom onto the earth and gave the spirit of law to the world. Farore, with her rich soul, produced all lifeforms who would uphold the law... The three great goddesses, their labors completed, departed for the heavens. And golden sacred triangles remained at the point where the goddesses left the world. Since then, the sacred triangles have become the basis of our world's providence. And, the resting place of the triangles has become the Sacred Realm.

The three golden goddesses hid the Triforce containing the power of the gods somewhere in Hyrule... the power to grant the wish of the one who holds the Triforce in his hands. If someone with a righteous heart makes a wish, it will lead Hyrule to a golden age of prosperity... If someone with an evil mind has his wish granted, the world will be consumed by evil... That is what has been told.... So the ancient Sages built the Temple of Time to protect the Triforce from evil ones."

Link took a moment to mull things over in his head. A lot of that didn't seem to add up, like for instance -- if the goddess hid the triforce somewhere in Hyrule... That sounded like no one knew where it was hidden. But then she said that the ancient Sages built the Temple of Time around it. But, if that's the case, what would the sacred realm have to do with anything? It didn't make sense...

He shook his head. *Doesn't matter*, he convinced himself. *She knows more about this than I do, and she's who the Deku Tree wanted me to meet so I trust her... I don't know anything about this world or how it works... But if this temple is where the Sacred Realm is -- whatever that means -- then that's all that matters... right?*

"So..." Link tried to choose his words carefully, making sure he'd get a clear answer. "This Temple opens the Sacred Realm... yeeees?"

Zelda smiled, nodding. "That's right," she answered. "The Temple of Time is the entrance through which you can enter the Sacred Realm through our world. But the entrance is sealed with a stone wall called the Door of Time. And, in order to open the door, it is said that you need to collect three Spiritual Stones. And another thing you need... is the treasure that the royal family keeps along with this legend... The Ocarina of Time!"

Ocarina? Link thought, feeling his own ocarina in his pocket. ... *Strange...*

"Did you understand well the story I just told you?" Zelda asked, her voice full of hope.

Not at all! Link thought, kind of annoyed at this whole thing. Just yesterday the one who watched over him his whole life was suddenly killed by some curse that Link failed to defeat, then he was thrown into *this!* Spiritual Stones, Sacred Realms, Princesses and Prophecies... it was all nonsense to him. Gibberish!

But he heard the hope in her voice, and saw the fear in her eyes. Even if Link understood it, Zelda was deadly serious about everything she'd told him. So Link nodded his head.

"Yeah," he said. "I understand."

"That's great!" she clapped, excited to have someone on her side. Suddenly she stopped and stepped aside, motioning to the window. "I forgot to tell you... I was spying through this window just now... The other element from my dream... the dark clouds... I believe they symbolize... that man in there!... Will you look at the window at him?"

Link looked from Zelda to the window, stepping closer to it. There, right in front of him, kneeling in the center of the long blue carpet that ran the length of the hall... was the man the Great Deku Tree had warned him about...

The man in black armor, Link thought, a chill running up his spine. The knights that lined the hall didn't seem to be doing anything but standing there. They *had* to know this man was evil... right? Everything about this man emanated terror. Even just standing on the other side of the window, Link was suddenly very well aware just how thin that window was.

"Can you see the man with the evil eyes?" Zelda asked, startling Link.

"... Yeah... Who is he?"

"That is Ganondorf," Zelda answered. "The leader of the Gerudos. They hail from the desert far to the west. Though he swears allegiance to my father, I am sure he is not sincere. The dark clouds that covered Hyrule in my dream... They must symbolize that man!"

Suddenly Ganondorf's head turned to look at Link.

Link jumped back as fast as he could, tripping and falling backwards.

"What happened? Did he see you?" Zelda hissed, ducking down with him. "Don't worry. He doesn't have any idea what we're planning... yet!"

Link sat up. "... Did you talk to your father? Warn him?"

"..... Yes," Zelda said solemnly. "I told my father about my dream... However, he didn't believe it was a prophecy... But... I can sense

that man's evil intentions! What Ganondorf is after must be nothing less than the Triforce of the Sacred Realm. He must have come to Hyrule to obtain it! And, he wants to conquer Hyrule... No, the entire world!"

She turned to him, grabbing his arm and looking at him with determination. "Link... now, we are the only ones who can protect Hyrule!... Please!"

If even the King doubted his own daughter's vision, Link wasn't sure about her. But, the Great Deku Tree told him to seek her out specifically, and Link had seen firsthand the evil that this man Ganondorf would curse the world with... He felt lost, confused, and more than annoyed at this point... But, he also felt he could trust her. He might not have been able to understand it all, but he knew he had to help her.

If no one else believed her, then he would.

"Okay," he nodded. "What do we do?"

"Thank you!" Zelda smiled.

Link stood, helping Zelda up as well. They didn't move far, just over to the steps at the end of the little platform under the window. They just wanted to sit somewhere a little more comfortable that wasn't in full view of the window.

"I... I am afraid," Zelda admitted. "I have a feeling that man is going to destroy Hyrule. He has such terrifying power! But it's fortunate that you have come... We must not let Ganondorf get the Triforce!"

"But what do we do to stop him?" Link asked. "What's our plan?"

"I will protect the Ocarina of Time with all my power! He shall not have it!" Zelda explained. "You go find the other two Spiritual Stones! Let's get the Triforce before Ganondorf does, and then defeat him!"

Link looked up at the sky, passed all the towers that rose above them. This world was a lot bigger than he'd thought it would be... he wasn't even sure where to start.

"One more thing," Zelda said suddenly, fumbling with the pocket of her dress. "Take this letter... I'm sure it will be helpful to you."

Zelda folded a decorated piece of paper and scribbled a note on it with her signature. Then she handed it to Link. He started to look over it but suddenly Zelda was on her feet, watching a figure who had entered the gardens.

Link stood as well, seeing the tall woman with white hair in blue garb and silver armor. She wasn't as heavily armored like the knights that protected the castle, but she looked plenty strong enough to not need, and Link didn't figure her as much of a knight anyway. The way she stood perfectly straight and still, like she was trying to take up as little space as

possible, but in a way that she was prepared to move if necessary.

If the Knights were meant to guard, then this woman was meant to attack.

"My attendant will guide you out of the castle," Zelda told him. "Don't be afraid to talk to her."

Link nodded, pocketed the note from Zelda, and walked across the gardens. He stopped in front of the attendant, looking up at her. She was very tall and had a sour look on her face. She also seemed horribly impatient.

"I am Impa of Sheikahs," the woman said. "I am responsible for protecting Princess Zelda. Everything is exactly as the Princess foretold."

She protects Zelda? Link thought. *I guess we have more friends than I thought. At least someone else believes that man must be stopped. I just wish the King were like the Deku Tree... If he's really watching over this place called Hyrule, why doesn't he stop this man?*

"I'm Link," Link introduced himself yet again. "I guess I have to find the Spiritual Stones."

Impa smiled. It was faint, and brief, but Link saw it. She even almost laughed at how naive he'd just sounded. "You are a courageous boy," she mused. "You are heading out on a big, new adventure, aren't you?"

Link nodded.

"My role in the Princess's dream was to teach a melody to the one from the forest," Impa explained. "This is an ancient melody passed down by the Royal Family. I have played this song for Princess Zelda as a lullaby ever since she was a baby... There is mysterious power in these notes. Now listen carefully..."

Impa put her fingers to her lips and started whistling a strange tune. Link couldn't whistle like that, but he did know how to play his ocarina, so he took out the instrument that Saria had given him. Impa gave him a funny look, confused for a moment, before ignoring it and repeating the tune.

Link copied her, playing the slow melody -- Zelda's Lullaby.

As he played it, he thought he heard something in the echo of the notes, a sound he'd never heard an ocarina make before... yet it felt... familiar... It almost felt like...

"Wow," Navi breathed. "What a beautiful song."

Satisfied with Link's repetition of the song, Impa returned her hand to her side, staring down at him once more. "If the castle soldiers find you, there will be trouble. Let me lead you out of the castle."

"Right," Link nodded. He turned back to face Zelda, returning the ocarina to his pocket. "I'll do what I can. I made a promise to someone else I wouldn't let that man -- I promised I'd stop him! So don't worry, I'll find those stones, and we can get the Triforce before Ganondorf!"

Zelda smiled brightly, thankful. She waved them goodbye as they left the gardens.

Link however, was just happy to have a name and a face to put to the hatred he felt for the man he would get revenge on.

CHAPTER 5

THE ROAD TO DEATH MOUNTAIN

Impa brought Link out to Hyrule field in front of the city. She stopped Link at the end of the drawbridge and pointed to a mountain on the horizon. There was a heavy ring of smoke that circled the mountain's peak.

"You brave lad," she began. "We must protect this beautiful land of Hyrule! Take a good look at that mountain. That's Death Mountain, home of the Gorons. They hold the Spiritual Stone of Fire."

Link stepped forward, looking at the smoke and wondering what a Goron was.

"At the foot of Death Mountain you will find my village, Kakariko," Impa continued. "That is where I was born and raised. You should talk to some of the villagers there before you go up Death Mountain."

"Go *up* that mountain!?" Link exclaimed.

Impa took a step back. Not in a fearful way though, more like she was just going to start walking away. "The song I just taught you has some mysterious power," she explained. "Only Royal Family members are allowed to learn this song. Remember, it will help to prove your connection with the Royal Family. The Princess is waiting for you to return to the castle with the stones. All right. We're counting on you!"

Before Link could ask any more questions, Impa threw a pellet at the ground. It sent a blast of blinding light and then Impa was gone.

"Wha... what?" Link mumbled.

Navi saw the lost look on Link's face and patted his shoulder. "What would Saria say if we told her we're going to save Hyrule?" she asked, trying to sound as cheerful as always.

"She'd either yell at me to stay home where it's safe," Link sighed, half smiling. "Or... she'd yell at me to hurry up and do my best."

"I guess," Navi nodded. "So, we go to Kakariko?"

Link took a step towards the mountain, but looked south, back towards the forest and Lon Lon Ranch. "I didn't see that girl in town," Link said. "Malon. I wonder if her father got home."

"We could check up on them," Navi suggested. "It's not far, right?"

"Yeah," Link nodded. He changed course and set out for the Ranch.



By the time they arrived at the Ranch, the sun had already begun to set. It was the last hour of twilight now as Link walked through the gate. The wind carried the faint sound of humming, coming from the fenced-in field.

Link followed the sound of humming, and found Malon sitting out in the field petting the horses.

"Hi!" Link smiled.

"Oh, it's the fairy boy again!" Malon joked, standing. "I heard you found my dad! How did you like the castle? Did you see the princess? Hee hee!"

"Yeah I met the princess," Link said smugly. "I was just on my way out of town when I thought I'd pass by to see if your father made it home okay."

"Dad came home in a hurry after you found him," Malon laughed. One of the youngest horses suddenly nuzzled up against her. "Oh, yeah -- I have to introduce you to my friend, fairy boy! She's this horse. Her name is Epona. Isn't she cute?"

Link chuckled, reaching out to pet the horse. It jerked away from him, then ran.

"It seems like Epona is afraid of you, Fairy boy," Malon sighed...

"I've never been near a horse before," Link admitted. "We get all kinds of animals wandering the forest from time to time, but they stay away from the village."

"What's it like that forest?" Malon asked, sitting back down on the grass.

Link put his hands on his hips, watching the horses. "A lot like this I think," he said. "But with a *lot* more trees..." He felt the ocarina under his hand, and took it out to look at.

"Oh, cute ocarina!" Malon giggled. "Are you going to play my song with that ocarina?"

"That song you were humming before?" Link asked.

Malon nodded, humming her song again. Link sat down next to her, listening to the tune. When he had it memorized he began playing the song with her. As they were playing, Epona trotted over to them, brushing up against Link with her head.

"Oh, Epona!" Malon laughed, petting the horse's mane. "She's grown fond of you, fairy boy."

Link laughed and they continued playing their song until the sun set. Afterwards they headed back inside the building with the chickens on the lower floor -- which Link learned was the building they lived in -- and Link found a corner to sleep in again.



In the morning, before Link left, he told them he was headed for Kakariko. Talon offered a ride in his wagon since he was headed that way as well. So, Link helped tie the horses to the wagon, and then waved goodbye to Malon.

It was much easier than walking, and too less time too. It was still mid morning by the time they arrived in the little village to the east. The wagon rattled as they rode under the big wooden sign marking the entrance to the Kakariko at the foot of the mountain.

Link disembarked, saying goodbye to Talon as he left to make his delivery.

Now that it was all over with, Link headed straight for the path up the mountain. He didn't want to waste anymore time, so he hurried through the village, ducking under construction rigs and running up the many stairs that wound through the somewhat vertical town. When he reached the path up the mountain however, he was stopped by yet another knight guarding a gate.

"The road is closed beyond this point!" the knight snapped, seeing Link staring at the gate. "Can't you read the sign over there?"

"I didn't-"

"Eh? Oh, I see," the knight mocked. "You're just a kid, and you can't read yet. Ha ha hah!"

Link glared at the knight. *Is every knight just a-a... crummy person?* He pulled out the letter he'd gotten from Zelda. "I need to pass," he said bluntly. "Zelda told me to."

"Oh, this is..." the knight's face paled, realizing his mistake. "This is surely Princess Zelda's handwriting! Well, let's see... Hmmm... Ok... *This is Link... He is under my orders to save Hyrule.*"

For a moment he looked at the note with a serious expression, but then he handed the letter back and laughed. "Wah ha ha ha hah! What kind of funny game has our princess come up with now?!" He stepped aside, opening the gate. "Ok, ok, alright. You can go now... Just be careful, Mr.

Hero! Wah hah ha ha hah!"

The gate opened and Link started through it, tucking the letter back in his pocket.

"By the way, Mr. Hero," the knight said sarcastically, stopping him. "If you're going to climb Death Mountain, you should equip a proper shield! It is an active volcano, after all!"

Link looked at his own wooden shield. It would easily burn in fire... "Where do I get a new one?"

"If you go back to Hyrule Castle Town Market, you should check out the bazaar," the knight suggested. "They sell the shield you need there. Tell 'em I sent you, and they should give you a special discount! If you think you're good to go already, don't worry about it."

Link nodded, crossing his arms and thinking. He didn't really want to go all the way back to the city... He'd lose the better part of a day if he walked and he wasn't sure he could just ask Talon to take him from place to place.

While Link was thinking though, the knight thought of something else. "I'd like to ask a favor of you." Link gave him a cautious look. "No, I don't expect you to do it just because of the great tip I just gave you! I'm just asking!"

Link sighed.

"Have you been to the Happy Mask Shop that just opened in the Hyrule Castle Town Market?" the knight asked. "Everyone is talking about it! My little boy pesters me for a popular mask, but I don't have time to go there... So could you go and get the mask for me next time you are in the Market? If you don't feel like it, that's ok, but... Well, I have no choice -- this is my job..." He sighed, annoyed with having to stand in one spot all day for no real reason.

Link looked up at him. *Maybe he just hates his job*, he thought. "... Uh, yeah. Next time I'm there I'll look for it."

"Thanks," the knight smiled. "Now... to return to duty..." He stayed put, looking down at Kakariko.

Link back tracked through the village. He *did* need a better shield for this, but he didn't want to go back to Castle Town to get it.

Instead, Link started asking around the village for where he could get a shield. There weren't any being sold at the local shop, but he did find a lot of random information... maybe. Apparently, Impa wasn't just born and raised here, she also opened it up to the general public. She hired all the carpenters who were expanding the village. Sadly he also learned that the carpenters were mostly lazy or thinking of alternative ways to get paid.

One worker was talking about becoming a thief...

What kept coming up though, was the local graveyard. If the topic came up, people avoided it. If asked directly, they just acknowledged its existence before moving on. But every time Link asked about a shield he could find nearby without going back to the city, the graveyard was the first answer they had before dismissing the idea altogether.

It only took an hour to work his way around the village, looking for answers, but finally he decided to head straight for the graveyard.

Right at the front there was a large slab stone with intricate looking letters scrawled across it. **R.I.P. Here lie the souls of those who swore fealty to the Royal Family of Hyrule. The Sheikah, guardians of the Royal Family and founders of Kakariko, watch over these spirits in their eternal slumber.**

"Sheikah," Navi said. "That's what Impa said she was. So, these are her people."

Link looked around at the many gravestones. "Must be several generations worth..."

"Don't cause trouble!" a child suddenly yelled from down the isle of gravestones. "I'll tell Dampe!"

"Uh, Dampe?" Link asked. "Who's that? What are you doing walking around a gravesite on your own?" Link might've been young, but this kid wasn't even half his age. He wondered where the boy's parents were.

"Little kids can't go on the Heart-Pounding Gravedigging tour described on the sign," the boy answered, poking the ground with a stick. "Since I can't do that, I'm just imitating Dampe the gravekeeper all day. But with my cute face, I'm not heart-pounding at all, am I?"

"Well you definitely surprised *me*," Link patted his head and started walking away. He continued on his way, searching for some sign of why people kept referencing this place when talking about a shield.

There weren't any shops here, the one cabin was locked, and none of the gravestones had any obvious openings.

But then he came across the Royal Family's tomb located at the back of the graveyard. It wasn't really a tomb, so much as a stone casket marked like a gravestone. But there was something off about it. It was written in some older form of Hylian, and what's more was that the whole thing seemed to have been moved. The grass was matted down along one of the edges, as if it had been pushed one way slightly and then put back.

Upon further investigation however, the ground broke beneath Link, sending him falling into the *actual* tomb far below. It wasn't a long

fall, but he landed on his back on the concrete platform. Luckily enough sunlight spilled through the hole to allow him to see the chamber beyond.

There were pools of foggy water, and all the stone was cracked and covered in moss. It almost looked like there were traps that used to be in place, but none of them looked to be active anymore. There were however, dozens of skeletal remains littered throughout the tomb. It reeked of death, only leeches and spiders making their home here now.

"I never liked bugs," Link sighed. But on the other side of the room looked to be something important. It was another headstone, still in a language he couldn't read, but there was a poem that he *could* read.

"The rising sun will eventually set, a newborn's life will fade. From sun to moon, moon to sun... Give peaceful rest to the living dead."

"This is an interesting poem... huh?" Navi asked, nervous and worried the spiders would try to eat her. "Something else is inscribed on the tombstone..."

At the bottom of the tombstone looked to be something that was added later, but it was still old carving. *"From one hero to another."*

Link noticed that at the base of the tombstone was a slab of rock that with a grip in the center. He grabbed it, and pulled as hard as he could. The moss had gunked it up, causing it to stick, but Link was able to break it free... and there on the slab, was a shield like Link had never seen before. It looked old, a little worn... but strong, like it it could take any hit.

"You can *feel* the power this thing has," Navi mumbled, staring wide eyed at it. "... I wonder where it came from."

Link took off his wooden shield, strapping the much larger one to his back. He felt like a beetle with a heavy shell.

"What are you going to do with your old one?" Navi asked.

Link looked at his shield, and eventually placed it on the slab. "I'll leave it here, for the next hero," Link said. "It's not as good as this one, but maybe one day I'll come back and switch them again." He backed away, returning back up through the hole in the ground. "But first... we have to get through Death Mountain."

CHAPTER 6

GORON CITY

The trail to Death Mountain... It felt dry, like all the water had been sucked out of the air. The sky didn't even look blue anymore from here, it instead being a more sandy color. If there were ever a place that was the complete opposite of where he came from, this would be it.

Beside him there was a sign stuck on a crooked wooden post. It read: **Kakariko Village, Death Mountain Trail Starting Point**

Link thought it was odd they would put a sign at the start of the trail, telling you where the start was, but the fact that it was facing back towards the village like it was telling you to turn around and leave was something Link didn't particularly like.

"It's not that ominous," Navi chuckled, totally sensing how ominous it was. "I mean, clouds might be blocking sky, but at least sunlight's getting through! We'll be fine!"

Link nodded, and headed up the trail. "I wonder what's up here," he said, looking up at the high canyon walls. The winding path kept moving around corners, refusing to let him see more than a few feet ahead of him at any time. "It's almost like a maze with just one path."

"Watch out!" Navi blurted.

Link threw up his sword. Ahead of him was a strange looking four-legged spider. It sat at the end of the path, watching him closely. "What is it?"

"A Tektite," Navi said. "I've heard about them from the other fairies. So long as you don't attack it or look threatening, it won't bother you."

"It's in the way," Link hissed. "And it already sees my sword... so..."

"Careful," Navi warned, tucking herself under Link's hat.

Link crept forward. It was half his size, but that was massive for a spider. Of course, the Skulltula he fought in the Deku Tree was the *same* size as Link, so this would be easy.

It twitched as Link got closer-- ***SWAAHT***

Link pulled his sword of the Tektite's body as it sunk to the ground. Its legs twitched a bit, but it was dead.

"I'm making an executive decision," Navi said, looking at the dead

Tektite.

"Okay?" Link sheathed his sword.

"No more bugs," Navi stated. "Bugs are gross."

"You're a bug," Link laughed.

Navi huffed at him crossing her arms and turning away, but remaining on his shoulder. "And *that's* why it took so long for a fairy to come to you."

Link patted her on the head and continued up the trail.

Dodongo's Cavern; Don't enter without permission!

Link looked at the large boulder the sign pointed to. It looked like it was a boulder, but it also looked like just another part of the rock wall.

"Yup! It's been blocked off for a while now."

Link looked over his shoulder at the giant rock monster standing behind him. "What... the...?"

The rock monster smiled down at him, scratching his head. "Haven't seen around here before."

"I'm, Link," Link answered, looking up at him with no clue how to respond. "Who... what, are you?"

"I am one of the Gorons," the rock monster answered. "The stone-eating people who live on Death Mountain."

"Oooh," Link nodded. "Impa mentioned Gorons, never said what that meant. Nice to meet you?"

The Goron waved politely, then turned back to the boulder. "Look at that huge boulder over there! It blocks the entrance to Dodongo's Cavern, which was once a very important place for us Gorons... But one day, many Dodongos suddenly appeared inside the cavern. It became a very dangerous place! On top of that, a Gerudo in black armor used his magic to seal the entrance with that boulder!"

"A Gerudo in black armor?" Link asked. "Ganondorf?"

The Goron gave Link a confused look, clearly unable to answer. Instead he stepped aside and nodded towards the path that continued up the mountain. "If you want to hear more Goron gossip, head up to our city! Goron City is just a little way up the trail. It won't take much longer to get there, even on foot."

"Thanks!" Link waved goodbye and sped off up the trail.

The tall canyon walls had long since given way to sheer cliffs overlooking the land of Hyrule. Link would have taken a moment to enjoy the view, but he already felt he was moving too slow. He didn't like how big this world was. It felt like too much of his time was spent getting from place to place. If only everything was just closer together.

But at last he reached the fork in the road. One path continued up towards the mountain's peak, and the other led into the mountain itself. At the back of the large cavern, light by the sun in the west facing it directly, were wooden gates with a sign above them.

Goron City

Home of the Gorons

"Looks like we made it," Link said.

"It's about time!" Navi whined. "I thought mountains got *colder* towards the top."

"Maybe it'll cool off inside," Link said.

He entered Goron City and immediately realized how wrong he was. It was like the whole cavern was permanently the hottest day of the year. The walls radiated heat and the air moved like waves. There were many Gorons as well, all either sitting around the cavern or standing and talking.

If you ignored how'd out of place everything was, and the incredible heat, it actually didn't seem like that bad a place. The Gorons seemed like decent enough people, they just happened to look like terrifying rock monsters.

That being said, Link was never one to hang on to worries. Once he'd moved passed something he'd moved passed it, and after speaking to one Goron the rest didn't seem to different.

Could be worse, Link thought, walking through the cave. *Could be those Hylian Knights*.

A couple of Gorons waved to him as he passed by. Link waved back. *Friendly too*.

They returned to their conversation and Link walked out to the ledge overlooking the rest of the underground city. Ropes and wooden planks made up the walkways from ledge to ledge, stretching across the open air of the city. Doors and cave openings lined the outer walls, possibly leading to either more of the city or to the homes where the Gorons lived.

In the center of the city however, Link saw what he was here for: a platform held high above the center of the cavern, dangling from ropes that were bolted to every corner of the cave. On the platform was a stone that looked to have what he needed... or at least, it used to.

There was only an indentation where the spiritual stone used to be.

"If I'm not mistaken, you came here to eat the red stone too!" a Goron said, standing beside Link. "Well, too bad! It's not here!"

"Eat?" Link asked. "Not at all! That's not why I'm here, sorry. I'm looking for a Spiritual Stone. Not to eat though."

The Goron thought for a moment, still staring at the stone pedestal. "You must mean that delicious-looking red stone that was once displayed above the city!"

"I guess so," Link answered. "Know anything about it?"

Again the Goron took a moment to think, then nodded with a big grin on his face. "I was so hungry that I thought it would be okay to just give it one tiny, little lick... so I snuck up there. But it was already gone!"

Link thought it was strange that such large creatures seemed to behave more like children than the children of the forest. Clearly it was difficult to keep them on track. If the stone was gone though... that could be bad. "Do you know what happened to it? Where it went?"

"I think Big Brother took it away," the Goron answered. "He always says that everyone is after that red stone! Big Brother has shut himself up in his room saying, 'I will wait in here for the Royal Family's messenger!' Are you the Royal Family's messenger? If you were, you would have some kind of proof."

Impa's song, Link thought. *Zelda's Lullaby*. *She must have come here when she disappeared, gone ahead to tell the leader of the Goron's I was coming...*

"Thank you," Link smiled. "Any idea where I could find this 'Big Brother'?"

The Goron nodded, pointing to the lowest floor of the cavern. "At the far back of the cave, on the bottom level, that's where you'll find him. The door between the two torches."

Link could see it from here. "Thank you!" he said again, already hurrying off.

Good kid, the Goron thought.

Link weaved his way through the cavern, moving down through the winding tunnels until he reached the bottom floor. The cavern seemed bigger from down here, everything spreading up and around him.

He approached the door between the two torches, and took out his

ocarina. *How did that song go?* he wondered. He played a few soft notes, just to make sure he had it right, then knocked on the door.

I hope that was enough to get your attention, Link thought. He played Zelda's Lullaby, the notes echoing through the city. He could hear the noise of the heavy Gorons stopping as they all began to listen.

When the song was done, he lowered the ocarina and stared at the door.

A moment later, the stone door rose up from the ground, sliding in to the rock wall.

"Enter," said the rumbling voice from within.

Link took a deep breath, and entered the chamber of the Goron City elder.

CHAPTER 7

DODONGO'S CAVERN

It was a long hall, pitch black save for the single torch in the distance. His footsteps echoed, and the further in he went the stronger the ominous presence felt. Whoever this 'Big Brother' was at the end of the hall wasn't someone Link wanted to mess with.

And when he entered the room and saw the Goron who sat at the other end of it... Link was confused. This Goron was a little shorter than the rest... rounder. He looked strong still, and his face looked every bit as intimidating as Link had expected, with spiky hair and an intense stare, yet he somehow looked just as softhearted as the the others of his kind. Well, except for the obvious bad mood he was in.

"What the heck?" the Goron scoffed, looking at the puny child who stood before him. "Who are you?! When I heard the song of the Royal Family, I expected their messenger had arrived, but... you're just a little kid!"

"I *am* the messenger," Link explained. "Zelda sent me."

The Goron pressed his hand to his forehead, sighing in agitation. "Has Darunia, the big boss of the Gorons, really lost so much status to be treated like this by his Sworn Brother, the King?" This seemed to be mostly directed to himself, but when he looked back at Link he seemed to be demanding an answer.

Link didn't have one.

"Now I'm *really* angry!" Darunia hissed. He stood, towering over Link. Link stood his ground, but that only seemed to make matters worse. "*Get out of my face!*" he roared, knocking Link back.

Darunia sat down hard, cracking his stone chair.

Link got back up, brushing himself off. "I'm *sorry* I'm not what you had in mind," he said, glaring back at the Goron. "But Zelda trusted me to do this and I already promised a lot of people I'd see it through. So what's your deal?"

"Are you asking why I'm in such a bad mood right now?" Darunia asked as though the answer were obvious.

"It's clearly more than just me," Link bluffed, having no clue if he was right.

Darunia looked him up and down, then passed him, towards the

entrance to his chambers. "Ancient creatures have infested Dodongo's Cavern," he growled in a low voice. Once again it felt like he was talking to someone other than Link, like he was hoping those 'ancient creatures' could hear just how angry he was from here. "We've had a poor harvest of our special crop, Bomb Flowers. Starvation and hunger because of the rock shortage! But..." He turned back to Link, looking him dead in the eye. "This is a Goron problem. We don't need help from strangers!"

Link stared him down, but it was clear Darunia was done talking. Link however, wasn't backing down just yet.

He realized after talking to a few of the Gorons that all seemed to act like children, and Darunia was no different. He was throwing a tantrum, nothing more. He didn't get what he want, so he's lashing out.

That's what Saria would say, Link thought. But what would Saria do?

Link pulled out his ocarina again, remembering all the fights he'd gotten into with Mido. At the end of a particularly bad day, Saria would cheer up the rest of the children with her music. If these Gorons behaved like children, then they should be no different.

So Link started playing Saria's song.

For a moment Darunia had just rolled his eyes and looked away. But as Link kept playing, Darunia seemed to pay more attention. He sighed, smiled, and shook his head as though he thought Link was embarrassing himself and Darunia thought it was amusing.

When Link finally ended the song, Darunia was laughing. "What a nice tune," he remarked. "And just like that, my depression is gone."

Link could tell he was being sarcastic, but at least he was in a better mood.

"I am Darunia," Darunia said, properly introducing himself at last. "The boss of the Gorons. Now tell me, what was it Princess Zelda sent you here for?"

"The Spiritual Stone," Link answered. "A sacred relic you're said to hold."

Darunia's expression flashed with anger again, but only briefly. "You want the Spiritual Stone of Fire too?"

"Too?" Link asked. Had Ganondorf already tried to obtain it himself?

"The Spiritual Stone of Fire," Darunia explained. "Also known as the Goron's Ruby, is our race's hidden treasure... But hold on -- I'm not going to give it to you that easily. If you want it so badly... Why don't you go destroy the monsters inside of Dodongo's Cavern and prove you're a

real man?"

That was a challenge, a test. Darunia didn't think Link would accept. Link figured that if Ganondorf really had come here already, Darunia probably thought now that Link was with him, trying to get the Spiritual Stone a different way.

But Link was always up for a challenge. After all, he'd come *this* far.

"That way," Darunia continued as he waited for Link's answer. "Everybody will be happy again! If you do it, I will give you anything you want, even the Spiritual Stone!"

Link nodded. "I'll do it," he said blankly.

Darunia's smile dropped. "Really?" he scoffed. "You would accept this task? Could be dangerous."

"I know," Link nodded. "But if it's what it takes to prove to you that I need that stone, then I'll do it."

Darunia regarded him for a moment, then looked away towards a table across the room. "You are not strong enough," he said. Before Link could counter, Darunia continued. "I have something for you. I'm not really giving you this in return for anything, but take it anyway. If you wear this, even a little fella like you can pick up a Bomb Flower."

Link looked at the table to see two golden bracelets sitting amongst other Goron objects. "These?" Link asked.

Darunia nodded. "Their magic will increase your strength tenfold. Even a child like you could overcome those dangers then."

If that were the case, you would have no problem doing this yourself then, if it were that big of issue. But Link didn't argue. If this was what he had to do, it's what he had to do. Once again he admitted he couldn't understand how this world worked, so he would just have to go along with it.

"Destroy the monsters in Dodongo's Cavern," Darunia told him. "And become a real man! Then we can talk about the Spiritual Stone."

Link nodded, and started out of Goron City.

The first thing he had to take care of was the boulder blocking the entrance to Dodongo's cavern.

"Any idea how to get rid of it?" Link asked the Goron who still stood beside it.

"I guess we could use Bomb Flowers," the Goron suggested. "I

will go get one." He hobbled off to go find a Bomb Flower.

"You could've--" Link sighed.

"I'm... starting to think the Gorons aren't exactly... well, all there," Navi folded her arms behind her back and looked up at the boulder.

"Probably not," Link agreed. "But we need their help."

A moment later something small and blue fell out of the sky, landing on top of the boulder with a *thud*. It sparked.

"Duck!" Link snatched Navi from the air, hitting the ground as chunks of rock came flying at them.

"Watch the *wings*!" Navi squeaked.

Link let go of her and looked back at the entrance. It wasn't blocked anymore, obviously, but there was even more intense heat coming from inside than there had been in the Goron City.

Navi brushed herself off and flew up to sit on Link's shoulder again. "Welp, let's see what these monsters in Dodongo's Cavern are."

Link took out his sword -- keeping the heavy shield on his back as it was too big lift -- and went inside the burning cave.



It went down for miles, deeper and deeper underground than Link thought possible. Most of it was just stairs, but plenty of it was steep ramps made of loose dirt. On the bright side, it didn't seem to get any hotter, it was just consistently boiling.

"Maybe the Gorons just couldn't stand the heat," Navi mumbled hiding under the shade of Link's hat.

"I don't think it bothers them that much," Link said. "They seem to come down here a lot, or at least *did*... And it looks like it's always hot down here."

They finally reached the bottom of the entrance ramp, the massive chasm opening up in front of them. The path split to go either direction around the gap, lining the wall and going around to the other side. If it weren't for the pit of lava in the center of the chamber, and the river of it that flowed down into from the ceiling, the area would've been pitch black, but the lava lit up every inch of the incredibly huge dungeon. The only thing Link couldn't see was whatever was behind the falling lava.

What he *could* see however, were the many person-sized lizards all staring directly at him. Bomb Plants grow in crops that looked like they used to be controlled, and shining rocks glistened in veins that spread through the walls.

"I don't like the look of this place," Link sighed. "Think we're trespassing?"

"An army of angry lizards are staring at us and you respond with sarcasm?" Navi asked. "Time and place Link, this isn't it."

Link chuckled, taking a step down the path to the left, beginning the long circle around the chamber. "These must be the Dodongos," he said. "I think they get along fine with the Goron, otherwise they wouldn't have named the cave after them. They must keep them around for a... reason... Navi?"

Navi was already staring at the monster Link saw. Behind the falling lava was creature like the rest, but a hundred times bigger. Heavy horns rested on its head as it lay curled up on the burning ground. Its scales were blackened underneath it, smoking.

"That looks like an actual problem," Link hissed through clenched teeth. "Why did he send us to do this?"

In that moment, it woke. Its eye shot open and looked directly at Link, and at the same time all the other little Dodongos stepped away. It was just like every other predatory pack of animals; the young would wait for scraps after their king was done...

They were looking at Link like he was food, and they were waiting for their leader to take the first bite.

"This isn't going to be easy," Navi told him.

"No kidding," Link agreed, gripping his sword. "Glad I got a new shield though." He didn't want to point out that it would be difficult to use in this fight though, since he couldn't take it off his back since it was too heavy. *It'll have to do.*

Link reached the bottom of the steps as all the Dodongos watched from the ledges above. The King Dodongo stepped up to Link, walking around the lava pool to glare down at him. Link was like a leaf compare to this monster, no bigger than half the palm of its clawed paw.

It crouched down, and roared with all its might.

The blast knocked Link off his feet, but it got worse when the King Dodongo began sucking in air. Before, Link had been forced away, but now he was being pulled towards it, sliding across the ground.

Link dug his sword into the ground to keep from getting swallowed, but it wasn't over yet. Once the King Dodongo was done breathing in, its throat began to burn. Link barely had time to pull his sword out of the ground before a blast of fire was sent in his direction.

He rolled across the ground, circling the pool of lava. Expecting the monster to chase after him, he glanced over his shoulder. "It's not

moving," he noticed, seeing it stay perfectly rigid as it blew flames in a straight line.

"Almost looks stuck," Navi agreed.

Then the Dodongo was done again, and it *did* chase after them. It rammed forward, crashing into the wall. Bomb Flowers were knocked down, a few of them exploding when they hit it's head but the rest just lay scattered on the ground.

"Works for me," Link smirked, running right at the King Dodongo.

"What are you doing!?" Navi exclaimed.

The King Dodongo lowered again, taking in a deep breath and sucking up everything in front of it. The Bomb Flowers were too far away, so Link had to get closer. He skid across the ground, stabbing the ground again so he wouldn't get sucked up, and kicked a Bomb Flower straight into the King Dodongo's mouth.

The monster had already gone rigid, but the Bomb choked it, so Link threw another, then another. For a moment it stared down at Link, the fire in it's throat flickering. The bombs had exploded, and suddenly the whole beast keeled over, toppling into the pool of lava.

Link sat on the ground for a moment, watching the rest of the Dodongos back away. Some of them left altogether, walking deeper into the cave.

Navi popped out from under Link's hat, looking at the monster that was being devoured by the flames. It's scales turned black, and it slowly melted away. "I wonder... if it was Ganondorf who's magic caused this."

"It was," Link nodded. "This thing, the thing in the Great Deku Tree..."

"I had no idea this was going to be our whole adventure," Navi sighed, resting on his shoulder.

"I won't be," Link assured her. "We'll get the spiritual stone here from Darunia, then go get the other one somewhere else. Hopefully that'll be easier."

Link was quiet, arms folded around his knees as he looked into the fires. The King Dodongo was gone now, his job here was done. But something about the whole thing threw him off... something didn't feel right...

"What are you thinking?" Navi asked.

"That monster was *really* big," Link answered. "I probably should've been terrified to go up against it... but..."

Navi waited for him to finished, but he never did. "... But what?"

Link got up. "... Let's go get the stone from Darunia."

CHAPTER 8

THE GREAT FAIRY

Link stepped out of the cave facing the sunset, when out of nowhere Darunia dropped down behind him, breaking the ground.

"It's me, Darunia!" the Goron exclaimed, patting Link hard on the head, knocking him down. "Well done! Thanks to you, we can once again eat the delicious rocks from Dodongo's Cavern until our stomachs burst!"

Link got to his feet, grumbling sarcastically about how happy he was for them, but Darunia was already lost in thought.

"What a wild adventure!" Darunia laughed. "It will make an incredible story... I can't believe the Dodongos suddenly appeared in such great numbers! And that big rock blocking the cave..."

"But it's all taken care of now," Link said. "Right? The boulder's gone, the big Dodongo's dead, the little Dodongo's aren't a problem. That should be it."

Darunia nodded, crossing his arms. "All this trouble must have been caused by that Gerudo thief, Ganondorf!"

So he was here, Link thought.

"He said, 'Give me the Spiritual Stone! Only then will I open the cave for you!'" Darunia looked down at Link, patting his head once again. "You, on the other hand, risked your life for us..." He smiled, which still looked odd to Link, since a Goron's face was made of mostly rock. "Kid, I like you! How's about you and I become Sworn Brothers?!"

"Sworn Brothers?" Link asked. He considered the Kokiri his family, even though they mostly treated him like an outsider, but he'd always wondered what it would be like to have an actual sibling. This was not what he pictured.

"No, there's no big ceremony involved!" Darunia laughed, misinterpreting Link's thought process. "Just take this as a token of our friendship!"

He held out a large chiseled hand, and handed Link the Spiritual Stone of Fire. "This is the Goron's Ruby, the Spiritual Stone of Fire passed down by the Gorons." Its red shine reflected the sunset perfectly, the gold rim a deep bronze in this light.

"Brother!" Darunia said. "You'll keep brushing up on your skills as you travel, won't you?"

"I think I have to," Link answered. "If Ganondorf was behind this, then most likely he'll have caused trouble elsewhere as well... I'm done with this yet I guess."

Darunia looked to the mountain's peak. "You should go see the Great Fairy on top of Death Mountain! She will power you up!"

Before Link could ask what that meant, other Gorons began dropping in as well. They clambered around him, asking Link about Dodongo's Cavern. Darunia stopped them, holding out his arms.

"Hey, everybody! Let's see off our brother!"

They all waved their goodbyes, and Link began his second trek up Death Mountain.



Large boulders blocked his way, rivers of lava cut him off, and flaming rocks rained down from above, all the while the smoke-filled air choked his lungs. The path itself was either narrow or a vertical climb straight up an impossibly tall wall.

But with the use of ducking at the right time, and with the help of the Goron's bracelets, he managed to make it to the very top of Death Mountain.

The air was thin up here, and yet there between two paths, perched the talking owl from the start of Link's adventure.

"What are you doing all the way up here?" Link panted, trying to catch his breath.

"You've done well to come all the way up here, Link," the owl hooted, his head twitching. "This is the summit of the sacred Death Mountain! Hoot! It is said that the clouds surrounding this peak reflect the condition of Death Mountain. When they look normal, it is at peace. Climbing all the way up here just proves how smart you are! Now I want to see you make another smart move..."

"... I still have no idea what you're talking about," Link chuckled. "Thanks anyway though."

He started walking away, but the owl stopped him. "The Great Fairy lives on this mountaintop, and she will give you a new skill! She is the leader of the fairies, you know. Hoo! Exactly what you need to do to find her, I cannot tell you. She insists all visitors find their own way. Check your surroundings for anything... suspicious. You will surely find your way to her."

"Right," Link nodded, walking towards the large cave entrance that

was clearly right in front of him.

"By the way," the owl continued. "The nearby volcanic crater is far too hot for you, and you won't find her there anyway."

Link looked at the owl, then back at the cave, then back at the owl as if to say "This cave?" The owl nodded. Link sighed and stepped away from the cave entrance.

"I will perch here and wait for you. When you're ready to go back down, I can help you! Now get going!"

Instead of going through the already open cave, Link started down the other path he saw, which dead-ended into a rock wall. He didn't see any Bomb Flowers around, so blowing it up clearly wasn't the answer...

Instead, Link looked for the biggest crack he could find and drew his sword. "Doesn't look like it's that thick a wall," he grunted, stabbing the crack. "I bet... I could break through... Like *this!*" He used the edge of the sword and turned it sideways, using it like a crowbar to break a hole in the wall.

Now that the hole was big enough to fit his arm in, he started tearing at the rock with his hands. The Gold Bracelets granted him strength enough to break it apart. After a minute or two, he'd made a hole big enough to climb through.

"Not the way I'd've done it," Navi mused, flying through the hole ahead of Link. "But I guess it works."

Link looked back at the owl first. The owl regarded him, then turned away to look out at the moon. It was deep into the night now, the time of night when an owl would be most active.

What a strange creature, Link thought. He followed Navi into the hole.

Waterfalls of clear water flowed all the way along the stone chamber, a tiled path straight through the center. The path led to a circular structure of columns with two torches in front of it. Inside the stone structure was another pool of clear water, rain falling down into it from above, though it seemed to come from nowhere. Every drop of that rain sparkled in the torch light, making it look as if the ceiling were leaking stars.

"Wow," Link mumbled in awe. Even compared to the castle in Hyrule, this was the most beautiful place he'd ever seen.

"Welcome, Link!" a voice said from nowhere. Suddenly a woman stepped out of the darkness from beyond the pool, folding her arms and resting them on the edge of the pool, facing Link. The odd thing was, she was maybe twenty feet tall. Vines were tangled in her long pink hair, and

her dress was made of leaves.

Everywhere he went Link seemed to find stranger and stranger people.

"I am the Great Fairy of Power," the Fairy smiled. "I'm going to grant you a sword technique. Receive it now!" She spoke so kindly that Link barely registered what was happening until it was already happening.

The room disappeared, fading into light, and Link's head started spinning.

Something happened... a memory... maybe. Except it wasn't familiar... It was like... He saw himself, but it wasn't him. He could feel their actions though, the skills they learned... Like muscle memory, but his muscles were remembering someone else's movements...

His head hurt, the lights were too bright, and there was more than just sword techniques... He couldn't see their faces... but there were people, important people... Who are they? Why do they look so familiar if he's never seen them?

What is this? Link thought.

"Hey, boy," the Great Fairy said, snapping him awake.

Link found himself kneeling in front of the pool, sword gripped firmly in hand. He remembered all the skills of someone else... several someone else's... and he had no idea how.

"You're a messenger of the Royal Family, aren't you? You should visit my friends who live across the land. They'll surely grant you other powers. Head to the path leading to Hyrule Castle. One of my friends awaits you there, at a dead end in the road."

And then she was gone.

"What just happened?" Navi asked, numb. "Are you okay?"

Link looked down at his sword, not sure how to answer. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice quiet. "I don't know."

After leaving the Great Fairy's fountain, Link was greeted once again by the talking owl. He acted as strange as ever, talking around things and never giving straight answers, but still making it seem like it was just Link not being where he needed to be yet.

Link never knew what to say to this creature, so for the most part he just nodded along, pretending to understand. He hated that everything was like this. What the Princess Zelda told him, what Impa told him, what Darunia told him... everything was just a bit too big for him.

He supposed the only things at this point that made sense were the Ranch and the forest.

Eventually the owl's one-sided conversation ended and he offered Link a ride down the mountain. Link accepted, not realizing what that ride entailed.

Link found himself gripped in the owl's large talons, suddenly flying down the mountain. The air rushed around him and the ground blurred behind him. Only seconds after taking off Link looked over his shoulder to see how far away the peak of the mountain already was.

Would have been nice to get a ride up the mountain, Link thought.

Then the owl deposited Link on top of a building in the middle of Kakariko village, flying off on its own into the sky.

The sun had yet to come up and there were very few people walking the streets, so Link didn't think he'd wake anyone.

"Where to next?" Navi asked

"I think we should head back to Hyrule castle," Link answered. "See the other Great Fairy."

After stopping by a place in town for food and a bit of rest, Link headed out.



The creepy man smiled down at Link, angled eyes like slits. "Keaton Mask -- Price 10 Rupees! Keaton stuff is hot, hot, hot! Do you want to borrow the Keaton Mask?"

Link nodded pulling out a few rupees. Apparently it was some sort of marketing trade system, where Link bought it for a price, then found someone else to sell for twice the price, then gave half of that money earned back to the shop. So basically for a ten rupee mask, Link would make ten rupees, and the shop would make twenty.

The world was a big place full of complicated things, but even this felt like a cheat.

Not that it mattered to Link though, he just needed to give it to the guard.

The streets of Hyrule Castletown were a lot less crowded when Link left the shop. It was the middle of the day so he expected it to be as crowded as it was when he was last here, but he thought maybe that had to do with Ganondorf being in town then.

At least it made it easier for Link to get to the castle path. He paid to get passed the guard again and hurried down the road, but this time

instead of sneaking up the hills and passed the other guards, Link continued down the path and came to a dead end.

"This one looks easier," Navi noticed.

"Yup," Link moved the large stone that covered the hole in the wall. It was small and close to the ground, but it was big enough to crawl through without too much trouble. "I wonder if people come here often, or if they know these places exist."

"Considering how obvious they are wouldn't they *have* to?" Navi asked.

"That's what I was thinking!" Link laughed, crawling out of the hole.

This Fairy fountain looked just like the last, except the torches were different. In the last Fountain the torches were like square pillars with simple chalices of fire sitting on top, but this one had curved columns with flower shaped cups of fire on top. In fact the whole thing seemed flower themed, with the pool having large stone pedals ringing the outside of it.

"Welcome, Link!" a voice came from nowhere. It was different from the other fairy's voice, still kind sounding but... different. And yet, when the fairy showed herself she appeared very similar to the last. "I am the Great Fairy of Magic! I will give you a magic spell. Please take it."

Once again, before Link could ask any questions, a bright light came over him and a dizziness overwhelmed him. This time was different however.

Before, he was given memories of someone else, learning skills from someone like himself... This time... This time there was a voice. A woman's voice he'd never heard before... It seemed to be in his head, but also all around him at the same time.

"*My gift to you,*" it said. "*Chosen hero. Use it wisely.*"

Then a diamond appeared in front of him, a polished ball of pure fire held within. Somehow, without being told, he knew who it was who gave this to him.

This was Din, the Goddess who shaped the world in fire... This... This was Din's Fire.

"You can use it not only attack," the Great Fairy said, waking him. "But also to burn things!"

Link was left speechless yet again as he watched her disappear. The diamond with the fire was gone from his hands, but he could still feel it, like it was something he could call out at any time. He didn't do that here, but he would have to test that... somewhere.

"I still don't understand," Navi said. "What is it they give you?"

Link got to his feet, looking at his reflection in the pool. "The first gave me memories of sword skills... this time I was given magic. I don't really get it myself, so I'll have to test them later... but for now I think I've gotten all the help I need from them."

"So now we go after that last Spiritual Stone," Navi said.

"Yup," Link nodded. "We just need to figure out where that is."

"Then let's not waste any time," Navi told him.

"Already going," Link said.



CHAPTER 9

ZORA'S DOMAIN

ZORA'S RIVER

**Watch out for swift current
and strong undertow**

After delivering the Keaton Mask to the knight in Kakariko, the knight had shared some useful information. *"The only other place I can think of that would have something like a Spiritual Stone, would probably be Zora's River. I heard something fishy was going on down there though, so be careful."*

A day's walk and Link was there, trudging passed the sign to Zora's Domain. It sat at the top of a tall hill, nowhere near as tall as Death Mountain, but it was a long road all the same. Here though, the air was cleaner, not as dry as Death Mountain. The grass was greener than in the forest, and it was just as loud as the city. It was mainly the sounds of wildlife, like frogs and fish, and the water carving it's way through the lower hills, but once again Link found some peacefulness to this.

He thought it was strange that each place he'd been too since leaving the forest, still reminded him of the forest in some small way despite how vastly different they still were.

When he reached a certain point on that path, he heard a familiar voice squawking behind him.

"Hoo hoo! Look like you've gotten bigger and stronger already, Link!" the owl said. "Just ahead lies Zora's Domain. The Zoras serve Hyrule's Royal Family by protecting this water source. Their door will not open for anyone except those who have some connection with the Royal Family. Let them hear the melody of the Royal Family! Hooo hoo hoooot!"

Then it was gone again, flapping away and disappearing into the sky, feathers dropping behind it. *Still telling me things I already know or have no use for*, Link thought, continuing up the trail. *I wonder who you are, Owl, and why you insist on following me...*

At the end of the path, Link came to a stop. He had arrived at a cliff facing a waterfall. He saw no other way through or around or up, but this felt like a dead end.

"Did they really lock their doors?" Navi asked. "That knight said something *fishy* was going on here, I wonder if they're just keeping *everyone* out."

"I guess," Link agreed. "But, I might as well let them know I'm here."

He pulled out his ocarina and played the same tune here that he played for the Goron leader Darunia -- Zelda's Lullaby. Then he waited, and the waterfall parted, revealing a doorway embedded into the rock behind it.

"Ooo," Navi mused, floating towards it. Link jumped across from the cliff to the doorway and Navi returned to his shoulder.

The waterfall closed behind them, the entrance sealed once more.

But the sounds of rushing water only got louder as they went deeper into the cavern. The whole place opened up to a brightly lit chamber of rock formations that stretched out of the massive underground lake. Everywhere there were people with scaly skin, like fish. They had long heads that ended in fins, webbed feet and hands, and purple eyes.

"When he said something 'fishy' was happening," Link whispered. "I didn't think he meant it literally."

"These must be the Zora!" Navi chirped. "They look so cool!"

Some of them were diving off incredibly high platforms, others simply swam in the lake or stood around. There were more Zora roaming around than there were Gorons back in Goron City, but there was still nowhere near how many people were in Hyrule Castletown.

Still, Link asked around and was eventually pointed towards the King Zora's Chamber. It was at the very top of the city, at the end of an impossibly long staircase. The whole domain was so interesting looking though that Link didn't mind having to walk through it all. The walls seemed to reflect the water, shimmering like purple glass.

Forcing himself to focus, he tore his gaze away from the cavern walls, and looked up to the King who sat on the edge of a platform on the other side of a pool. The wall the King sat on was already about ten feet high, but the King himself was just as tall, and almost as wide. Whereas the other Zora were more fish-like, the King reminded Link of a frog.

The King seemed to be lost in thought, not seeing Link standing before him. "Oh, my dear, sweet Princess Ruto... Where has she gone? I'm so worried..."

Then Link realized there was someone else beside the King. He'd been standing behind a pillar and was hard to see, but he started talking to the King. "That's what I've come to tell you," the Zora said. "We've

discovered a letter that seems to have come from her. It's a cry for help. She's trapped in Lord Jabu-Jabu's belly."

"She's inside Lord Jabu-Jabu?" the King exclaimed. "That's not possible! Our guardian god, Lord Jabu-Jabu, would never eat my dear Princess Ruto! But since that stranger, Ganondorf, came here, Lord Jabu-Jabu has been a little green around the gills..."

"Ganondorf was here?" Link blurted out.

He got their attention all right. The other Zora glared at Link for interrupting, but the King looked like he had an idea. "You've heard of this man?"

"Uh... yeah," Link nodded. "I spoke with Zelda about him, and also Darunia-"

"So," the King Zora mused, turning to the other man. "It seems the young boy can get around..."

"... Of course," the Zora nodded.

The King turned back to Link. "The evidence seems clear. Of course, you'll go find Ruto. You can pass through here to the altar of Lord Jabu-Jabu. Please find my dear Princess Ruto immediately!"

Another favor, Link thought. Let's just hope it's not some giant monster again.

"Knowing Ganondorf," Navi huffed, unknowingly thinking the same thing. "There'll be trouble here. That princess might be in trouble!"

Link nodded and took the side path up to the King Zora's seat. The King had finished shuffling slowly to the side, revealing the cave's exit just behind him.

"Might I ask your name as well?" the King asked as Link passed.

"Link," he answered.

"I am King Do Bon XVI," the King Zora stated. "Good luck."

"I'll bring her back," Link said. "Don't worry."

He hurried out of the cave, the sun beating down on him. The air was cooler in the cavern, and after having been in there so long the air outside was much hotter by comparison.

Of course, he only had a moment to think about that though. His attention was quickly captured by the enormous whale floating in the lake in front of him. He'd never seen a creature this size before! If this was Jabu-Jabu -- which judging by the sign it most definitely was -- then it would be very easy to get swallowed whole and go missing.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Navi said. "I don't want to be eaten."

"There's not enough of you *to* eat," Link chuckled.

Navi didn't feel much for bantering at the moment, so Link shut himself up, and walked the steps up the altar to Jabu-Jabu. And before he could say another word, Jabu-Jabu opened his mouth... and sucked him up, swallowing him whole.

CHAPTER 10

INSIDE JABU-JABU

Jabu-Jabu's teeth closed behind Link, locking him in. Then in an instant Link was flying through Jabu-Jabu's throat.

Suddenly he slammed into something squishy, and sat up. He was in some kind of chamber with tunnels leading in every possible direction. Everything was red, squishy, and disgusting. He was almost positive that something was also leaking blood.

"You!" someone shouted. "Who are you?!"

"I'm Link!" Link shouted back, eyeing each of the tunnels. "Are you Princess Ruto?!"

"I am Ruto," she answered. "Princess of the Zoras."

Link spotted her, peeking out from around the corner of a tunnel off to the side of the chamber. "Your father sent me to look for you."

"You're saying my father asked you to come here to save me?" Ruto scoffed. "I'd never ask anyone to do such a thing!"

"Someone found a letter in a bottle that says otherwise," Link told her, crossing his arms.

"Letter in a bottle?" Ruto laughed. "I have no idea what you're talking about!" She huffed and stormed off.

"Your father is worried!" Link shouted after her, heading towards the tunnel.

He found her standing still in the center of it, staring at the ground. "My father is worried about me?" She looked over her shoulder and smiled at Link. "I don't care!" She waved him off, continuing on her way. "Anyway, I can't go home right now. And you... Get out of here! Understand?"

She took another step and ripped straight through the ground. "Ooooh noooooo!"

Link sighed. "Aaaahh, this is gonna be my whole day isn't it?"

"Yup," Navi nodded. "I don't like her. She's kind of annoying."

"But we gotta get her out of here," Link said, dropping down. He hit the ground (or goeey equivalent) right beside Ruto who was still brushing herself off.

"Are you still hanging around here?" Ruto growled. "I told you to go away!"

Link eyed her ankle. She was still sitting on the ground, not even bothering to get up. Ruto noticed him looking and huffed at him again.

"I'm okay," she muttered. "I've been going inside Lord Jabu-Jabu's belly since I was little, but..."

"But?"

"Lord Jabu-Jabu is very strange today..."

"Strange how?"

"There are electrified jellyfish and strange holes around... On top of that, my precious stone was... But... that's none of your business! Anyway... You! Go home now! Understand?!"

She finally got up, pretending not to notice how wobbly she was. Clearly she wasn't going to be moving far, or fast for that matter. Yet she pushed passed Link and tried to head towards the nearest tunnel.

"Stop," Link told her. "You're just going to end up hurting yourself even more! I told your father I would get you out of here, and I'm going to do that."

Ruto stopped again, leaning against the wall. "You're that worried about me?"

Link nodded.

Ruto looked almost vulnerable for a moment, worried about herself for once, but then she crossed her arms again and glared at Link. Even at her weakest she wasn't going to admit defeat it seemed. "Then I will give you the honor of carrying me! However... I won't leave until I find the thing I'm looking for. You'd better believe me!"

It wasn't exactly what Link was hoping for, but he picked her up and carried her on his back. "I don't suppose you know your way around, do you?"

"In a place this big?" Navi laughed.

"A fairy!" Ruto gasped. "I didn't think they existed!"

"We like to keep to the forests," Navi explained. "Water is... bad for our wings."

Navi once again tucked herself under the hem of Link's hat, peeking out from under it.

"... Take a right here," Ruto said, pointing down one of the tunnels. "If it ended up anywhere, it'd be in his stomach, so we'll head there first."

Link nodded, and followed Ruto's directions.

"... Maybe... that way?"

"I thought... you said... you came here... all the time..." Link huffed between breathes. They'd been walking in circles for at least half an hour, completely lost, and Link was getting tired of carrying Ruto around everywhere.

"I do!" Ruto complained. "But... everything looks different somehow... I think Lord Jabu-Jabu's sick..."

"That much is *obvious*," Link sighed. "But I feel like... we're making things worse... by being here..."

"You should set her down," Navi told him. "Her ankle can't hurt *that* bad."

"I think it might be broken," Ruto whined, looking down at her foot. "I don't think it should bend that way..."

"At least let him take a break!" Navi bonked Ruto on the head. "You're tiring him out!"

"Wait..." Link took a few steps back, looking down another path. "What's that?"

Through the smaller tunnel, there was something sparkling. It looked like it was stuck on something higher up, almost like a ledge.

"That's it!" Ruto exclaimed. "That's what I've been looking for! Throw me up there! Onto the platform!"

"Throw you?" Link asked.

Ruto nodded, staring intently at the sparkling gem on the ledge. *Makes sense to me*, Link thought, glad to finally get her off his back. She might have been heavy to carry, but with the help of the Goron Bracelets she was still light enough to throw.

She landed safely on the ledge and sat down for a moment, clutching the crystal in her hands.

"Oh, my goodness!" Ruto said happily. "I finally found... my mother's stone..." She looked down to Link, a smile on her face. "I got very upset when Lord Jabu-Jabu swallowed it... While I was feeding him, he suddenly swallowed me! I was so surprised, I dropped it inside... But now that I've found it, I don't need to be in here anymore!" She held the crystal tight to her chest, showing the same vulnerable look she had earlier. Then just as quickly, it was gone again. "So take me home right now!"

Link nodded, holding his arm up to catch her. "Okay, whenever you're--"

Suddenly the ledge stretched upwards, and Ruto disappeared.

"... Do you think Lord Jabu-Jabu just got sick of her and kicked her out?" Navi asked.

"Navi that's mean."

"We were both thinking it!"

Link would've come up with some witty counter, but the walls started closing in. The squishy ground tightened, and the tunnel behind him suddenly closed. "What's going on? What happened?"

Then they heard the horrible sound of something cutting through guts. It started farther away, but very quickly it closed in on them. Before they knew it, the walls of the chamber ripped open, and some terrifying creature stepped through.

Lord Jabu-Jabu roared in pain, his screams echoing even in here.

"I don't think he's sick," Link muttered, drawing his sword.

"There's not enough room to fight in here!" Navi told him.

"But I can't let it do anymore damage!"

It looked like an electric tumor. Jellyfish type things were latched onto it, sparks flying off in random directions, and long tentacles were lashing out, trying to make space for itself. Only Ganondorf could have created something like this.

The parasite in the Great Deku Tree, the King Dodongo in Dodongo Cavern, and now this tumor here in Lord Jabu-Jabu.

It doesn't make sense, Link thought, defending himself as he tried to think up a plan. He can't get the Spiritual Stones, so instead he leaves monsters behind? What does that accomplish? You won't get the stones any quicker that way... in fact people will be less willing to trust you! You jerk, you're just outting yourself as the bad guy!

"Alright," Link muttered. "I beat his last two monsters, I can beat this... thing."

"What's your plan?" Navi asked.

"Well, I was really hoping I'd have one by now," Link grit his teeth, looking over his shield at the monster. It's tentacles were flailing, pushing him back, and bolts of lightning kept hitting his shield. Whatever magic this shield had did an excellent job of absorbing the attacks though. "I just have to--"

WHACK!!

His shield was knocked out of his grip and a second attack sent him flying. He hit the wall of the chamber, glad for once that it was so squishy. It didn't help the electric shock though.

"Link!" Navi screamed. "Are you alright!?"

Link staggered for barely a second before getting hit again. This time the attack didn't just hit him, but it grabbed him as well. It wrapped around his waist and shocked him.

"Link!"

"YufFGHhjk!" Link took his sword and slammed the blade straight through the tentacle. He landed on the ground, clothes smoking, but somehow managed to stay on his feet. After speaking a line of absolute gibberish, Link threw his sword at the tumor.

Navi had no idea how it happened, but she knew it was partially her doing. She'd reached out her hand to grab the sword, forgetting for a moment that she was too small to do so. She couldn't believe Link would do something so reckless, and she only hoped the sword would hit something important.

And in that brief moment where the sword was in the air, she saw it move and change trajectory.

The blade pierced the top of the tumor, where it connected to the tentacles. There was a blast of electricity, and then it went quiet.

Link and Navi stood there, baffled, as the tumor slowly melted into goop that was then absorbed into Jabu-Jabu.

"What... just happened?" Link asked.

Navi looked at her own hands. "I guess I can be useful after all."

Link retrieved his sword from the bloody ground. "Come on, let's get out of here before we cause serious damage."

"Are you okay?" Navi asked.

"I'll be fine," Link nodded, retrieving his shield next. "We should go find Ruto."

They met up with Ruto in Jabu-Jabu's throat, where she very angrily reprimanded Link for being late. Ignoring the sudden outburst, Link helped her to Jabu-Jabu's teeth, where they were then spat out into the lake.

Feeling more than slightly annoyed, Link floated for a bit, Navi sitting on his head.

"You!" Ruto said, getting Link's attention. She stared at her reflection in the water, her attitude less aggressive for the moment. "... You looked cool... Cooler than I thought you would, anyway... Just a little!" And then the attitude was back. Link had no idea what her problem was, flipping back and forth so frequently like that. "Well, anyway, you saved me, so I guess I'll reward you. What do you wish? Just tell me..."

I want to go home, Link thought. *I'm tired...* But he was almost done. He just had one more thing he had to do, and then it would be over.

"I want the Spiritual Stone." He didn't mean to sound so blunt, but he felt like his brain wasn't saying what he was thinking. *Stupid electricity.*

"You mean the Spiritual Stone of Water, Zora's Sapphire, don't you?" Ruto asked quietly, holding it in her hand again. "My mother gave it to me and said I should give it to the man who will be my husband." She smiled at him. "You might call it the Zora Engagement Ring!" She looked at the crystal and her expression faltered. She still looked happy, but in a more somber way. "All right! I'll give you my most precious possession: Zora's Sapphire!"

She handed Link the crystal, and then sunk beneath the water before Link could even thank her. He didn't understand half the things she'd told him about engagement rings, but for this moment he didn't care that he didn't understand.

Because what he *did* understand... was that he had all three stones now. Now, whatever they were supposed to do... He could bring them to Zelda, and stop Ganondorf, just like he'd promised.

"Don't tell my father!" Ruto shouted from the other side of the lake. And then she was gone again.

"Link?" Navi said. "What's that?"

Link turned to where Navi was pointing. There was a cave at the back of the lake, and a feeling similar to the Fairy Fountains.

"Another Fountain?" Link asked.

"Let's check it out!" Navi said. "One last stop before it's over?"

"... Yeah," Link smiled. "One last stop."

CHAPTER II

THE CALM AND THE STORM

It was similar to the second Fairy's Fountain; rose colored water, rose shaped braziers, and rose pedal-shaped stones lining the large pool of water at the end of the chamber. In fact, it even *felt* like it was the same place.

"Have we been here before?" Link asked.

"Maybe?" Navi kept glancing around the room, trying to spot any differences... There weren't any.

"Hello?" Link called, standing at the edge of the pool. "Anyone home?"

"Welcome, Link!" the Great Fairy said before appearing. It was the same Fairy as before.

Link almost laughed. "The Great Fairy of Magic. I thought your Fountain was near Hyrule Castle?"

"Some places have *many* doors," the Great Fairy smiled. "But now, I have another magic spell for you. Please, take it."

There was no dizziness this time, but the blinding flash of light was still there. Suddenly Link could feel himself falling into his own thoughts, another voice echoing in his mind. This one *was* different than before, a cheerier voice.

"*My gift to you!*" she said. "*Chosen hero. It will help, I'm sure!*"

Another diamond appeared in front of him, except instead of an orb made of fire, it was a polished orb of green light and strong winds. And again, without any idea how, he knew who gave it to him.

This was Farore's gift. Farore's Wind.

"This is warp magic which you can use to remove yourself from immediate dangers," the Great Fairy explained. "Use it once to create a Warp Point. Use it again to return there."

Link was returned to the edge of the pool, still on his feet and the physical representation of the magic now gone. The magic itself was in him now.

"When battle has made you weary, please come back to see me."

Link nodded. "Thank you."

The Great Fairy began to leave, but Navi stopped her. "Wait I have a question!"

"You have the answer as well," the Great Fairy smiled. "You need no confirmation from me. The Great Deku Tree chose you for a reason."

"You know the Great Deku Tree?" Navi asked.

"All Fairies do!" the Great Fairy laughed. "Farewell, Navi. Farewell, Link."

And then she was gone, the falling water sparkling in the light of the fires.

Navi sat on Link's shoulder, thinking about what the Great Fairy said.

"What were you asking her about?" Link asked as they were leaving the cave.

"During your last fight," Navi explained. "I did something. I moved your sword in the air, and I was going to ask how. I guess the answer is, I just can." She shrugged, not sure what else to say.

"... So..." Link thought for a moment, wading into the lake. "You can like, aim for me? If I throw something, you can just point it in the right direction?"

"I guess?" Navi chuckled.

"Why didn't we know about that earlier?"

"Never came up before!"

Link shook his head. "I think it'd be more help if I had any kind of throwing weapon, but if we ever get in another fight it'll definitely be useful."

"Think of the other adventures we'll have once we're done here!" Navi beamed.

Link shook himself off as he got out of the water. "There is way more world out here than I thought there was going to be," he admitted, walking passed Lord Jabu-Jabu.

The whale huffed at him, asleep. He was probably resting now, healing.

"Where should we go next?" Navi asked. "After Hyrule Castle I mean."

"Um... Home first," Link laughed. "That's for sure. I want to check in on everyone, tell them what I've been up to."

"Don't sound *too* proud," Navi poked him in a joking manner. "They won't believe any of it."

"Ha! They won't believe any of it anyway."

They rode the raging rivers all the way back through the Zora's territory. Out of the King's chamber, down through Zora's Domain, then Zora's River, and finally came to a stop on the shores of Hyrule Field.

It was darker than he remembered. The grass wasn't as green, the sky wasn't as blue, and the winds were stronger.

"A storm?" Link asked.

"... No... I have a really bad feeling, Link."

Link moved his hand to the pouch tied to his belt, the pouch that held the three Spiritual Stones. "A bad feeling like... Ganondorf?"

Navi nodded.

"Then we've gotta hurry."

It was early in the morning, but the sky was almost black. At first it was hard to tell why, but as they got closer enough to the city to see the outer wall, they could see the smoke rising behind it. The drawbridge began to lower, and they saw the flames spreading through the city.

"No... Are we too late?" Link ran as fast as he could towards Hyrule Castletown, Navi fluttering furiously beside him.

Thunder struck in the distance, and it began to rain. It felt like the sky was angry, lashing out, using the lighting as weapons and the roaring winds as it's screaming voice. It was cold, colder than Link had ever been.

And then he saw the figure riding out of the city. It was a horse, carrying Impa and Princess Zelda. There was no time for words as they rode passed Link as fast as they could. They were running from something, and Link could see the look of pure terror on Zelda's face.

She threw something behind her before going over a hill and disappearing into Hyrule Field.

"Z... Zelda," Link gasped. "I was too--"

He whipped around, hearing another horse coming to a stop behind him. It was a black horse with a red mane wearing sand polished armor... and on it's back was Ganondorf, scowling into the distance.

"Arrrrgh! I lost her..." Ganondorf noticed Link, and for a moment his furious expression turned almost sad. "You, over there! Little kid! You must have seen the white horse gallop past just now... Which way did it go?!"

Link felt petrified. Even if he wanted to speak, he found he couldn't.

Ganondorf's fake expression broke. "Answer me!" he roared.

Link stood his ground, glaring back at him. He drew his sword,

ready to fight if he had to. He wasn't going to be afraid of this man. He'd fought his monsters, and this man was considerably smaller.

"So you think you can protect them from me," Ganondorf sighed. "You've got guts, kid."

"You're not going to hurt her!" Link shouted. "I'll stop you!"

Ganondorf shook his head. "Heh heh heh... You want a piece of me?!" he exclaimed, holding his arm out like he was offering a challenge. "Very funny! I like your attitude!"

Except he wasn't offering a challenge. A ball of fire formed in his hand, crackling with energy. Dark clouds swirled around him, and Link was struck with the full force of the attack. It threw him to the ground, knocking his shield off his back and his sword out of his hand.

"Link!" Navi screamed. "Link get up!"

"Pathetic little fool!" Ganondorf gloated. "Do you realize who you are dealing with?!" He looked down at Link with malice, done with showing off. "I am Ganondorf... And soon I will rule the world."

He kicked his horse and rode off after the princess.

Link picked up his weapons, watching. At the very least, Ganondorf was going the wrong way. He didn't know where Zelda had gone.

"What are we going to do?" Navi asked. "Should we follow Zelda and Impa?"

Link turned to face the city. The fires were under control, the knights working to put them out, but there was still a horrible air hanging over the whole city. But he saw something, there on the ground near the moat. He walked over and picked it up, looking at the Ocarina of Time that Zelda said had been the last key to opening the Sacred Realm.

She wanted him to finish this, with or without her.

"No," Link said, gritting his teeth. "We do what we came here for. We head to the place where these Spiritual Stones were meant to be used, and do it ourselves."

Navi looked out at where the princess headed off, then back at the city.

"Yeah," Navi nodded. "Let's head to that temple."

"The Temple of Time." Link headed into the city.

CHAPTER 12

THE TEMPLE OF TIME

The town square was crowded, knights trying to put out the last of the fires and people pushing each other to figure out what happened. Link thought he could see the top of the temple, just on the other side of town... but there were too many people in his way.

"There's plenty of back streets," Navi suggested. "Doesn't look like many people are walking them."

Link nodded and followed her down the paths between the buildings. It was technically the wrong way, but it should allow them to come out behind the crowd...

They stopped in the middle of the near empty street, spotting an injured knight laying against a wall.

"Are you okay?" Link asked, kneeling beside him.

"Unnngh... are you the boy from the forest...?"

"Yeah," Link nodded. "Did you know Zelda?"

"I-I-I've finally met you..." his eyes weren't focusing. He stared across the alley like who he was talking to was somewhere on the wall. "I-I-I have something to t-t-tell you... Ganondorf, the Gerudo King of Thieves, betrayed our King... Zelda's attendant, Impa, sensed danger and escaped from the castle with our princess... I tried to stop Ganondorf's men from chasing them... but..."

The knight moved his hand away from his armor, showing a deep bloody gash in his side. He didn't have any time left.

"I'll go get help!" Link said, jumping to his feet.

"The princess was... waiting for a boy from the forest..." the knight coughed, motioning for Link to stay put. "That's you... She wanted to give something to the boy..."

Link looked at the Ocarina of Time. "This... this is what she wanted to give me." He looked down at the knight. "It's okay... Zelda made it out in time. I'll do what she told me. Ganondorf won't win."

The knight smiled, glad that he could at least know it would be okay after his passing. "If you received it from the princess, hurry... to the Temple of Time..."

He wasn't moving anymore.

Link stood, even angrier than before. He was already angry at it

all, but every time he turned around something else worse happened. The death of the Great Deku Tree, the monsters Ganondorf left behind, these tasks he was sent to complete without help, and now Zelda was on the run and her knights were dying.

He almost wished he could go back to the forest, back to the days when his only problem was putting up with Mido bossing people around. Link could show him a thing or two now... But now... Now things were so different.

Understanding it didn't matter. He couldn't make sense of this no matter how hard he tried, but he could at least put a stop to it. He could finish this quest, and put a stop to Ganondorf once and for all.

"Come on," Link hissed, still staring at the body of the dead knight. "Let's stop wasting time."

They hurried down the rest of the alleyway, avoiding the crowd entirely and running through town. On the edge of the city, passed all the markets, was an old church. There was nothing to mark it as such, but they knew this was the temple.

They opened the great wooden doors, and entered the Temple of Time, the white marble infrastructure reflecting themselves beneath them.

At the end of the chamber was an altar with three slots, each slot was a perfect fit for the Spiritual Stones. Navi sat on his shoulder as Link placed each stone in it's slot. They glew in succession, first the Kokiri Emerald, then the Goron's Ruby, and then the Zora's Sapphire.

Then Link stepped back, looking at the locked steel doors behind the altar. He pulled out the Ocarina of Time, the final piece of the puzzle, and suddenly a vision blinded him, similar to the visions he received from the Great Fairies.

It was Zelda, standing before him.

Link... can you hear me? It's Zelda. Link, when you hold this ocarina in your hand... I won't be around anymore... I wanted to wait for you, but I couldn't delay any longer... At least I could leave you the ocarina and this melody... This song opens the Door of Time... Now, Link. Play this melody in front of the altar in the Temple of Time. You must protect the Triforce!

He heard her song playing in his head, and when the lights faded he played the song for the altar. The halls of the Temple carried the music, and the doors slid open, revealing another chamber beyond it.

It looked to be a part of the same building, but as Link passed the door... he felt a strange shift.

The room felt darker, older. It was like he stepped into some other

place... some other time... A voice echoed in his head, something familiar. It felt like the first vision he received from the Great Fairies, but somehow different.

There was only a single light shining from a window high above, and in the center of the chamber seemed to be where the voice was coming from. He still couldn't quite make it out... but as soon as he saw the sword he knew.

That was the familiar presence he felt.

"Link, isn't that...?!" Navi fluttered around his head before moving to the sword. "It's that legendary blade... The Master Sword!"

Link walked the steps up to the pedestal, in awe of the weapon. It was something even the Kokiri had heard tales of. The ancient blade that once destroyed a great and terrible evil.

This was that blade... *this was...* the Master Sword.

The one chosen by my creator, the voice said, clearer now. *I have been waiting for you. You will play a role in the great destiny.*

It was far away, like echoes of some other conversation... But he remembered it. Remembered it as though he were the one having it.

"So you keep saying," he mumbled. "But... What does that mean?"

May we meet again in another life...

Link placed his hand on the hilt of the sword, the gem glowing faintly as if waking up from a very long sleep.

Without saying another word, he removed the sword from the pedestal.

A circle of light surrounded the room, closing in around him and the blade. It swallowed him whole, and the temple fell away.

...

Geh heh heh! Excellent work! As I thought, you held the keys to the Door of Time! You have led me to the gates of the Sacred Realm... Yes, I owe it all to you, kid!

Ganondorf's haunting laughter echoed in the void, tauntingly.

Link... another voice spoke. *Wake up... Link, the chosen one...*

Link opened his eyes, a weak feeling in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't see. A sound like rushing water was all he could hear.

After a moment his vision cleared enough that he could confirm it was definitely water... but he had no idea where he was. He stood on some sort of platform, suspended in darkness. Rings of water fell on each of the six sides of the platform, and each of the six corners there was a smaller engraved platform.

On the platform in front of him, was an old man in brown robes.

He was the one speaking. "I am Rauru, one of the ancient Sages..."

Ancient Sages, Link thought. *The ones who...*

"Ages ago, we ancient Sages built the Temple of Time to protect the entrance to the Sacred Realm... This is the Chamber of Sages, inside the Temple of Light... The Temple of Light, situated in the very center of the Sacred Realm, is the last stronghold against Ganondorf's evil forces. The Master Sword -- the evil-destroying sword that you pulled out of the pedestal -- was the final key to the Sacred Realm."

The sword was the key? Link thought. *I thought... I thought the Ocarina...*

"Link," Rauru said calmly. "Don't be alarmed... Look at yourself..."

Link wasn't sure what the old man was talking about, but he forced himself to stand... and when he looked at himself...

"Look, Link!" Navi exclaimed. "You're big now! You've grown up!"

He felt different... Taller for sure, but something else. It didn't feel like his body. It felt...

Link growled at himself, balling his fists. He couldn't quite piece it together but it was *wrong*. Whatever this was, whatever was happening now... it was *wrong*!

"The Master Sword is a sacred blade that evil ones may never touch," Rauru explained. "Only one worthy of the title of "Hero of Time" can pull it from the pedestal. However, you were too young to be the Hero of Time... Therefore, your spirit was sealed here for seven years."

"Seve-..." Link couldn't believe anything he was hearing. The amount of things that had heppend in the past week... and now he's missed seven years? What happened to Zelda? Could they have stayed safe from Ganondorf for so long? Did Ganondorf find her? Did he lose? Was his entire role unnecessary and it's all been taken care of?

A thousand thoughts flooded his mind and he didn't have answers for anything.

"And now that you are old enough, the time has come for you to awaken as the Hero of Time!" Rauru folded his arms behind his back and stared down at Link. "Well, do you understand your destiny?"

"Understand... my destiny?" Link growled. "*Destiny!*?"

You will play a role in the great destiny...

Link felt himself shaking. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't just have everything torn away from him like this because someone else *planned* it that way! This wasn't fair-- it wasn't right!

"No!" Link barked. "No I *don't* understand! Nothing has made sense so far! The mission the Great Deku Tree sent me on... the legends Zelda told me... the whole... the memories and this sword and this place... it doesn't add up!"

Rauru gave a heavy sigh, disappointed. "Right," he nodded. "It looks like you are confused... Let me tell you again, from the beginning. The Master Sword is a sacred blade that evil ones may never touch--"

"Stop," Link said firmly. He gripped the sword in his hand, looking at the blade. The gem still glowed faintly, but it felt different now. "I don't understand this... I don't understand any of it..."

"Link," Navi said, trying to comfort him. "I don't get it either. But the Great Deku Tree told us we had to succeed. If we drop out now, when we're needed most... We'd be letting him down."

He lowered the sword, holding it at his side and staring at the ground. "Fine," he growled. "Forget that I don't understand... Just tell me what I have to do."

Rauru nodded. "But, remember," he said carefully. "Though you opened the Door of Time in name in of peace... Ganondorf, the Gerudo King of Thieves, used it to enter this forbidden Sacred Realm!"

One answered question, Link thought bitterly, forcing himself to stay his tongue. *But it's the wrong answer.*

"He obtained the Triforce from the Temple of Light, and with its power, he became the King of Evil..." Rauru turned away from Link, turning his disappointment on himself. "His evil power radiated from the temples of Hyrule, and in seven short years, it transformed Hyrule into a world of monsters. My power now has only little influence, even in this Sacred Realm... Namely, this Chamber of Sages."

Rauru looked back at Link, stepping forward off his platform. "But there is still hope... The power of the Sages remains. When the power of all the Sages is awakened... The Sages' Seals will contain all the evil power in the void of the Realm..." He placed a hand on Link's shoulder. "I, Rauru, am one of the Sages... And... Your power to fight together with the Sages makes you the Hero of Time. The Hero of Time, chosen by the Master Sword."

He stepped away, standing back on his platform. "Keep my spirit with you... Find the power of the other Sages, and add their might to your own!" He remained close enough to hand Link a small token. A gold medallion, the Medallion of Light.

Link accepted it, but refused to look Rauru in the eye. Taking another step back, Rauru raised his hands and a light took Link out of the

Sacred Realm.

Find the other Sages and save Hyrule.

Link arrived back in the chamber of the Sword's pedestal. His thoughts were all over the place... He stared at the pedestal wondering if this was the end... or the beginning of something far bigger than he could possibly imagine.

"Link... we're back in the Temple of Time," Navi said, standing on his shoulder. "But have seven years really passed?"

"You can't believe it either," Link mumbled.

"Let's get out of here."

Link hesitated, staring up at the window that shone down on the center of the room. Had it always been broken?

He turned away, and started down the steps.

... Then heard the tapping behind him. The sound of someone landing softly on stone ground.

Link took his shield off his back and pointed his sword at the stranger. They looked like Impa, dressed in the clothes of the Sheikah, but their face was covered, and their hair was blonde and cut jagged. All he could see was one of their red eyes.

"I've been waiting for you, Hero of Time..." It was a boy, could have been older than Link was. Sixteen or seventeen at the oldest.

"Who are you?" Link growled. "What do you want?"

"When evil rules all, an awakening voice from the Sacred Realm will call those destined to be Sages who dwell in the five temples. One in a deep forest... One on a high mountain... One under a vast lake... One within the house of the dead... One inside the goddess of the sand... Together with the Hero of Time, the awakened ones will bind the evil and return the light of peace to the world..."

"Noted," Link said, turning around. "Thanks for the help."

"This is the legend of the temples passed down by my people, the Sheikah. I am Sheik, survivor of the Sheikah..."

"The survivor," Link said, stopping for a moment. He looked over his shoulder. "I'm sorry about your people... I am. And I appreciated your help... But I don't have time to stand around and listen to stories anymore. Keep your legends."

"As I see you standing there holding the mythical Master Sword, you really do look like the legendary Hero of Time... If you believe the legend, you have no choice. You must look for the five temples and awaken the five Sages..."

"And I'll do that," Link growled. "Now unless you want to point

me in the right direction, I'd like to get going now."

Sheik gave him a sad look, but at least gave him an answer... even it was still acting as a riddle. "One Sage is waiting for the time of awakening in the Forest Temple. The Sage is a girl I am sure you know... Because of the evil power in the temple, she cannot hear the awakening call from the Sacred Realm... Do you understand, Link?"

Do you understand, Link? Link thought sarcastically. "Yeah," he said, waving him off and finally leaving. "Yeah... I understand perfectly fine."

Navi flew beside him, not wanting to question him. She knew he'd been through a lot already, and she knew he wasn't okay... but she wasn't sure what to do to make it better. The way things were going... they were only going to get worse.

And when they stepped outside and overlooked the city... she was proven right.

"They... They're all... dead." Link fell to his knees watching the horrible rotten monsters tear apart the market.

There were no people... No Knights to defend the people... It was all smoking, the ashes already settled.

"Link," Navi said.

Link pounded his fist into the ground.

This... This was the last straw.

CHAPTER 13

NUMB

The entire city reeked of death. Grotesque creatures limped through the streets and the sky seemed to be permanently tinted black. The buildings and ground were stained in blood, all the wood was rotten and every stone was smashed. Even the Temple of Time suffered during those seven years. It still stood, but it was on its last leg.

Then he turned to the north, towards Hyrule Castle... Or rather, where it should've been.

Walking through the city, the monsters eyed him but left him alone. They were too busy chewing on something Link didn't want to think about. Pieces of armor and weapons lay scattered on every road, rusted and old. And sometimes he had to look at the sky, to keep from seeing the corpses on the ground.

And at last he arrived at the path to the castle. Burn marks scorched the ground, and the stone structures that were once gates were reduced to rubble. But the most obvious change was the castle itself.

It was gone. Entirely and completely gone... nothing more than a hole in the ground filled with fire. But hovering above it, floating where the Zelda's castle used to be, was a dark and twisted shape. It was like a cruel shadow, *mocking* what once was.

"Link," Navi choked. "What... what do we do now?"

Link didn't answer. He was afraid if he opened his mouth he'd just scream. Instead he turned away from the castle, and started his walk out of the city.

—

It was just as dead. The grass was yellowed, mostly dirt now, and the dark clouds seemed to cover the rest of Hyrule...

"It... It can't be all bad, right?" Navi asked. "There has to be *something* that survived the last... seven year..."

Sheik had told him to go back to the forest, to wake an old friend as the Sage. It was a start, at least, but there was another place he wanted to pass by before going there.

So he began another long walk through Hyrule Field, watching the

stormy clouds roll across the sky. The sun still shone through them on occasion, letting him know it was still day, but by the time he reached his destination it was raining.

"You don't want to go home first?" Navi asked. "Isn't seeing them a little more important?"

Link stopped at the gate of Lon Lon Ranch. Maybe it would've been smarter to leave here and just go... but he didn't want to. Not yet. He didn't want to see what it had become.

So he passed the gate, and stepped around the corner. The buildings looked to be in okay shape, still standing at least, but not as inviting as he remembered them.

The field was the first sign of life he'd seen since leaving the Temple of Time. Horses still roamed around inside the fence, but the humming was gone. Malon wasn't singing her song.

"Oh... a visitor!" Link looked back, seeing Malon standing behind him with a bucket of seeds. "It's been a long time since we've had a visitor here... Where did you come from?"

Link started to answer, almost reminded her she knew him... She was older now, but she still looked the same. Looking at her, he saw the same little girl who pulled him away from the market the first time he went to Hyrule Castle.

But Link didn't answer, and she seemed to understand. She walked by him, standing beside him and watching the horses with him.

"Since Ganondorf came, people in the castle town have gone, places have been ruined, and monsters are wandering everywhere." She looked down at the bucket. "Mr. Ingo is just using the ranch to gain Ganondorf's favor... Everyone seems to be turning evil... But Dad..."

She had a sad look in her eyes, like she was looking into her memories instead of what was in front of her. "He was kicked out of the ranch by Mr. Ingo... If I disobey Mr. Ingo, he will treat the horses so badly... So... there's nothing I can do..."

Link remembered Mr. Ingo... the older man who seemed grumpy all the time... He never liked Ingo much.

"If only I could play their favorite song for them..." Malon said, almost smiling.

Link looked around, spotting Ingo standing by the gate to the field. The man was clearly doing well for himself, wearing fancier clothes and jewelry. Link walked away from Malon and straight to Ingo, getting his attention by drawing his sword.

Ingo's eyes went wide and he threw up his hands. "There are some

people in Kakariko spreading rumors that I cheated Talon out of the ranch, but... Don't be ridiculous!" He stepped back and recomposed himself, holding up fists instead of open palms of defense. "That guy Talon was weak! I, the hardworking Ingo, poured so much energy into this place! I don't want any strangers like you saying anything bad about me!"

Link raised an eyebrow. He actually reminded him of Mido a bit. Desperate attention seeker, pretending to be all high and mighty. He lowered his sword.

"Listen," Ingo said, folding his arms behind his back and standing up straight. "The great Ganondorf recognized my obvious talents and gave the ranch to me! I will raise a fine horse and win recognition from the great Ganondorf!"

Then Ingo had an idea, and a mischievous look sparkled in his eyes. "Say, young man, do you want to ride one of my fine horses? If you pay me ten rupees, you can ride."

Link looked at the horses, and pulled out a fist full of rupees.

"Do you want to hear how to ride?"

Link was already opening the gate. Ingo laughed behind him, counting the money... then he stopped dead in his tracks as Link walked out to the middle of the field and sat down.

"What, are you doing?" Navi hissed. "What are we doing here at all? This is no time to be playing games, Link!"

Link took out his ocarina, the one he got from Saria. "... Ganondorf," he said. "Hasn't destroyed everything."

He played the song Malon had taught him, Epona's song.

Ingo grit his teeth, but he couldn't quite place where he remembered that song. Malon however, recognized it immediately, though she wasn't sure how this stranger knew it. For Ingo it had been seven years since he heard the song, and for Malon it had been seven years since she saw Link. But for Link, it was only a few days ago that he met them, learned this song...

Epona however, remembered the song well, and came trotting over to Link. She nuzzled her head up against him, and he smiled, patting her mane.

"Hey, young man!" Ingo shouted, still standing by the gate. "Do I know you? I just felt as though I've seen you somewhere before..."

Link climbed onto Epona's back and strode back to Ingo.

Ingo eyed him, curious. "How about a little race with me? One lap around the corral with that horse. Let's make a wager -- say fifty rupees?"

Link didn't have fifty rupees, but he wasn't going to admit that. He

looked at Malon who was still standing by the fence trying to figure out who Link was.

"Deal," Link said.

Ingo smiled and called over his own horse. When he was ready, they stood outside the gate. Malon had moved away as to not get trampled, but she was watching intently.

"Three!" Ingo laughed. "Two!..."

He kicked off before finishing his own countdown, charging ahead of Link.

Link sighed, but Epona was ahead of him, chasing after Ingo. After just a few seconds, Epona took the lead, storming ahead of Ingo. Link grinned, holding the reins tight. She lapped the fence in no time, it was barely a challenge.

And when Ingo finally caught up he leapt off his horse with rage. "Sh-shooooot!" he exclaimed. "If the great Ganondorf found out about this humiliation..." He stopped throwing his tantrum for a moment and looked back up at Link. "Hey, you! How about another race? If you win... You can keep... the horse!"

Not exactly what I came here for, but, he patted Epona. "Agreed."

Ingo shooed away his horse and sought out another. This one looked a little stronger, but Link didn't doubt Epona's speed. Didn't matter what tricks Ingo used, Link would win.

"Three!" Ingo growled, kicking his horse. He launched, speeding down the track.

Link laughed. "C'mon Epona!" The horse went after Ingo, and once again passed by with ease.

"No!" Ingo screeched, kicking his horse again. His horse just whinnied, shaking it's head and refusing to move any faster than it already was.

Link waited for Ingo at the finish line, turning Epona around to face Ingo as he finally finished the lap.

"What's up with that horse?!" Ingo exclaimed, jumping off his own steed. Unable to tell the difference between his own horses, it had apparently taken him this long to tell which horse Link had even picked. "Is that Epona?! How did you tame that wild horse right under my nose?! I was going to present that horse to the great Ganondorf... But I bet on the race and lost! Shoooooot!"

Link looked down at him. "You lost," he agreed. "So if you don't mind, I'll be taking my new horse and leaving." He turned Epona around, but Ingo zipped in front of him.

"Hah ha hah!" Ingo laughed. "As I promised, I'll give the horse to you... However... I'll never let you leave this ranch!"

Link and Epona exchanged looks, then backed up. With just as much ease as winning the race, they jumped over Ingo's head. One of Epona's back hoofs knocked him in the face though, and he fell flat on the ground, unconscious.

Epona landed and Malon walked over to them. She remained cautious, but... something about this stranger said she could trust him. So Malon looked up at him.

"Thank you very much, I think, for winning at least Epona's freedom," Malon said. "I haven't even asked you your name yet..."

Link looked down at her, half smiling. "I'm Link."

Malon's eyes went wide. "Really?" she gasped. "Link!" She clapped her hands together. "That's what I thought! You're the fairy boy from the forest! That was *years* ago! Do you remember me?"

"Of course," Link nodded. "I remember meeting you, seven years ago... like it was yesterday."

"You do?" Malon smiled. "I was sure it was you, because Epona remembered you!"

Link laughed softly, then looked down at Ingo who was snoring in the grass. "So... What happened with him? I remember him being rude, but... working for Ganondorf?"

"Oh, I have to tell you about Mr. Ingo..." Malon realized. "He was afraid of the evil King... He doesn't come here, but it's terrified Mr. Ingo... Ever since their one and only encounter, Mr. Ingo's convinced that he has to do an outstanding job or else Ganondorf will be mad..."

"How long ago was that encounter?" Link asked.

"... Five years," Malon answered, looking down at Ingo. "He was scared of him before, when he took over... but when they met in Kakariko, and Ganondorf forced my father to hand over the ranch on a whim..."

"So what will happen now?"

"I think... this will finally convince him to go back to normal," Malon smiled. "I think he'll see that even after this, Ganondorf won't come back. He doesn't care about our little ranch. I think, after some time, he'll go back to being a normal, nice person. Maybe my father can come back some day."

"He'll come back," Link said. "I promise. I have to pass by there eventually, so I'll look for him and tell him about this."

"You will?" Malon asked. "You promise?"

"I promise," Link repeated.

"Thank you!" Malon smiled. "Thank you, Link!"

"But for now, I have to do something," Link told her. "I have to go home."

"You're returning to the forest," Malon said. "Will I see you again?"

"Of course," Link smiled. "I'll be back."

Link left with Epona, waving goodbye to Malon who was helping Ingo to his feet.

"Did we lose?" Ingo mumbled.

"You lost," Malon nodded.

"Aww," Ingo huffed, getting up.

As soon as they were out of the ranch, Navi peeked out from under Link's hat. "You didn't have to do that you know."

"I know."

"Could've left the ranch alone."

"I know."

"You like that Malon girl."

"... I know."

Navi laughed at him, flicking his forehead as they rode south. The rain still poured, the dark clouds still hung over them, and the grass was still dead... but Link felt better knowing that *something* was still okay.

It gave him hope that the forest was okay... it gave him hope that his friends were okay.

You can't destroy everything, Ganondorf, Link thought. I won't let you... Whatever I have to do... I will stop you.

CHAPTER 14

HOME

Link climbed down from Epona, letting her walk around in the grass outside the forest. Everything looked the same, if not a bit smaller. The trees were still standing, their leaves still green, but the dark clouds overhead reached even this far and the air felt sick.

"Link," Navi said. "The plants here..."

"They *feel* poisoned," Link nodded, looking down at the purple flower buds. The weren't Deku Babas, but they definitely resembled them. "I'm sure... everyone's okay."

He told Epona to stay put, and ducked into the fallen tree trunk that was the entrance to the Kokiri Forest.

When he came out the other side he realized it was darker than it used to be, little fireflies and a few fairies being the only source of light. They hung above them, fluttering around. The bridge creaked under foot, but it was sturdy enough. But once he made it to the end of the path and at the entrance of the village, he stopped again.

"I wonder how much it's changed," Link sighed.

"We won't find out just standing around here," Navi told him, pushing him from behind even though it did basically nothing. "C'mon! Let's keep moving!"

Link took a deep breath, and brushed aside the branches that concealed the village.

And the second he stepped out of the trees a very large Deku Baba lashed out at him. As a reflex Link stabbed it through the vine neck, cutting off it's head. The flower beast fell to the ground with a thud, the vine shriveling up.

Then suddenly a Deku Shrub hit him in the back with a nut. Link glared at the leafy foe and it sunk back into the ground, hiding. *Stupid bush*, Link thought.

He looked around at the village. It was still night, so most likely everyone was sleeping. But... why were there so many monsters in the village? He knew the Great Deku Tree's magic kept the monsters out, but in his absence have none of the Kokiri grown to fight these things? None of them protect the village in the Deku Tree's place?

"Something's wrong," Link said, walking down the familiar dirt

path through the houses. He stopped when he reached his own home. It looked smaller... but some things hadn't changed at least.

The little sign that was hammered into the ground still read his name, and he smiled at the little drawing Saria had etched into the base of his tree house.

He was almost afraid of it breaking, now that he was bigger, but he climbed up the ladder to the little porch, and brushed aside the curtain door. He ducked inside, letting the curtain close behind him. A little candle was lit on the table in the center of the one roomed home, and everything was still just as clean as he left it.

The chest he pulled his sword and shield out of was still left open. He closed it, no longer having those things. He'd left his shield behind in the tomb where he found the larger shield he had now, and his sword had disappeared when he claimed the Master Sword.

Link drew that new blade, sitting down on the edge of his bed. It was lower to the ground than he remembered, as was the ceiling for that matter.

"We should get some sleep," Navi said, sitting down beside the candle. "We can figure out what's happening in the morning."

"We've been gone a lot longer than I wanted to, Navi," Link sighed. "We were just supposed to go see Zelda... and come back."

Navi hung her head, wrapping her arms around her knees. "I know... Things feel a lot different now..."

"Yeah," Link took off his shield and sheath, putting away his sword and setting them down next to his bed. "But... we'll deal with that in the morning."

Navi laid down on the table, curling up by the candle.

Link laughed.

"What?" Navi asked.

Link got up and crossed the room to a little shelf. Sitting on it was a stitched together mattress and blanket, a small pillow sitting on it. "I made this, for when I finally got a fairy," he said, sitting it down next to Navi. "We left the forest so quickly after everything happened..." He sat down on his own bed as Navi crawled into hers.

"It's comfortable," Navi smiled. "Thanks."

Link laid down, his feet hanging over the edge. His own bed was a lot less comfortable now... but even then it felt safer than anywhere else he'd been in seven years... Seven years packed into almost two weeks...

"Goodnight," Link said.

Navi was already asleep, her light dimming and glowing in rhythm

with her breathing.

Link chuckled to himself, and eventually fell asleep.

"Wake up," Link said, putting his sword and shield back on. "C'mon Navi, we've gotta get moving."

Navi rolled over, and landed flat on the table. "Oof!" she huffed, brushing her hair out of her face. "Wha?"

Link booped her on the head. "Wake up sleepyhead."

Navi stretched her wings and fluttered into the air. "Why don't *all* fairies have beds?" she wondered, still half asleep.

"Cause then you'd never leave them," Link laughed.

"True," Navi agreed. "So, where are we going first?"

"To see Saria," Link answered, stepping out of the door. "She'll know more about what's..."

Gathered in a group near his house, a bunch of the Kokiri were watching as Link stepped out of his house. They looked shocked, confused... and not a day older than last he saw them.

"Did... did we go *back* in time?" Link asked.

"He didn't seem to have any trouble getting in," one of them said.

"Why's he got a fairy?" another asked. "He's not one of us!"

"Another monster from outside!" a third claimed.

"Haven't I seen him somewhere before?" one of the twins asked.

Link hopped down from the porch, startling the Kokiri. "Scatter!" they yelled, running in different directions.

"I... wonder what happened," Navi said, wide awake now. "Why haven't they...?"

"Why aren't they aging?" Link agreed. "Would I have stayed the same as them if I stayed here? Or... was I... really different the whole time?"

He remembered how even Saria had treated him differently. She'd always tell talk to him like he didn't quite belong, even when she was trying to be nice.

It was time to confront her about that.

Link left his house and walked down the path to Saria's. He called her out before even stepping all the way inside. "Saria!"

The little Kokiri girl inside jumped in surprise... but it wasn't Saria.

"Do I know you?" the girl asked. "Oh! Do you know Link? Mido said he did something that caused the Great Deku Tree to wither... Only

Saria defended him until she left--"

"Saria left?" Link asked. "Do you know where?"

The girl thought for a moment. "I don't know where she was going, but she headed off into the Lost Woods. I don't think we're supposed to do that though..."

"The Lost Woods," Link nodded. "Thank you." He left the girl terribly confused, but he had bigger problems to deal with.

He knew the entrance to that place well, him and Saria would often go there to take care of the little monsters the Deku Tree couldn't keep out. And deep on those woods, was an old place Saria liked to hide away in.

If she was anywhere, it was there.

As quick as he could he headed to the north of the village. The path up the cliffs was easier now that he was bigger, and in no time he was walking through the Lost woods. They were called the Lost Woods for a reason, but Link knew every path by heart.

The many paths tended to turn people around, and they'd either end up back at the start or just... well, never coming back. Legend has it that the Kokiri that got lost turned into creatures called Skull Kids, but Link had never seen one of them before. And considering he knew every way through the forest and hadn't spotted a single Skull Kid, he was inclined to believe they simply didn't exist.

"This way," Link said, taking the first right. It was a long winding road through trees that were too close together to move through. After that it was another clearing where he turned left. It was another narrow path, but the trees were farther apart, allowing them to step off the path. That wasn't what they needed to do though, so when they reach the next fork in the road in they turned right.

At the end of that path... Link felt like all the air got knocked out of his lungs.

"Who do you think you are?" Mido growled, stomping his feet.

"Mido," Link mumbled. He was the same as the rest, no older than ten years old. A kid, un-aging...

"That Kokiri-like clothing won't fool me!" Mido continued. "I promised Saria I would never let anybody go through here."

Link looked passed Mido, down the path that led to Saria's hideout. "Saria's back there?" he asked. "I need to see her... It's important."

"If you want to see her that bad," Mido barked. "I'm gonna need some proof that you're really a friend of hers! Something you could only have heard from her... Not that she would ever be friends with a grown-up like you."

"Something of Saria's?" Link took out the ocarina, the one he'd gotten from her. He looked at it, and Mido gasped. "That ocarina?! Saria gave that to... Do you know Saria?"

"I do," Link said, still looking at the ocarina. "I'm... an old friend of hers. Someone she used to know."

Mido thought about it, and finally stepped out of the way. "Ok," he said, looking away. "I trust you. When I see you... I don't know why, but I remember... him..."

"I know," Link sighed, starting down the path. Forward, left, right, and was at the garden.

It was a grove of sorts, just a more taken care of part of the forest. Large hedges made a maze to keep people out of the place Saria always went off to, but they were just as easy to get through for Link as the rest of Lost Woods. There were a few creatures that got in the way of course, like more Deku Shrubs and Babas, but it was nothing Link couldn't take care of.

That is, until he reached the long path at the end of the grove.

At the end of it, a large beast with a hammer stood waiting.

"Navi," Link hissed. "What is that?"

"I think... that's a Moblin," Navi whispered.

"Does it see us?" Link asked.

"Yes," Navi answered.

Link dashed forward and the Moblin brought its hammer down. The ground shook but Link dodged quick enough.

"Watch out!"

The Moblin was quick too, and nearly took Link's head off. Link threw up his shield as the Moblin struck again, but the force of it knocked him sideways. Using that momentum, Link flipped his sword backwards and spun into slicing the Moblin's wrist. The Moblin roared in anger, but Link jabbed his blade through its stomach.

Link stepped out of the way as the Moblin sat down and finally fell over.

"And with that out of the way," Link walked up the steps, and into the clearing where Saria was meant to be. An old temple hung over the clearing, sitting on the edge of a cliff, and below that was the tree stump Saria always sat on, playing her ocarina.

"Saria!?" Link called. "Saria!?"

He heard footsteps behind him and spun around, excited to see his old friend... and then dropped his smile when it was only Sheik.

"The passage of time is always cruel," he said. "Its speed seems

different for each person, but no one can change it..." He looked up at the temple. "A thing that doesn't change with time is a memory of younger days..."

"Where's Saria?" Link asked.

"Link..." Sheik turned away. "I'll see you again..."

Link reached out to stop him, but in a flash of light Sheik disappeared.

"What's up with that guy?" Navi huffed.

"I don't know," Link growled. "But I'm not happy about this." He looked up at the temple. "I was hoping to see Saria... But I guess I have work to do first."

Link grabbed the vines that run the length of the wall, and started climbing up to the temple.

CHAPTER 15

THE POE SISTERS

The oak door creaked shut behind Link as he entered the mossy stone hall. Trees had grown into and around the walls, branches dangling above him and grass growing between the cracks in the floor. Skulltulas hung from those branches, watching Link as he made his way through the hall. Light filtered through the leaves, coming through the cracks in the ceiling.

The stained glass door was broken, too many pieces of the image missing to tell what it used to be, but above it was one of the markings from the Sacred Realm. Or at least, it looked similar to it. Here it was what looked like either three blades of grass or three wisps of wind, but in the Sacred Realm he'd seen it as four of those markings.

Strange, Link thought, opening the stained glass door. "That's not my imagination, right? Those markings are different?"

Navi looked at the symbol above the door. "... Yeah, I don't have an explanation for that."

Ignoring the issue altogether and hoping they weren't being misled in some way, Link shut the door and looked around the main chamber of the temple.

There were a couple of different doors leading to other rooms, but in the center of the chamber was a square altar with a boxed wall around it. The altar itself was an old brassy color, and looked like it was neither sitting on the floor nor built into it, so he wasn't sure what that meant. Along the low boxed wall however, on each corner, was a different colored torch. One green, one red, one blue, and the last was purple. The chamber was dark despite the torches, as there was no light coming from the ceiling. In all, this place seemed relatively untouched.

Suddenly he thought about why Saria came here so often. He only ever met with her under the cliff the temple was on, but he wondered if Saria ever went inside to maintain the place. He supposed if anyone were to care about some old building in the middle of a forest no one entered, it would be her.

Suddenly the torches flickered, catching his attention. Then they were out, throwing the room into complete darkness, save for the small light cast by Navi.

"Where did they go?" Navi whispered.

"I... don't know," Link muttered, drawing his sword.

A voice laughed. A child? It echoed weird, like it was coming from everywhere. A moment later four spirits appeared above the torches, holding the flames in their hands. They were all children, but they had twisted forms, clouded in rags and straw. And now that they could see, Link noticed the altar in the center had disappeared. It must be where the Sage was being kept...

They laughed in unison, their voices muddled together, then they disappeared, taking the light of the torches with them.

"Do you have any idea what that was?" Link whispered.

"...I didn't think they were real," Navi answered. "Just stories the other fairies told to scare me."

"Who are they?" Link asked.

"The Poe Sisters," Navi explained. "Four little girls got lost in the forest a long time ago, never came back... Joelle, Beth, Amy and Meg. They used to play tricks on the other kids, causing all sorts of trouble... One day I guess they just... took it too far."

Link looked around the chamber, barely able to see more than a few feet forward. "I don't suppose you could cast a little more light?"

Navi flickered. "Not much, sorry."

Suddenly the gem on the Master Sword glowed, casting a beam of light over Link's shoulder.

Link flinched, looking at the hilt. "I guess that works." He looked at Navi who sat on his other shoulder. "Let's go find them. Maybe they can tell us where we're going."

"You think they'll *help* us?" Navi scoffed. "I told you they were pranksters! Not a roadmap."

"I think being dead, maybe they'll have learned their lesson," Link shrugged. "Besides, we don't exactly know where else we're going from here."

Before Navi could argue, Link set out to find the first of them. They all disappeared in different directions, so he headed after one of them first, hoping to get them all together.

After about an hour of running through hallway after hallway, room after room, and even a few gardens, he finally accepted that he had no idea where he was going. He kept trying to listen to their laughter,

hoping it would lead towards them, but it felt like they were toying with him.

Every step he took led him closer to a dead end, sometimes literally. These chambers were filled with things far worse than skulltulas and the occasional Deku Baba. A few times he saw what looked like flaming skulls. They kept jumping out at him every time he turned a corner, and even though his gut reaction was usually to punch them in the face, they disappeared in an instant.

Eventually he stopped reacting at all, brushing off the skulls like they were just something that happened. He started going the opposite direction of the laughter as well, and soon it stopped altogether. Everything stopped.

It was like they realized they couldn't play with him anymore.

And when Link reached a room where all the doors suddenly locked for the third time this evening, he simply took a seat against the wall and allowed himself a moment's rest.

For a few minutes he didn't say anything, he just closed his eyes and tried to think of the right answer to this puzzle.

"I think I got it," he finally whispered. "I think I had it the whole time."

"What?" Navi asked, wanting an answer as much as he did. "Why haven't you said anything sooner?"

Link faced the opposite wall, not really looking at anything in particular. "I don't like this game," he said aloud. "I'm not going to play it anymore."

"Liiink," Navi warned. "You're going to make them angry..."

"I want a new game," Link smiled. "Something *I* used to play! I was pretty bad at it though, Mido always made fun of me. But, instead of a game of me chasing you, how about a game of hide and seek? You can pick a place to hide, and I'll come find you! It's a big place, it'd be a lot of fun! But you have to play fair, okay?"

He didn't hear any kind of response, but suddenly one of the doors opened.

Link's smile widened and he got up. "Okay!" he laughed. "Let's play!" He hurried to the door and threw it open, only to have his smile wiped from his face. "I said you had to play *fair*."

"This corridor is all twisted!" Navi exclaimed.

She wasn't kidding. The whole hall tilted so that the doorway at the other end was sideways. But the door slammed shut behind him, and he heard laughing yet again.

It was different this time though, it didn't feel like they were mocking him, but instead like they were actually having fun.

"Just you wait," Link said, running down the hall. As he moved, he felt himself tilting with the floor, it was like gravity suddenly took the day off and as he looked back he could see the door he came through become sideways as he reached the other end. "So long as this is all you've got, I'll beat this game in no time."

A few times Link got lost, but at least he no longer felt like he was getting jerked around. If he cleared a room he knew it would stay that way. And when he reached the back of the temple, a stairwell lined with portraits, he knew he'd finally found one of them.

Most of them were too tattered to tell who the portraits were of, but there were three that remained unharmed. Two of these were simply black, and the third held the image of the red Poe Sister, the one Navi said was named Joelle.

As Link approached that portrait however, she disappeared.

A moment later, she reappeared in one of the black portraits.

"So that's how it is," Link chuckled. "All right, how about this?" He took down one of the black portraits and flipped it around so that the front faced the wall. Then he moved up the stairs to the portrait Joelle currently occupied, and as she disappeared he flipped that one around as well.

Now that Joelle had no choice but to be stuck in one portrait, Link confronted her.

"I win this time," he told her. "Game over."

Joelle smiled at him, shaking her head. She seemed disappointed in herself for losing, but at the same time she looked glad that she got to play with someone again. Then she was gone, a torch lighting up with a red flame next to the door at the bottom of the stairs.

"One down," Navi said.

"Three to go," Link nodded, already headed into the next room.

The next room felt far more ominous than all the ones before it. Shadows that looked like hands kept appearing and disappearing beneath their feet. He kept his sword in hand as it's glow led the way, and quickly crossed to the next room.

It mirrored the other staircase, leading him back upwards. And once again it was lined with portraits, only a few of which still in good

condition. It seemed like this sister, Beth, had had the same idea as Joelle and was hiding in them.

Not wasting any time, Link used the same tactic as before, and cornered Beth. But she wasn't going to give up as easily as her sister.

She jumped out of the portrait and floated down the stairs. Link chased after her, but she wasn't going far. Beth stopped at the bottom and took out her torch, bouncing with excitement.

"What are you doing?" Link asked cautiously.

The blue fire crackled in her torch, but she didn't answer. They never did.

Link readied his shield. "I've beat you at this game," he told her. "You're supposed to play fair."

Beth swayed in the air, lowering her torch a bit. She kept her smile, but after a moment she conceded the victory to Link.

Link put his sword and shield away, standing in front of her. "Go back to your sister. Joelle should be waiting in the main room."

Beth nodded and disappeared, a torch by the door lighting with her blue flame.

"That makes two," Link sighed.

Link slashed through the underbelly of a large skulltula as the ceiling came crashing down. He stood in a small square where there was a hole in the ceiling, but it was clearly meant to be used as a trap. If the temple hadn't been so old, there wouldn't be holes like this for Link to use to avoid it.

"That was too close," Navi said, popping out from under Link's hat. "Why build traps like this anyway?"

"Waste of money," Link agreed, opening the door to the next room.

They entered another large, dimly lit chamber. On one side was a locked door, and beside it a torch, and on the other side was a large painting that took up half the wall. The painting was of the third sister, Amy. Even in the painting, the flame on her torch flickered and moved.

"There's nowhere for you to hide," Link said, putting his hands on his hips. "I win again!"

Amy snickered, spinning and then disappearing.

Suddenly Link was hit from behind and hit the ground. As he grabbed his weapons he turned to see Amy spinning in place, using her

torch as a weapon.

Link threw up his shield as she hit him again. She was done laughing, and a slightly angrier expression on her face.

"I'm not cheating!" Link told her, blocking her attacks as she appeared and disappeared at random. "I'm just better than I remember being!" He knocked her back. "Come to think of it, I was probably only bad at this because *Mido* was cheating, so..."

Amy appeared in front of him, holding her torch dangerously close to Link's face. At this point though, he was unfazed. He patted her head. "I already found Joelle and Beth. Once I find Meg, it's over, okay?"

Amy backed off, her torch going out. She didn't seem as happy as the others, but she acknowledged Link's victory. The torch by the door lit with her green flame, and then Amy was gone.

"I don't think she's happy that the game's almost over," Link sighed.

"Well once you're gone who will they have to play with?" Navi asked.

"Maybe I'll speak with the Kokiri," Link answered. "Let them know they're not all bad."

"Something tells me if they wanted to get to know the Kokiri, they'd have done it already."

"... Probably." Link opened the next door.



The main chamber was once again mostly lit, three of the four torches now back in their places. The altar in the center was still in the ground, but floating above it was the last Poe Sister, Meg. Link leaned on the rail of balcony that looked over the main chamber, seeing no stairs leading down.

"There she is," Navi said softly. "She's alone though... where are the others?"

"Watching, I think," Link answered. "Waiting to see the end of the game."

He hopped over the rail, dropping to the first floor. There wasn't a way back up, but it didn't matter now. All that was left was this sister, then he'd move on to meet the first Sage.

"Did you give up?" Link joked, stepping into the boxed area around the altar.

Meg turned to face him, a wide smile on her face. Without saying a

word, she split into two, then those two split as well. The four copies of Meg surrounded Link, brandishing their torches... But she didn't fight. Instead she floated away, out of reach.

"Where are you going?" Link asked.

He didn't really expect her to answer, none of them ever actually did, instead each copy sunk into the ground. Her laughing echoed behind her, but it also seemed to move as if it were a separate entity. Link didn't feel like backtracking through every room again, but luckily it seemed like Meg and her clones were staying put for the time being.

"I don't have time for any more games," Link growled, growing tired of this running around. "I need to meet the Sage of this Temple. I found you, so you have to give up."

He kept thinking he saw Meg out of the corner of his eye, but every time he turned around she was gone. He ended up spinning in place for a moment or two just trying to spot her, when finally he had an idea. He put his sword and shield away, standing in the center of the altar.

"What are you doing?" Navi asked as Link just stood still with his arms out.

He stayed like that for a few moments, breathing slowly and his eyes closed. Then he put his hands behind his head and stared at the floor.

"What... are you *doing*?" Navi laughed.

"I'm trying to... hold on, I think I..." He held out his hand in front of him, staring at his open palm. "Just... focusing..."

Navi gave him a confused look, then watched in amazement as a small fire sparked in the center of his palm. "Din's Fire," she gasped. "You can just light the torches yourself!"

"Yup!" Link let the fire grow in his hand, then threw it at one of the torches. It hit... but it didn't light. "Hmm... maybe I have to light them all at once."

"How are you going to do that?" Navi asked.

"Stand back," Link told her. She fluttered away, outside of the square altar's low wall.

Link made another fire, this time letting it envelope his whole lower arm. Then he slammed his fist into the ground, the fire quickly spreading out around him in a great dome of heat. It reached the torches, hitting each of them... but again they remained unlit.

"Come on," Link huffed, crossing his arms. "What else am I supposed to do?"

From out of the floor, Meg and her clones peeked their heads out, watching him.

"I don't even know what game you're playing at this point," Link told them, not sure which one was real. "If I give up and say you win can we be done?"

Three of the Megs reverted back to their original forms -- the other sisters. Meg, Joelle, Beth, and Amy all floated out of the floor, but none of them would look Link in the eye. They were like children expecting to get yelled at by their parents.

"... Because they *are* children," Link sighed, mentally smacking himself.

"It was a trick," Navi said, landing back on Link's shoulder. "They just wanted to play another game."

"And I probably scared them with the fire," Link moved to go sit on the edge of the low wall and the Poe Sisters all lined up together, waiting for him to get angry again.

"I'm sorry I yelled," Link said quietly. "But I'm in a hurry. I don't if you know what it's like out there, outside the forest, but there's a lot of people hurt. There's someone here I need to ask for help, so I need you let me pass."

They all looked away, thinking.

"How about this," Link offered. "You let me pass, I promise to come back and play with you again, when the fate of the world *isn't* weighing me down."

Amy glanced back at him, as excited as if someone had just offered her the biggest cake in the world. But Joelle hovered in front of her, Meg holding Amy and Beth behind.

"... *You promise?*" Joelle hissed.

Link felt a shiver down his spine, but he nodded. "Yeah, I promise. As soon as I'm done with my job, as soon as I stop Ganondorf once and for all... I'll come back."

Joelle turned back to Meg. For a moment they didn't move, both contemplating whether or not Link was telling the truth. Link couldn't tell if they knew what was happening outside their temple, but he knew Meg and Joelle seemed to be the older two of the four, so he hoped they'd be smart enough to know he wasn't lying.

Finally they faced Link again, and Meg stepped forward. She held out her torch in front of him, and the flame went out... then it appeared in the torch on the corner of the low wall. In turn, Joelle did the same, then Beth, and finally Amy.

They flew to hover above their flames, staring down at Link as the altar rose out of the floor.

"Thank you," Link said, stepping towards the platform. "I'll keep my promise."
"We'll hold you to that," Joelle told him.
Link nodded, and entered the altar. It sunk back into the ground, taking him with it.

CHAPTER 16

SAGE OF THE FOREST

The lift lowered into an octagonal stone chamber. Torches were on every other wall on carved braziers that cast strange shadows on the blue carpet that lined the room. As the fires moved it made shapes like branches of leaves on the ground, mimicking shadows cast by sunlight through trees.

It almost felt peaceful, quiet, but there was a feeling of darkness coming from the long hall in front of him. As Link brushed his hand against the arch that led to the hall, he heard a voice from behind him.

"*Link*," it said. Nothing more than that, but it was enough to get him to turn around.

Looking back he saw another doorless walkway, a small chamber on the other side with a box in the center. "What's that?" Navi asked, following his gaze.

"Did you hear that?" Link asked. "The voice?"

"What voice?"

Link crossed the room, walking around the lift. The box in the other chamber was a blue chest with gold markings. A symbol was marked on it's top, the same medallion as he saw in the Sacred Realm. This one had four wisps of wind, as opposed to the markings in the rest of the temple that only had three.

"This must be more recent than the temple," Link said aloud, voicing his thoughts. "I think the temple itself was made first, when the symbol was still three markings. After it was changed to four the chamber in the Sacred Realm was constructed, and then this was put here."

"How do you know that?" Navi asked, standing on top of the small marking on the chest.

"Cause the temple looks way older than anything else," Link explained. "And I know the Sacred Realm is too, but this looks more recent and it matches the markings in the Sacred Realm. So clearly they both came after the temple. Why it was changed at all I have no idea."

Navi tapped the marking with her feet. "Does it matter? We're not here for archeology are we?"

"No," Link chuckled. "I guess not."

He knelt down and cracked open the chest. It might have appeared

new, but the lock was either flimsier than it needed to be, or too old to stay locked. Either way it opened... and sitting inside was a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

Link picked them up, staring in disbelief. "Whoa," he mumbled. "I... I don't even know how to use these."

Navi giggled with excitement. "You don't have to!" she exclaimed. "This is perfect! We found out the other day -- w-e-hu -- earlier, that I can move things a little, redirect their aim!"

"Can you change something as fast as an arrow?" Link asked.

Navi looked across the chamber and passed the lift, down the hall and all the way to the large wooden double doors at the other end. "Fire an arrow in that general direction," she told him. "I'll see if I can move it!"

"We don't have a *whole* lot of time to play around," Link told her, trying to figure out how to even *hold* the bow.

"I know I know but this is important," Navi squealed. "Fire!"

Link pointed the arrow in the general direction of the hall and let go. The arrow dropped out of his hand and hit the floor as Navi flung her arms trying to move it.

"No, Link, you have to fire the--"

"I know," Link huffed, resetting the arrow. "Okay." He fired, and this time actually launched the arrow.

It didn't go anywhere near where it was supposed to go, and was going to just hit the top of the lift, but Navi zipped ahead and changed it's direction.

As if it had been fired with perfect precision, it struck the crack between the two doors.

"Ha!" Navi shouted, throwing her fist in the air. "Got it!"

Link laughed, strapping the quiver to his back under his shield, then he clipped the bow to it. "There," he grunted, making sure nothing was weighing him down. "A little more balanced actually."

Navi sat on top of the lift. "You don't look *anything* like the little boy the Great Deku Tree sent me to find," she said with a faint smile.

"Yeah," Link agreed, looking down at his hands. "I don't really feel like him either." He shook himself off, waving for Navi to follow as he passed the lift again. Navi flew back down to return to his shoulder as they finally entered the long hall.

The old blue carpet was stiff beneath his feet, crunching with every other step. There were no torches in here either, the only light coming from the lift chamber. Along the walls were paintings, but Link couldn't make out what they were. Some of them looked like trees, but for the most

part it looked like they were all painted to *look* shredded or burned.

None of that helped with the creepy feeling that increased the closer he got to the double doors.

"Alright," Link growled. "Something's not right."

He opened the door, peeking inside. It was hard to see most of the room from where he was, as a large platform seemed to take up a lot of space, but to the right were stairs that led up to it, so Link started there. At the top though he found the whole platform lined with ropes like some kind of fence, and the mark of the Triforce in the center on the ground.

But two things stood out. First, along the walls were yet more interesting paintings. They were all the same painting though, a path lined with dead trees leading to an old mansion. The other thing was a steel strip in the ground in front of him. It was in between him and the platform and had a row of holes, each hole with a spike embedded in it.

"I get the feeling those will either come out as I cross it," Link sighed. "Or they'll come out to block my way back."

"You could just jump the ropes to get out if that's the case," Navi suggested.

"True," Link agreed. He took a step back and jumped over the spikes.

...

They didn't do anything.

"Everything in this place is so old it doesn't work anymore," Link laughed. "Ah well." He looked around some more, trying to figure out where to go next.

The Sage obviously wasn't here... the ominous presence obviously was... but this was the end of the road. There was nothing past this, no other doors or secrets to find.

"I... don't get it," Link said, stepping towards the center of the platform. When he stood in the center, he expected something else to happen, but nothing did. He spun in a circle, still looking around.

"Maybe we missed something?" Navi suggested.

"Maybe," Link agreed. He turned back around and started towards the stairs.

Then the spikes launched up at him, blocking his way. It startled him, but his instinct was rarely to be afraid and instead he reached for his sword.

... But the sound of hooves on the stone behind him caused him to freeze.

He turned back around, and stared up at Ganondorf, sitting on his

horse.

"Ganon-"

"*RRAAGH!!*" Ganondorf laughed.

Link took a step back and Ganondorf raised his hand. The room grew darker and Ganondorf put his hand to his face.

In the most twisted and gruesome thing Link had ever seen... Ganondorf peeled off his own face. It was cracked, fissures forming the features, tiny lights where his eyes had been. His jaw was gone, and horns grew out of his forehead beside the jewel he wore.

The skin of his face he held in his hand disappeared into flames, and he and his horse rose into the air.

"What... are you?"

Phantom Ganon roared, summoning a lance out of the darkness. He charge forward, over Link's head, and into one of the paintings.

"What!?" Link exclaimed, drawing his weapons. "How is that even--!?"

"Keep on your toes, Link!" Navi said, fluttering around in circles. "He could come out of any one of those paintings!"

"Yeah," Link grunted, putting his sword away. "But that spear's gonna do some damage if I'm too close." He pulled out his bow, notching in an arrow. "I guess that's why they gave me this."

He could hear Phantom Ganon's roars from every direction, and he could've sworn he saw his image in a few of the paintings. But it felt like the room was spinning around him, making it hard to focus on anything.

"*HRRRAAAA!!!*"

In a single movement Link jumped and spun in the air, pointing his arrow at the demon that materialized behind him.

"Fire!!" Navi shouted.

Link let go of the arrow and Navi maneuvered it towards it's target. It struck the demon in the head, and in an instant Phantom Ganon disappeared into smoke. The smoke then retreated once more towards the paintings, hiding once again.

"Did that even hurt it?" Link asked.

"No idea," Navi answered. "Watch out!!"

Again Link spun around, not waiting a second to fire his arrow. It would've completely missed it's target if not for Navi. This arrow however pierced Phantom Ganon's side, whipping back around and striking him when he thought Link had missed.

This caused *Phantom Ganon* to miss, as he'd moved to stab Link with his spear. But the arrow knocked him off balance, and gave Link an

opening. Link jumped back a bit and fired another arrow at Phantom Ganon's chest. This time he was close enough that he could hit his mark without assistance.

As Phantom Ganon staggered, nearly toppling over the side of his horse, Link drew his sword and sliced straight through the demon's neck.

The skull of Ganondorf fell to the ground as the horse reared backwards. The horse disappeared in a flash of flames and Ganondorf's body knelt on the ground.

"Hey kid, you did quite well," Ganondorf's voice said. "It looks like you may be gaining some slight skill... But you have defeated only my phantom. When you fight the real me, it won't be so easy!"

Link kicked it over, staring at the skull that stared back up at him.

"What a worthless creation that ghost was!" Ganondorf laughed. "I will banish it to the gap between dimensions!!"

Link fired an arrow through it's glowing eyes. After that, the skull and body just faded away, Link's arrows clattering on the stone platform.

"What *was* that thing?" Navi asked.

"Ganondorf's been a step ahead of us this whole time," Link answered, picking up his scattered arrows. "His plan was always for us to open the Sacred Realm... so maybe waking the Sages was part of his plan too."

"Why would it be?" Navi asked. "He's already conquered Hyrule."

"But he doesn't have the Triforce," Link told her, putting everything away. "That... he's going to need us for again."

"But... we need the Triforce to beat *him*," Navi said. "Right?"

Link nodded. "So it's a race. First one to claim the Triforce wins."

As if on cue, the Triforce marking on the ground began to glow. Link and Navi took a few step back as a figure appeared from that light.

As the figure's image was made clear, Link took a deep breath, feeling a rock hit his stomach. It was the last person he'd wanted to see, and yet deep down he knew it was her the whole time. He couldn't find her anywhere else, and when Mido said she was here... but...

Why... why just her spirit?

Link felt every muscle in his body shiver. "Hi Saria," he said, barely audible to his own ears.

"Thank you, Link," Saria bowed. She was just as young as the rest of the Kokiri, still forever a child. Perhaps she knew that's what Kokiri were, and that's why she treated him different. "Because of you, I could awaken as a Sage... I am the Sage of the Forest Temple..."

She looked down at herself, forcing a smile... But Link knew her,

and could tell she was just as emotionally distraught with her form now. "I always believed that you would come," she said. "Because I know you..."

Link opened his mouth to argue, but Saria shook her head, looking up at him. Only a week ago... just a few days ago... Link had been shorter.

"No..." Saria told him. "You don't have to explain it to me... Because it is destiny that you and I can't live in the same world." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a coin similar to the coin Rauru had given him. "I will stay here as the Forest Sage and help you... Now, please take this Medallion..."

Link took a knee and put his hand out. Saria placed the medallion in his palm, and though he could feel the medallion, he couldn't feel her. Her fingers passed through his hand.

He looked up at her, and she smiled.

Then light took him away... but he could still hear her voice.

I will always be... your friend.

CHAPTER 17

REBORN

The morning breeze rustled the leaves of the branches around Link as he sat on the stone steps of the Forest Temple entrance. He let his feet dangle over the last broken step, the ground at the bottom of the cliff a good twenty feet down. Navi fluttered around, stretching her wings.

"That's two Sages," Navi said, looking up at the sun. "Just four more."

"Yeah," Link sighed.

"We should keep moving," Navi continued, trying as always to stay upbeat. "Before Ganondorf gets too far ahead again."

"... Yeah," Link mumbled.

Navi turned around in the air, now looking at him. She saw the sullen expression on his face, but more so she saw the ocarina he held in his hands.

It was her's, Saria's. Link couldn't take his eyes off it, and he couldn't seem to put it away either. He just held it loosely in his hands like it was the most fragile thing in the world.

"I c-..." Link shook his head, not even *wanting* to come up with the right words.

Navi sat on his shoulder, looking at the ocarina with him. "Everyone else is okay," she told him. "Saria has a job to do here, and that's what she'll do, however she can. But we have a job too, and we have to do it for everyone else."

"I know," Link said, his voice cracking. "Defeat the parasite... Go talk to the Princess... Go find the other two Spiritual Stones... Enter the Sacred Realm... Take the Master Sword... Wake the Sages... Bring Peace to Hyrule..."

"Link," Navi started.

"Where does it end?" Link hissed, tightening his grip on the ocarina slightly. "Each *job* I've been given I've been led to believe it was the last step. That once I'm done, I'm done... But... Seven years have passed, and I've made things worse!"

He felt like crushing the ocarina. It felt like -- for a moment -- it mocked him. It taunted him with memories of a happier time, a time he'd

missed out on, a time he was forced to leave, a time he could never get *back!*

Every step he took demanded more of him, and he couldn't get out of it. It's not like he could stop now! He can't just give up after making everything so much worse! He'd screwed up, and everyone else had too... but who would take his place now?

"If I just walked away," Link said quietly. "Could I go home now?"

Navi didn't know what to say. She was meant to help him... but this was a bit too much. "I don't think either of us were ready for this," she admitted, a little more depressingly than she'd wanted to. "But, I don't think we get to home yet. We have a lot to do, and I don't when it'll end but we can't stop until it does. After--"

She shut up, seeing the tears rolling down Link's cheeks. Ever since he got the Master Sword, and skipped seven years, it's been hard to keep up with him. She kept forgetting that he was still a kid inside, and she couldn't begin to imagine what that must feel like.

For her it was different. Fairies lived a long time, and seven years wasn't all that much to them. She was still considerably young by her standards, but in Link's world... Seven years was a long time... and to come back to his world in shambles...

"I'm sorry," Navi said. "I can't fix that."

"I know," Link choked, wiping his face. "I shouldn't be like this... It's just... a setback, that's all. Just caught off guard and everything caught up to me."

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to move on, at least for now. He got up, stretched, and put Saria's ocarina back in his pouch. "Okay... next stop... Temple of Time."

Navi looked up at him. "... Yeah."

Making their way back through the forest they noticed Mido had left. When they arrived in the village one of the Kokiri told him that Mido had returned when the wind changed. Link wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but just a simple glance around told him something strange had happened when he was away.

The monsters in the village seemed to have disappeared completely. For the most part... it looked just as it had when Link was a child.

Good riddance, Link thought, specifically towards the Deku Shrubs. *Lousy ugly creatures*.

But there was something else missing: the Kokiri. At least, Link *thought* they were missing, but then he found them all gathered around the entrance to the Great Deku Tree's Meadow.

"What happened?" Link asked.

One of the twins looked up at him. "Now that the Deku Tree Sprout is growing in the Great Deku Tree's meadow, the forest has returned to normal!"

"Deku Tree Sprout?" Link moved through the crowd of Kokiri, curious as to why none of them were actually going to see for themselves.

He expected something a monster, something that was scaring them off. He expected something to jump out at him at least. But instead, there, in front of the grey barked Deku Tree... was a stumpy little sprout, no taller than the other Kokiri.

"Strange," Link mumbled, getting a closer look.

The Deku Sprout eyed him, giving a wide smile. Its bark wasn't fully formed yet, and the soft malleable plant could still move its features a bit. "Hi there! I'm the Deku Tree Sprout!" its excited little voice squeaked. "Because you and Saria broke the curse on the Forest Temple, I can grow and flourish! Thanks a lot!"

Link took a few steps closer and sat down in front of it. "What does it mean to be a Deku Tree Sprout?" he asked. "Do you know all the things the Great Deku Tree knew?"

The Deku Sprout made a funny face, thinking to itself. And, almost ignoring the question altogether, moved right into exactly what Link was thinking anyway. "Hey, have you seen your old friends?" it asked. "None of them recognized you with your grown-up body, did they?"

That answered Link's question anyway, he figured. This sprout *did* seem to know what the Great Deku Tree knew. Link shook his head. "No... It's been seven years, but I'm the only one who's changed."

"That's because the Kokiri never grow up!" the Deku Sprout smiled. "Even after seven years, they're still kids! You must be wondering why only you have grown up! Well, as you might have already guessed, you are not a Kokiri! You are actually a Hylian! I am happy to finally reveal this secret to you!"

So... I was right, Link sighed, smiling halfheartedly. *I really am just... different*.

He looked back to the Deku Sprout, only one question burning in his mind. "If I'm not Kokiri," he said slowly. "Then... where do I come

from?"

The Deku Sprout nodded solemnly. "Some time ago, before the King of Hyrule unified this country, there was a fierce war in our world. One day, to escape from the fires of the war, a Hylian mother and her baby boy entered the forbidden forest."

"My mother," Link mumbled. "But... What happened... to..."

"The mother was gravely injured..." the Deku Sprout said sadly. "Her only choice was to entrust the child to the Deku Tree, the guardian spirit of the forest. The Deku Tree could sense that this was a child of destiny whose fate would affect the entire world, so he took him into the forest. After the mother passed away, the baby was raised as a Kokiri. And now, finally, the day of destiny has come!"

"Day of destiny?" Link asked. "Child of destiny? You're saying, no matter what I--"

"You are a Hylian and were always bound to leave this forest," the Deku Sprout confirmed. "And now... you have learned your own destiny... So you know what you must do..."

He paused, waiting for Link to answer. "... Yeah," Link nodded, looking at the ground. "Yeah... Bring Peace to Hyrule..."

"Now, Link," the Deku Sprout said in the same caring way the Great Deku Tree always spoke in. "Break the curses on all of the temples, and return peace to Hyrule!"

Link stood, looking down at the Deku Sprout. He felt dizzy, like he was standing on a box and at any moment he'd fall off and be back to his normal self, but all the while people were spinning him around and refusing to let him fall.

"Okay," Link said. "But can you assure me that all I have to do, is find the other four Sages? After that, it's just stopping Ganondorf once and for all. No more tricks? No more surprises?"

The Deku Sprout nodded. "The only other determining factor," he told him. "Is you skill with that blade."

Link looked over his shoulder to the Master Sword. The gem on it's hilt flashed briefly, almost encouragingly. "Then I guess... it's off to the Temple of Time."

CHAPTER 18

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO

Link ducked out from under the hollow tree, stepping out of Kokiri Forest. He found Epona standing by the high rock walls, chewing on flowers, and patted her mane. "It's pretty different from the grass you're used to, isn't it?"

Epona whinnied, huffing at the grass and eating more flowers.

Link lifted himself onto her back, grabbing the reins. "I just need your help getting around for a while," he told her, leading her away from the forest. "I'll take you back home when I'm done. Hopefully things will have settled down there by then."

—

With the help of Epona, they were able to reach the Castletown drawbridge in less than a day. Link led her away from the drawbridge a bit though, so she wouldn't be too close if any of those monsters escaped. She wandered off on her own anyway though, going to rest in the shade of the nearby trees.

"Do you think those monsters are even still there?" Navi asked.

Link nodded, drawing his sword. "I can smell it," he sighed. "They smell like dead bodies."

The drawbridge was permanently open, half sunken in the moat, so the open air carried the rotten stench of those beasts all the way out here. And as he crossed over the sunken bridge he half expected a Hylian Knight to greet him or at least be standing guard, but all he found was scattered armor and bones.

Continuing down the street to the market, he could hear the monsters getting closer. They looked like people, almost. Shambling corpses of people. Their eyes and mouths were just deep pits, cold and heartless. They moved, made noise, and were drawn to his presence, but they weren't alive.

He couldn't even tell if they *were* people or not. Were these all that was left of the Hylian people? Or, were these just more monsters Ganondorf created to terrorize the Hylians?

It was impossible to tell, and Link didn't feel like taking the time to

find out. He stayed away from them, keeping his shield between himself and them, and keeping a tight grip on his sword just in case the closer ones tried anything.

He didn't drop his guard until the doors of the Temple of Time were closed behind him.

"I wonder where they all went," Navi said now that her voice wouldn't attract the monster's attention. "There's not nearly enough of those things for them to be all the people of Hyrule, so they have to have gone somewhere... I hope."

"I hope," Link agreed. He looked past the altar of the Spiritual Stones and through the open door to the chamber of the Master Sword, seeing the figure that stood waiting for him.

"I figured you'd still be here," Link said as he approached Sheik.

"You destroyed the wicked creatures that Haunted the temple and awakened the Sage," Sheik sat down on the steps, watching Link. "But there are still other Sages who need your help. In order to awaken all the other Sages, you must become even more powerful."

"More powerful?" Link scoffed. "The stuff I've fought already wasn't good enough?"

"You must travel over mountains," Sheik said, waving off his question. "Under water... and through the harsh sands of the Gerudo Desert." He looked at Navi who peeked out from under Link's hat. "The path you travel is whatever path you choose, but the challenges you face will only get harder from here on out... So yes, you must become more powerful."

"There you go again either repeating information or making less than no sense," Link sighed. "If it's that big of a challenge, then just come with me. You all seem to know so much about what's going on, but none of you seem ready and willing to help."

Sheik narrowed his eyes, the only part of his face Link could see.

"So either stop speaking in riddles and tell me what I need to know," Link demanded. "Or come with me and explain on the way."

Sheik stood, looking him over. "As long as you hold the Ocarina of Time and the Master Sword, you hold time itself in your hands..." He stepped back. "Link, we shall meet again." Then in a flash of light, he was gone.

"... Coward," Link spat. "Throwing me into this and making me do it all myself..." He turned his back on the chamber and started walking away, mumbling angry nonsense all the way back to Castletown.

Link rode Epona into Kakariko village, climbing down as they passed under the entrance sign. It was definitely more crowded than the last time he was here, but still nowhere near as crowded as Castletown used to be. This couldn't have even been *half* of the people from Castletown...

But, that wasn't why he was here. He couldn't keep worrying about who survived the attack seven years ago. To everyone else, almost a decade had passed, most of the people had probably already moved on a long time ago. It didn't matter if it was just the other day for Link, it was in the past either way.

So he shifted his focus towards finding Malon's father. He tied Epona to a tree near the village entrance and started asking around. And of course, of all places, he found him sleeping at an inn.

"Look at him," the innkeeper sighed. "The man with the beard. I think he was fired from his job at the ranch..."

"Yeah," Link nodded. "That's kinda what I'm here for. What's he been doing since?"

"He's always just lazing around -- morning, noon, and night," the innkeeper shook her head. "He's an awfully carefree guy during such hard times."

"Isn't he always?" Link chuckled to himself.

He went over and patted Talon's shoulder. "Hey, wake up."

"ZZZZZZ..." Talon snored. He huffed and snorted, rolling over. "Malon," he muttered, still clearly asleep. "Doing all right... mumble... mumble... Sorry to make you worry..."

Link stepped away. "I'm going up to Death Mountain," he told the innkeeper. "I shouldn't be too long, but if you could make sure he's awake by the time I get back, it'd be much appreciated."

The innkeeper stared blankly down at Talon. It took a moment to register what Link had said as he said it as calmly as if he was just going to make a milk run. "Wait-wh- Death Mountain?" she hissed. "You can't go up *there*! It's too dangerous!"

"Yup," Link nodded, already headed back out. "I'll be back by either the end of today, or late tomorrow. Make sure he's up."

Link was gone again before the innkeeper could argue. As he was walking up the steps however, his leg was grabbed by a man sitting on the ground beside the building.

"Please!" the man begged. "Money! Food! Just give me

something!"

Link pulled his leg away, looking down at the beggar's own legs. They were clearly broken, and the man wasn't getting far any time soon. "I'm sorry," Link told him. "I don't have anything to give you."

"Liar!" the beggar growled. "I see your sword and shield and bow and arrows! You're a *traveler*! You *must* have things of value!"

"No," Link corrected. "I don't. What you see is *all* I have." *Besides the horse*, Link thought. *But I'm not telling you that.*

"Get back!" someone else barked.

Link looked up to a ledge beside the stairs that led up to Death Mountain. There was a knight standing there, holding his spear and staring down at the beggar.

"Stop bothering people," the knight told him. "You'll get your rations like the rest of us at the end of the day."

The beggar slumped against the wall, ignoring Link and the knight. Link regarded him for a moment before turning to leave, walking up the stairs to stand beside the knight. The knight's armor was a lot older than he first thought, rusted and dented.

But then he saw the Keaton Mask tied to the Knight's belt.

"You're the same knight from before," Link mumbled.

"What?" the knight huffed. He hadn't been paying attention to Link, he was still watching the beggar.

"You're the knight I gave that Keaton Mask to," Link said. "You... never gave it to him?"

The knight looked down at the mask. "Never got the chance," he sighed. "The day of the attack... Well, I was here..."

Link clenched his fists. It wasn't just Castletown or his own village that had changed... Everywhere, seemed to have been affected by Ganondorf's attack seven years ago...

The knight smiled. "This was Ganondorf's doing," he chuckled, showing a faint smile from beneath his helmet. "It's not your fault."

But it is, Link thought. *I opened the door for him... I let this happen...* He couldn't look the knight in the eye. "I'm sorry," he finally said, turning to look down at the rest of the village. "None of this should have happened..."

"No," the knight agreed. "But all we can do now is prevent it from happening again." He looked back at his post at the entrance to Death Mountain. "So I'll keep standing guard. It seems to have gotten more dangerous up there as of late. You don't happen to be headed that way again, are you?"

Link nodded, still watching the people of Kakariko. "Can I say something since you're the only other person who will understand?"

The knight thought for a moment, wondering what he meant, but he nodded.

"All of this," Link said. "... It *is* my fault."

The knight stared at him, then busted up laughing. "The events of seven years ago," he said in disbelief. "That was *you*? I highly doubt that."

"... I came to Death Mountain before in search of the Spiritual Stones," Link explained. "Then I used them, with Zelda's help, to open the Sacred Realm."

"... Wait--"

"In that chamber I was frozen in time for seven years," Link continued. "And during that time, Ganondorf used the opening *I* made, to take the Sacred Realm's power... and destroy Castletown." He looked the knight dead in the eye. "It's because of me that everyone suffered the attack seven years ago." He looked down at the Keaton Mask. "It's because of me you lost your son." He could feel the words choking him as he said them, but he knew he had to say them. He had to let *someone* who faced the effects of Ganondorf's attack know that it was his fault.

The knight put a hand on Link's shoulder, forcing him out of his thoughts.

"The attack seven years ago," the knight said slowly. "Was led by Ganondorf, and his soldiers."

"But--"

"I repeat," the knight said sternly. "It was *not*... your... fault." He stepped back, stomping his spear on the ground. "Now go and do what you have to do, cause I'm sure whatever it is, it's what you have to do."

Link looked up at Death Mountain. The ring of clouds around its peak were a lot more ominous than they used to be, storm clouds. "I don't think I can fix what happened," he said. "But I can stop it from happening again... right?"

"Right," the knight nodded. "Now get moving."

Link forced himself to take a few steps toward the Death Mountain trail... but stopped and turned back. "What was your name?"

"Jorol," the knight answered. "My son's name was Ebik."

"Jorol," Link nodded. "Thank you... And I--"

"Don't you dare say you're sorry," Jorol told him. "Just keep moving."

Link turned away, and started up the trail to Death Mountain. As he reached the broken gate however, Navi quietly popped out of Link's

hat. She fluttered softly away before appearing in front of Jorol.

"Thank you," she bowed. "Thank you for setting him straight."

Jorol smiled. "A real life fairy," he said in wonder. "I didn't think they existed anymore. I guess even Ganondorf can't destroy everything."

Navi laughed. "And I'm glad to see there are still good people fighting for Hyrule."

"Now go catch up," Jorol told her. "I've got work to do."

Navi sped off, saluting back to him. Link never even knew she left, and they continued on their way to Death Mountain.

CHAPTER 19

MOVING ON

Even this place had changed so much. The ground was broken up, scorched, and littered with boulders and chunks of the rocky walls. The heat coming off the mountain could be felt down in Kakariko Village, but the closer they got the hotter it became. Most of the trail was unwalkable, the ground just too hot.

At least the boulders in the way were climbable, and a few times they even acted as short cuts. Link found himself scaling the mountain quicker than he had before, if only because he basically skipped half the walk.

That being said, the air pressure this high up was almost intolerable with the increased heat. But at least he'd made it back to the Goron City, and he could talk with Darunia about the Sage of Fire.

"Are you alright?" Navi asked, also struggling with the heat. "Maybe we should rest before meeting with Darunia."

"Probably," Link agreed. "But we also need to get this over with. The sooner we talk to him, the sooner we'll be out of here. We'll rest back in Kakariko."

"Okay," Navi nodded, not exactly agreeing with him.

Link opened the warped wooden doors to Goron City, getting hit almost immediately with another blast of heat. "... Yeah, let's move quickly."

They stood at the entrance for a moment, just looking around. For the most part it didn't look much different than it used to, just a few pieces of the cave ceiling now blocking a path or two. What suck out was that there were no Gorons, they'd all gone and left it seemed.

He walked around a bit, but couldn't find any sign of them or where they might have gone. So he headed straight for Darunia's chambers, winding his way through the underground city. And yet the stone door was closed, and no matter what he did he couldn't open it, nor could he make enough noise that Darunia would hear him were he on the other side.

"So, he's not here either..." Link looked up at the many layers of Goron City.

"Hey look!" Navi shouted, pointing to the middle layer.

Link barely caught a glimpse of what Navi was talking about before it ducked its head behind a wall. "A young Goron. Maybe he knows something."

Moving quickly, Link hurried up the paths, nearly get crushed when he got to the middle layer. The young Goron came barreling passed him, rolling down the path. He seemed to be making laps, following the middle layer all the way around.

"So that's how you want to play it," Link muttered. He watched and waited for the little Goron to come around again. As soon as it was close enough, Link took out his shield.

WHACK!!

The Goron stopped dead in his tracks, stumbling back and landing on his rear. Link put his shield away and knelt down beside the Goron.

"How could you do this to me?" the Goron squealed, trying to slide away. "You-- you're Ganondorf's servant!"

Link grabbed the Goron's leg and stopped him from moving. "I'm trying to *stop* Ganondorf," he growled. "Can you tell me where everyone else went?"

"Hear my name, and tremble!" the Goron cried out, pushing Link away and jumping to his feet. He posed like a kid ready for a fight, and while he didn't exactly seem coordinated, he was still a Goron. "I am Link! Hero of the Gorons!"

Link couldn't help laughing. He wasn't sure whether to feel honored or not, but it was definitely funny. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I am Link. I didn't think my name would get around like this, but--"

"What?" the Goron calling himself Link asked numbly. "Your name is also Link? Then you must be the legendary Dodongo Buster and Hero, Link!"

"I did defeat King Dodongo, yes," Link chuckled.

"My dad is Darunia," the Goron Link said. "Do you remember him?"

Finally getting somewhere, Link thought. "Yeah, we were good friends, I think."

"Dad named me Link after you, because you're so brave!" So his name really *was* Link, he wasn't just playing hero. "It's a cool name! I really like it! Link, you're a hero to us Gorons! I'm so glad to meet you!" He was bouncing with excitement, barely pausing to let Link speak. "Please give me your autograph! Sign it: "To my friend, Link of the Gorons"---" He finally stopped for a moment. "Oh... I guess it's not a good time to ask you for this... Please help everyone!"

"That's what I'm trying to do," Link said, trying to slow down Goron Link a bit. "Just tell me what happened and where everyone went."

Goron Link nodded. "My dad, Darunia, went to the Fire Temple. A dragon is inside! If we don't hurry up, even my dad will be eaten by the dragon!"

Suddenly Goron Link started crying. He sat down on the ground and stared at nothing, as if he only just realized the terrible situation he was in.

"Don't worry," Link told him. "I'll find them and bring them back. Can you tell me where the temple is, and anything about the dragon?"

Goron Link tried to stop crying, enough to talk, but he kept sniffing when he spoke. "A long time ago, there was an evil dragon named Volvagia, living in the mountain. That dragon was very scary! It ate Gorons! Using a huge hammer, the hero of the Gorons... BOOOM!" He made a big motion with his hands, emphasizing the explosion. "Destroyed it just like that. This is a myth from long ago, but it's true! I know because my dad is a descendant of the hero!"

As soon as he was done talking he went back to crying.

"That's--okay," Link took a deep breath, trying to get the kid to focus and stay on track. With all the information he'd said still none of it was actually useful. "Just... where did they go?"

"Everybody was taken to the Fire Temple..." Link moved his hand in a circle, telling him to keep talking. "While my dad was out... Ganondorf's followers came and took them all away! All of them will be eaten by Volvagia!"

Still not what I'm looking for, Link sighed. "Where, did, they, go?"

But Goron Link wasn't quite done with his story. "Dad said that Ganondorf has revived Volvagia... As a warning to those who might oppose him, Ganondorf is going to feed them all to Volvagia!"

"I know, I know," Link nodded. "Where *is* the Fire Temple?"

"Dad went to the Fire Temple all by himself to try to save everyone," Goron Link continued. "Dad told me not to let anybody follow him to the temple, but... Only you, Link, can save everyone!"

"I'm trying to do that," Link said calmly. "But I need you to stay focused. Can you tell me, where the Fire Temple *is*?"

Goron Link nodded. "Now I'll tell you about the secret passage to the Fire Temple! Try to move the statue inside Dad's room!"

Link sighed with relief. "*Thank you.*"

"Please help, Link!" Goron Link pleaded. "I'll give you this heat-resistant tunic!"

Goron Link jumped down the ledge and disappeared into one of the side caves. Before Link could follow, the kid was already back, holding a red tunic. "Dad kept some of these just in case any Hylian Knights came back, but he sat one aside just in case the Hero came back too!"

Link hopped down and accepted the tunic, looking it over. It was a bit fancier than the green one he currently wore, and in much better condition. "You said it was heat-resistant?"

"Yeah! It's made of Bomb Flower fibers, and the inside is lined with Dodongo scales!"

That explained why it was heavier. "Thank you," Link said, patting the Goron's head. "I'll find your dad, and bring your people back."

He waved goodbye and hurried back down to Darunia's chambers. There, he took off his weapons and harnesses, setting them against the wall for a moment. Then he removed his old green tunic, folding into a square and setting it on a table. He wasn't exactly sure what to do with it at the moment, but he figured he'd come back for it when he was done.

Before he put on the new red tunic however, he looked down at himself. He hadn't really thought about it too much with everything else going on, but he'd just realized most of what he was wearing wasn't what he had on when he was a kid. Somehow, during his time in the Sacred Realm, during the seven year wait, he'd gotten new clothes.

The white undersuit seemed to hold up, and the leather boots were stronger than the ones he used to have, but the gauntlets were new. He put on the red Goron tunic and looked for a reflective surface. It had been a while since he actually saw himself...

He stopped in front of a large bronze plate that was sitting on a table. He leaned it against the wall, looking at his face... It was... a lot older, than he'd thought it was... His hair was cut even, but it was dirty now with all the running around he'd done. He also noticed his ear was pierced, but he didn't know why.

"Link this is no time for self reflecting," Navi told him. "We've got to help the Gorons."

"Yeah I know," Link said turning away from himself. He strapped everything back on and passed by his green tunic. He'd left his hat with it as well, figuring it would just get in the way down here. To be honest, he mostly just wore it out of habit, since every Kokiri male wore one... But, it wasn't even really his hat anyway... and he wasn't really Kokiri.

Forcing himself to move away, he started for the large statue behind Darunia's chair. It wasn't easy to move, but one thing he still had

were the Golden Bracelets Darunia had given him.

Once it was out of the way, he could feel the heat rising from the chamber hidden behind it.

He walked down the stairs, into the Fire Temple.

CHAPTER 20

HAMMER OF JUSTICE

Link stood on the edge of a rocky cliff overlooking a massive pool of lava. There was a large rock formation that rose out of the center of it with bridges wrapped around it, but... One led to a dead end, and the other was broken.

The broken one was low enough that he could jump to it, but he wouldn't be able to make it back.

"At least it leads where we need to go," Link stated. "I hope."

"Well it's no use just standing here," Navi agreed. "I say we go for it."

"We?" Link asked. "You can fly."

Navi looked at him from his shoulder. "Shut up," she smiled sweetly.

"Ha!" Link took a deep breath, got a running start, and launched off the side of the cliff, rolling across the wooden bridge. He didn't even get a moment to stop as the whole thing began to fall away beneath him.

He ran the length of the bridge as each plank turned to ash and crumbled under his feet, but at least he was on the other side now. Back on solid ground he looked at the remains of the rope that had finally given out.

"I really hope there's another way out," Link sighed.

"Maybe they shouldn't have built wooden bridges in an active volcano," Navi added.

Then he turned around, only to be met by none other than--

"Sheik," Link growled. "Fancy meeting you here."

"It is something that grows over time... a true friendship," Sheik said, sitting on a platform that bore the symbol of the Fire Sage. "A feeling in the heart that becomes even stronger over time... The passion of friendship will soon blossom into a righteous power, and through it, you will know which way to go... This song is dedicated to the power of the heart... Listen to the Bolero of Fire."

"I don't have time for any more riddles," Link told him. "And I don't have time for your songs either."

Sheik didn't even seem to regard Link, he played his song on the harp nonetheless. It was a strange song that didn't sound like anything he'd

heard in the forest or the city. It almost reminded him of something... primal, old.

"Link," Sheik said, done playing his song. "I'll see you again..."

Link stepped closer as Sheik stood. "Hold on," Link said.

Sheik looked him in the eye, and this time Link was close to make out what little features he could see behind Sheik's hair and cloth wrappings. He could only see one eye, but for the moment he could see it, it looked familiar.

Before Link could do anything about it though, Sheik was gone in a puff of smoke.

"I hate you so much," Link said plainly.

"Let's just forget about it and move on," Navi suggested. "Thinking about what he says makes my head hurt, and this place is already making me dizzy." She tucked herself under Link's collar.

Link took Navi's advice and ignored whatever Sheik was trying to say. A quick look around the immediate area told him there was only one way to go though, so he followed the thin rock path that crossed over the pool of lava below him. On the other side was a stone chamber that looked man-made, which probably meant it was the entrance to the temple.

In the center of the chamber was a square hole with a ladder leading all the way down. It was definitely deep, but at least there was light at the bottom. Link crouched at the edge, looking at the ladder.

"What are the odds that breaks just like the bridge?" Link asked.

"You want an exact percentage?" Navi scoffed.

"Can you give one?"

"Chances are exactly bad%," Navi told him.

Link smiled, grabbing hold of the ladder. "I can take those odd--"

As soon as he put his weight on the rungs, they snapped. He grabbed at the sides of the ladder, hoping it would slow him down, but it broke as well. Unable to slow his fall, Link crashed into the ground, landing on his shield.

"Frick!" Link coughed. He rolled over onto his hands and knees, trying to catch his breath after having all the air knocked out of him.

Navi sat on his head. "I think the chances were a little lower than just bad."

"Ya don't say," Link huffed, getting to his feet. "... Whoa." He looked down the hall in front of him, the only other way to go besides back.

At the end of the hall was a massive chamber with tribal statues and massive columns lining the walls. In the mouths of the statues were

large fires, smoke spilling out of their eyes. The whole set up looked less like a sacred temple, and more like a dark sacramental altar.

"I take back what I said about the Gorons seeming like children," Link mumbled.

There were four doors, but most of them were locked, so he opened the one that wasn't. It opened into what looked like a forge, with large square platforms and a steel grate floor. Large chains hung from the ceiling, and fire pits stood beside each of the platforms. On the other side of the room however, straight across from Link, Darunia stood in front of a heavy brass door.

"Darunia!" Link called, starting to cross the room.

Darunia turned around. "Who's there?" he grunted. Then he smiled, facing Link directly. "Is that you, Link...?"

"Yeah," Link nodded. "It's been a while, I guess."

He slammed his hand down on Link's shoulder. "Oh, it really is Link!" Darunia laughed happily. "You've grown so big since I last saw you! I want to have a man-to-man talk with you, but now's not the time." His expression turned serious and he looked back at the locked door. "Ganondorf is causing trouble on Death Mountain again! He has revived the evil, ancient dragon Volvagia!"

"So I've heard," Link said.

"On top of that," Darunia continued. "He is going to feed my people to that evil dragon as a warning to other races who might resist him... If that fire-breathing dragon escapes from the mountain, all of Hyrule will become a burning wasteland!"

"And what are we going to do about it?" Link asked. "Can't we just go find and kill it?"

"I will go on ahead to try to seal up the evil dragon..." Darunia answered, speaking as if that was the only option. If that was the case, it would mean this monster were unkillable. "I'm concerned, though, because I don't have the legendary hammer... But I have no choice."

"Is it really that important?" Link asked. "Is there no other weapon that can hurt it?"

Darunia stood in front of the door, folding his hands behind his back. "Link... I'm asking you to do this as my sworn brother... While I'm trying to deal with the dragon, please save my people!"

Link felt like arguing, but he knew it wouldn't do much good. Darunia was set on going after the dragon, which meant *someone* had to save the other Gorons. And to be honest, if anyone were to take on a dragon, Darunia could handle it.

"Okay," Link nodded. "Where are they?"

"The prisoners' cells are in the opposite direction," Darunia answered. "I'm counting on you, Link."

Link stepped back as Darunia opened the brass door. There didn't seem to be anything but fire on the other side, yet Darunia apparently didn't mind it as he entered, shutting the door behind him.

"C'mon," Navi said. "Let's go look for the Gorons."

—

The whole temple was built like a massive forge. Every room was made of steel grating, iron walls, or flexible metallic cords holding it all together. But it was all torn apart, melting or crumbling from the damage caused by either Ganondorf or the dragon.

Lava pools slowly expanded upwards, eating at the ground and blocking paths or destroying them completely. Small creatures crept out of the fires, bringing the flames closer to Link.

He was glad however that his new tunic could withstand it, and even absorbed most of the heat. That being said, he had no idea what the condition of the Gorons was. For all he knew the dragon could've eaten them already, or the heat might've finally been too much. Yet this ever expanding cavern continued.

It was clearly meant to be a sacred place, not just a place to craft metal. Strange carvings covered every door, and tribal markings wrapped around the base of every wall. But there were no signs of the Gorons, or where they might be being held. All he managed to find were things blocking his way.

Finally at the last giant stone pillar that blocked his only way forward, it was obvious that he had either no idea where he was going, or there just wasn't anything else anymore.

"Link," Navi said, staring at the cave ceiling. "It looks like there's another... place, up there!"

Link looked where she was pointing and saw a small hole high above them with what looked like some kind of carved chamber on the other side of it. Though, obviously it was *way* too high. "Yeah... I can't reach that. Maybe if I had some kind of large cloth that could catch the waves of heat, but I don't have something like that."

"Yeah," Navi sighed. She kept looking around, trying to find something that could help... and that took a deep breath and sighed in annoyance at herself. "This heat is getting to me. I can fly."

Link looked at her and laughed. "Think you can check it out? I don't see any other way forward."

"Yup," Navi nodded. She crossed her arms and stood on Link's shoulder, her wings flapping behind her as she stared up at the hole.

"... You gonna-"

"Yup!" Navi huffed. "Just psychin' myself up! It is... *really* hot in here."

She hopped away from Link, and flew straight up as quickly as she could, not wanting to spend more time in the heat than she had to. In just a moment she made it through the hole and into the chamber above, but it was much hotter up there than she anticipated. She felt like her wings were going to melt.

On the bright side -- well, everything was bright, it was all on fire - the chamber was pretty small. There was a stone altar built like every other altar in the temple, and crumbled stone pillars just like everywhere else as well.

Waste of time, Navi thought bitterly as she was just about to leave.

Then her eye caught something in the fire of the altar. There was something large and metallic... Navi gasped and flew back down to Link.

"What did you find?" Link asked as Navi tucked herself under his sleeve for protection against the heat.

"You know that hammer thing Darunia mentioned?" Navi asked. "That other legendary weapon that no one could find?"

"It's up there," Link sighed, looking up. "Just out of reach."

"That's a lot farther than just 'out of reach'," Navi countered. "It looked strong though. One good swing could crack open that block in the way."

"Yeah... so how do we get me up there?" Link looked around again, and saw exactly what he needed. "Think you can stand the heat for a bit longer?"

"What did you have in mind?" Navi asked.

Link walked over to a steel cable and made sure it was long enough. "Can you carry this?"

Navi looked it over. "It looks light... but not light enough. Can you attach it to an arrow?"

"I think," Link nodded. "What's *your* plan?"

"You fire it in that general direction," Navi smiled. "I move it from the safety of anywhere else."

Link grinned and tied the end of the cord to the back of the arrow. "Alright, let's give it a try."

He pulled back as far as he could, aimed, and fired straight at the hole. Navi flew up a little bit so she could aim better, and forced the arrow to carry the cord farther, threading it like a needle all the way through to the chamber beyond.

"Can you climb that high?" Navi asked.

Link tested the cord's strength. "Sure," he said with almost no confidence. "I climbed vines like this back in the forest... It'll be fine."

The steel cord creaked as Link clawed his way up. As soon as he was off the ground, the cord swung him away from the path he'd been standing on, and now he was hovering directly over the pits of lava. He grit his teeth and continued on, despite this being completely different from climbing vines. Vines were easier to hold on to, they had texture and knots in them, but a steel cord was slick and only got slicker in the heat.

At least with the aid of the Gold Bracelets he was able to keep going, but as he climbed he realized just how tight they were getting. They felt like they were simultaneously making his grip stronger, and cutting off circulation to his hands.

I'll have to find some kind of replacement eventually, Link grunted as he finally made it to the top. The first thing he did was check the arrow that was embedded in the wall. As far as he could tell that was sturdy enough, but clearly the cord was coming undone. If he'd climbed any longer it would've come loose.

"Lucky you made it when you did," Navi said, noticing the cord as well.

"Yeah, Link nodded. "Let's hope this hammer is the real thing."

Navi pointed him towards the altar with the flame in it's mouth. It looked like every other altar in the temple, but sitting in the center of the fire was a steel hammer.

Link looked down at his hands, knowing he'd just burn himself if he reached in and grabbed it.

"Do you have a plan?" Navi asked.

"Kinda," Link started taking off his fire resistant tunic.

Navi just stared at him. "... What?"

Link wrapped the tunic around his hand and approached the fire. As Navi realized what he was doing, Link pulled out the hammer. It was heavy, and enormous, and would take a considerable amount of strength to wield even *with* the bracelets.

And just as well, the metal was cold. There was no signs of the fires having done anything to the hammer.

Link put his tunic back on and lifted the hammer.

"That's definitely a Goron weapon," Navi nodded. "Can you carry that thing back down with you?"

Link tightened the cord around the arrow and looked back down the hole to the lava below. "I don't know if I can get down at all..."

CHAPTER 21

VOLVAGIA

The brass doors slammed shut behind Darunia as entered the cavernous inferno. Fires leapt up the walls, burning the rocky ceiling, and swirling flames crept out of the holes in the ground. There was a wide pit around the room, separating the floor from the walls, and down below was nothing but lava and more flames.

Fires crackling and the smell of smoke were like home to Darunia, but he could feel the evil presence within these flames... This was no homely fire, but a *hungry* fire.

"Great dragon Volvagia!" Darunia called out, planting his feet firmly on the ground and preparing to fight. "I won't *need* a hammer to break *your* skull open."

As he watched, from the fires on the other side of the chamber, from the chasm around the room, a large serpent's head rose. It's nostrils bellowed more smoke into the room, and it's eyes were brighter than the flames it emerged from. The great dragon Volvagia... was alive.

To anyone else it would have been a traumatically intimidating sight, but for Darunia...

Darunia smiled, at last facing off against the dragon told of in Goron legends. "Part of me wanted you to stay dead forever... but I'm glad it is in my time, in my *prime* that you have returned." He grinned, staring down the dragon.

"... Too... bold," Volvagia hissed. "Learn your place... Rock Biter."

The dragon snapped it's head at Darunia.

Darunia grabbed the dragon's maw with his bare hands. "Rock Biter!?" he roared. "I'll teach you what happens when you insult a Goron!!" He smashed his head down on Volvagia's snout.

Volvagia reared it's head in pain, snarling as his tail whipped out of one of the many holes in the ground. It slammed against Darunia, knocking him down. Using that as an opening, Volvagia pinned him with a long clawed arm, cracking the ground beneath the Goron. "And I'll teach *you* what happens when you challenge a *Dragon!*!"

Darunia smiled and punched Volvagia's arm, pushing him off. He got up and jumped into the air as Volvagia lashed out again, aiming to trap Darunia in his massive jaws. Darunia planted one foot between Volvagia's

lower fangs, then placed his other foot and his left hand against his upper fangs. Forcing Volvagia to keep his mouth open, he slammed his free hand into Volvagia's snout again.

But this only served to make Volvagia angrier and angrier. He bellowed fire point blank, throwing Darunia back. The rocks on his stomach were scorched, and as he hit ground he felt the rocks on his back cracking.

"That was... more of a hit... than I was willing to take," Darunia spat, getting to his feet. "But I'll best you yet... Sulfur breath."

Volvagia roared, whipping his tail again. The flames around the room grew hotter, and the swirling fires that crept from every hole in the ground, became more wild. The dragon was done toying with it's food.

"I should have eaten your race whole centuries ago," Volvagia growled.

"We Gorons don't go down easy," Darunia challenged.

Volvagia wrapped Darunia in his tail, then slammed him against the ground again. Before Darunia could act, Volvagia grabbed him and flew into the air. Then he threw him at the wall, cracking the rock.

Darunia fell, smashing into the ground just beside the ledge and toppling over. He scrambled to grab the ledge, rocks breaking under his fingers as he fought to stay conscious.

"Your race was always weak," Volvagia hissed.

One last time he launched down at Darunia, jaws wide open.

Just so long as that boy got my people out, Darunia thought. This sacrifice will not be in vain...

Bits of rock and steel bars went flying everywhere. The Gorons coward, throwing their arms up in defense.

"Who's there!?" one whimpered.

"Has the dragon come to eat us!?" yelled another.

More rocks broke and dust was thrown into the air. All the Gorons were silent as they waited to see what would come through. They heard coughing, and a sound like steel getting drug across the rock ground.

Then they saw a blue twinkling light.

"It's the dragon!" one screamed. "Don't eat us please!!"

"I'm not going to eat you!" Link shouted, still coughing as he waved away the smoke and dust. He let the hilt of the hammer crash to the ground as he faced the Gorons, hunched over slightly and breathing

heavily. "Are you all okay?"

"... Could it be?" a Goron gasped.

"The hero who defeated the Dodongo!" another exclaimed.

"Link!" they all shouted happily.

Link huffed, half smiling. "C'mon," he told them. "Let's get out of here."

They all got up and clambered out of the hole in their prison cell, but they stopped when they entered the cavern beyond.

"Where is Darunia?" one asked.

"He went to fight Volvagia," Link answered. "I'm going after him as soon as I get you all to safety."

"He can't fight that dragon alone!" another shouted. "We have to help him!"

The others grunted in agreement, but Link silenced them. "That's a great idea, but don't. He went to fight Volvagia to make sure you guys were able to get out safe. If you all go after him, it would go against what he wanted. *I'll* go back, and give him the help he needs."

Link lifted the hammer again, showing them the ancient weapon.

"The Megaton hammer!" a Goron asked. "It's been lost for so long!"

"It was not easy to get," Link admitted. "Now get moving. They faster you're out, the faster I can get back and help."

The Gorons nodded and all started moving through the caverns. Link wasn't sure if the Gorons were running because they wanted Link to make good on his promise sooner, if they were actually just that fast, or if he was just slowing down due to fatigue. If it was the latter, that would not do well in the coming battle.

He hoped to have *some* strength left to face Volvagia if Darunia hadn't already defeat him, but to be honest he was doubting he could now. He even considered on the way back out asking one of the Gorons to stay and help, but he knew he couldn't ask Darunia's people to make that sacrifice, not when he already promised to get them to safety. Even if they offered again, Link would have to turn them down.

Just like always, he'd have to do this himself.

And when at last they reached the exit to the temple, the Gorons all turned back to face Link.

"Don't worry," Link told them, hoping they couldn't tell how tired he was by now. "We'll be back before you know it."

The Gorons didn't have anything left to say, and exited the cavern, leaving Link alone with Navi.

"Are you sure you can keep going?" Navi asked, worry in her voice.

Link nodded. "I don't have time to sit around anymore. But I promise I'll take a break after this."

"You've been good at keeping those promises so far," Navi told him. "I hope you'll keep that up."

Link nodded again and started dragging the hammer back through the caves, hoping that Darunia had managed to hold out this long.



The smell of sulfur hit him first. Volcanoes had a tendency to reek of it, but until now it had at least been tolerable. Link slapped a hand over his face and looked around.

"It's definitely a dead end," Navi muttered, pinching her nose. "But... where's Darunia?"

Link grit his teeth, eyeing the wide ring of lava that ran the length of the room. There were smaller pits of lava scattered across the rocky platform in the center of the room, but there was no sign of either Darunia or Volvagia.

"They couldn't have beat each *other*," Navi suggested. "Could they?"

Link shrugged, walking out onto the platform, remembering the end chamber of the last temple. For whatever reason, the monsters tended to wait until he was all the way in the room. This time however, the chamber started shaking before he made it that far.

Navi had been clinging to Link's collar, but when he lost his footing she fluttered off, buzzing around his head. "Watch out!"

From one of the scattered pits of lava, a clawed and scaly hand grasped at him from the flames. It sliced the ground with its claws as it reached out with its other arm, then pulled itself out. Volvagia's massive head bellowed flames as it threw itself into the air, its long tail trailing behind it.

"... Wow," Link had heard stories of dragons when he was younger, but this was something else. He'd always pictured them shorter and fatter, and more like the lizards that lived in the trees... but this was a serpent's body, with long bony arms, a spine of flame, and its head was skeletal, with only wicked bone showing like a helmet over its scorched scales.

It was simultaneously one the most incredible... and most

terrifying... creature he'd ever seen.

And while he was lost in inaction, he didn't see it's tail swinging in behind him. It struck him in the back, nearly sent him into the pools of lava. He landed on his shield, but because he'd been holding it his back had been defenseless. His tunic was torn, and he could feel the sharpness of his wounds.

"You are weaker than the last to fight me," Volvagia snarled, annoyed at this second intrusion. "Even if you have brought the sacred Megaton Hammer... it will do you no good."

"You speak," Link gasped, swallowing blood and standing up. He glared up at Volvagia who flew in circles above him. "Where's Darunia?"

"He put up a good fight," Volvagia laughed. "But inevitably... he suffered the same fate that shall befall *you!*" He swooped down to strike.

Link, already off centered, threw up his shield to deflect the attack. It hit Volvagia in the face, but Link fell over, landing hard on his side.

"You should've rested!" Navi squealed.

"I'm fine," Link grit his teeth. "Just get ready."

"Ready?"

Volvagia dived back into the lava pits, disappearing in a splash of fire. Navi hid behind Link, where she got a better look at Link's wounds.

"... Link."

Link gripped the hammer, lifting it as best he could. "Pay attention!" he snapped, watching the lava.

Navi was taken aback for a moment, but she listened. She watched the lava with him as each pool seemed to bubble. "There!"

Just as Volvagia attempted to launch out of the pit, Link brought the hammer down on it's head, cracking it's skull. It screamed, bellowing fire again and pushing him back. Volvagia dropped into the pit, and the ground started shaking.

"*Enough... is enough!!*" The ground broke apart as Volvagia ripped apart the rock, sending lava flying in every direction.

Link covered Navi, but he needed to make his next move fast. "Navi!" Link ordered, hoping she'd know what to do without direction. He kicked off the ground as Volvagia dived at him one last time.

As Volvagia opened his jaw to eat Link whole... Link threw the hammer.

Navi reacted quickly, raising her hands and sending the hammer flying straight towards Volvagia's skull. Volvagia had no time to move, already flying right into it. The force of the impact embedded the blunt steel in Volvagia's head, and the velocity of it pulled his head back,

breaking it's neck.

Link hit the ground rolling as Volvagia came crashing down. It's body went limp, and it's bony arms lay lifeless at it's side. The dragon's head lay sideways on the ground, it's jaw unhinged.

Navi looked between the dragon and Link, shaking her head.

"I was too late," Link hissed, turning at glaring down at Volvagia. "Again... I had a chance to save him... and I took too long."

"Link--"

"Don't tell me that's not what happened!" Link snapped. "Don't tell me it's not my fault! It *is!* I took too long! *I'm* not strong enough! *I* opened the Sacred Realm! *I* let Ganondorf do this!"

Navi fluttered down beside him. "Link... stop beating yourself up... please."

"I don't even have time for *that*," he spat, not looking at her. "I have to keep moving... I have to... I have to find out what's next before someone *else* dies because of me."

Navi smacked him. "It's not your fault!" she shouted, eyes stinging. "I can't... *we* were too slow, Link... We're in this together... even if I can't do much besides help your aim... We share the blame together... This was my mission too."

Link stared at the ground, remembering the Great Deku Tree's final words.

"Navi the fairy... Help Link to carry out my will... I entreat ye... Navi... Good... Bye..."

It felt like just yesterday... because to him it hadn't been that long ago... He hadn't that yet again he was reminded of just how much time had passed.

"I know," Link mumbled. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry you got paired with me... You would've lived a happier life with an actual Kokiri..."

Before Navi could respond, the ground behind them began to glow. The image of a Triforce appeared in the rock, and hovering above it... was the Sage of Fire...

CHAPTER 22

SAGE OF FIRE

Darunia crossed his arms, a sad smile on his face as he watched Link and Navi. His feet didn't touch the ground, and he wasn't quite solid either.

Link couldn't speak, even when he moved his mouth to try. He knew, already, that Darunia had died in his fight against Volvagia... but knowing that he was the Sage of Fire...

Of course he was... just like Saria. Because, that was the pattern... wasn't it? Rauru was a spirit, and the Sage of Light. Saria had died, and became the Sage of the Forest. Now, it was Darunia's turn.

And Link knew what this meant... There were still three other sages... and he doubted they'd live to see their job completed.

"Thank you, Brother!" Darunia nodded. "I really appreciate what you did. I thank you on behalf of the entire Goron race! You turned out to be a real man, just as I thought you would!"

"No," Link mumbled. "I'm not-"

"By the way," Darunia chuckled, looking down at his new ethereal form. "I, the wild Darunia, turned out to be the great Sage of Fire... Isn't that funny, Brother? Well, this must be what they call destiny."

It was clear he was trying to take a positive spin on the situation, but he was struggling. They could all hear the sadness in his voice with that last line, how much it pained him to accept this...

"D-Darunia," Link stammered. "I'm sorry, I wasn't fast enough... I couldn't... I.."

Darunia raised a hand to silence him, giving him a determined look. "Nothing has made me happier than helping you seal the evil here!" This he said honestly. Though he regretted that he didn't make it out of the battle alive, he was at least proud to say he helped make an impact in Ganondorf's forces, and saved his people.

He held out his hand. "Hey, Brother, take this," a medallion like the others Link received appeared in the air above his open palm. "This is a Medallion that contains the power of the fire spirits-- and my friendship."

The medallion floated towards Link as he reached out his hand. When it stopped in front of him it spun for a moment before disappearing

in a brief flash of light.

And when Link looked up again... Darunia was gone.

Link stared at the space where Darunia had been, clenching his fists. "But... what about your son?" he mumbled. "What... do I tell him?"

Navi came to rest on Link's shoulder. "There's nothing else we can do here," she said solemnly. "We should find a place to cool off."

Link took a few steps back, and pulled the hammer from Volvagia's skull. He drug it across the rock as he started making his way out of the temple.

As he reached the exit, he heard Darunia's voice from somewhere beyond.

Don't forget... Now you and I are true Brothers!



The Gorons all gathered the entrance to the temple in Darunia's chambers, eagerly waiting the return of their leader and the hero. After a while, a few had left, wanting to get their lives back together and make sure their families were okay. And after a while longer, the rest had left as well, disappointed, and believing that perhaps their leader and hero had failed.

However, the son of Darunia, Link, had felt the mountain shake. The others left the city to confirm, and they came back with news that the storms over the mountain had cleared, and it was no longer erupting! Once again, Death Mountain had calmed.

But... Darunia and Link had still not returned.

Once again they waited eagerly, wanting to see them return safely... And at long last they heard sounds coming from the temple's entrance. A grinding sound, steel on stone. Something heavy. They held their breath as a lone figure made his way towards them, the grinding sound getting louder.

Then... Link stepped into the light, dragging behind him the legendary Megaton Hammer. The crowd of Gorons parted as he made his through the chamber.

The Gorons were stunned by the dark look in Link's eyes, but it was the son of Darunia who stopped him. Link the second tugged on Link's tunic, bouncing with excitement and not understanding.

"Brother Link! Everybody has come back!" he exclaimed. "Dad and you destroyed the dragon together, didn't you?! When I grow up, I want to be a strong man like you, Link!"

Link didn't face him, and he didn't answer. He just let go of the hammer, letting it fall to the ground in a ringing silence, and walked away.

He didn't need to say a word. Those who understood would explain it to the others. Those who didn't understand, would figure it out sooner or later.

Their leader, Darunia, wasn't coming home.

... Saria, wasn't coming home...



Link stood on the edge of Death Mountain, looking out over Hyrule. The damage didn't look as bad from up here, but that didn't erase it. He was still near enough to Castletown to see the perpetually smoking buildings, but everything else was a lie; the clear sky, the green fields, the silence of the wind...

Navi sat on his shoulder, no jokes, no banter... Then Link took a step forward. "What are you doing?"

The very edge of the cliff crumbled a bit, Link's feet standing just over it. He didn't shake, flinch, or move a muscle. His arms were at his sides and he had a blank stare fixed on the traitorous sky.

"Link, please... take a step back." She tugged at his ear a bit, trying to get him to acknowledge her.

"We screwed up Navi," Link choked, his words barely making it passed his lips. "W-... All of it..."

"It's like Jorol said--"

"He lied," Link hissed. "He was lying to himself." He rubbed his arm over his eyes, he took a step back. "He was lying to us." Another step back. "I screwed up!"

"Link!" Navi shouted, angrily fluttering in front of him. "Take a breath!"

Link stood there, body shaking. There was so much he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come. Fists clenched, gritting his teeth, tears streaming down his face, he stared passed Navi at the sky, and screamed.

He screamed with everything he had, letting his voice crack. He screamed until he couldn't see through the tears anymore. He screamed, hoping that every monster out there would hear him, that Ganondorf would hear him. He screamed until he ran out of breath and fell to his knees.

Navi hovered behind Link as he pounded a fist on the ground.

It had been a full day since he left Kakariko village by the time he made it back. He wanted to move on to wherever he needed to go next, but he knew there were a few things he needed to do first.

For instance, getting Talon back to the ranch.

Link stopped by the inn, ducking through the door. "Hey," he said, waving to the innkeeper. The innkeeper waved back and Link shifted his gaze to the back of the room.

The inn was pretty small, especially with so many people living in town now. Only one big room, a counter in front, and a mess of beds in back. Laying like a dog in the hot sun was Talon in one of the front beds, still asleep.

"I'm guessing he hasn't moved," Link sighed.

"I got him to wake a few hours ago," the innkeeper said. "But he grumbled something about being useless and went back to sleep."

Link shook his head, standing over Talon and crossing his arms. "Sitting around when things are this bad..." He glanced at the innkeeper before just staring at the ground with his eyes shut. "Can't you just tell him to go home?... He's one of the few that still has one."

The innkeeper didn't hear exactly what he'd said, since he spoke quietly, but she could tell from his general tone he wasn't happy. She stood next to him, staring down at Talon. "All people have hardships in their past that they would rather no one found out about. I bet even someone like him has had a share of troubles in the past..."

"I know," Link nodded. "But it's not going to get better just sitting around... It's not going to get better if you're waiting for someone else to do it for you. You have to fight on your own."

The innkeeper looked at him with sad eyes, wondering why he was so angry at the sleeping man. "I don't know who he is," she admitted. "I don't know who you are, traveler, or what your problem is. But you best get over yourself before you start causing trouble here."

"He left his daughter in the hands of a creep," Link said bluntly. "Then came here to just sleep on it. He's twice the creep's size and could'a taken him easy... Instead he's here, waiting for the problem to get better on it's own, like a coward."

The innkeeper didn't have an answer to that. All she knew was that he worked at the ranch, she had no idea what the details were. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Link nodded. He smacked Talon across the face,

startling both Talon and the innkeeper. "Get up."

"What in tarnation?" Talon exclaimed, sitting up. "Can't a person get a little shut-eye around here?"

"Get up," Link repeated. "Malon's waiting for you... if she hasn't given up on you."

Talon was still waking up and didn't hear what Link had muttered, but he heard Malon was waiting. "Did you save Malon?" he asked, snapping to attention.

"She's fine," Link answered, stepping to back to give Talon room to stand. "Ingo shouldn't be a problem anymore."

"Thanks!" Talon yawned, getting up. He stretched, cracking his back. "I'm going back to the ranch then." He started walking towards the exit, but Link stopped him.

"Hey!" Link barked. "Don't screw this up."

Talon clearly didn't understand what he meant, but he smiled awkwardly and waved goodbye anyway. "Yeehah!" he chuckled.

He's not taking this seriously, Link thought bitterly. Or he just doesn't understand how bad he messed up...

The innkeeper looked back at Link. "I'm not sure exactly what you just did," she sighed. "But I'd like to ask you to leave now."

"... That's fair," Link nodded.

CHAPTER 23

SEPARATE WAYS

From Hyrule field the damage didn't look too bad. The clouds over Death Mountain were calm again, Castletown was too far away to see clearly, and there was just grass in every other direction. On the horizon they could see forests and mountains, but it all looked as peaceful as it did back when Link had first left the forest.

"Deceptively pleasant," Link sighed, looking out at it all from Epona's back.

"Link," Navi started, floating beside him. "... You promised you would--"

"I know," Link hung his head, watching Epona eat the grass. "But I can't... I can't stop. I can't be just a little too late again..."

"You weren't a little late," Navi told him. "And there's nothing more you could have done for either of them. Not for Darunia... not for Saria... Please. Take a break for a moment, clear your head."

Link thought for a moment, looking south, back to the forest... He almost considered just turning back now. His home was right there, just a day's walk passed the horizon. But... that's not how this worked. It wouldn't all go away just because he crawled back into bed.

"Sheik said something about a lake," Link mumbled, turning to the south west. "Back in Kakariko... I did some research last night. Lake Hylia is down *that* way... I'm going there."

"You're going to continue anyway," Navi scolded. "Even though you promised--"

"I'm not breaking my promise," Link interrupted sternly. "From what I can tell, there's a problem down there, but there's no... trouble."

Navi considered his process on this. He was forcing himself to step back, but he needed to feel like he was doing something. "I guess it's a compromise," she sighed. "But I'll take it."

Link got Epona moving forward, and Navi sat back on Link's shoulder. As she did, Link slowed.

"Why are we stopping?" Navi asked.

"It shouldn't take me more than half a day to get there," Link said. "I'll probably be only a few hours, then be back tomorrow morning."

"What are you saying?"

"... I'd like to go alone. I want to think..."

Navi was silent, stunned. "... I... wh..."

"I spent a lot of time alone in the forest," Link explained. "That's how I cleared my head."

"I have to watch over you," Navi said quietly. "That's... that's what..."

"I'll be back tomorrow," Link mumbled. "I promise."

A minute passed as she sat on Link's shoulder, not wanting to move. When finally she did Link started moving again... leaving her behind. She watched as Epona took him through Hyrule field, until they disappeared behind the hills.

"... Get better, Link," Navi said, knowing he couldn't hear her. "... Please get better..."



By mid afternoon Link had arrived at the gate to Lake Hylia. It was easy enough to get Epona to hop the fence around it, but seeing the storm rumbling over the lake, she was unwilling to pass the gate itself.

Link patted her mane and let her mill around in the grass outside the gate, then entered Lake Hylia on his own. It was a wide open area surrounded by tall hills and trees, the rain matting down the grass, the shore at the bottom of a hill, and the lake itself was nearly drained. Dark sand and pebbles that used to be the lake bed were now only wet from the rain, but even that didn't seem to affect the water level.

Out over the lake however, was what used to be an island but now just a tall cylinder that rose out of the bottom of the lake. There was a single tree in the center of that island, and a bridge that connected the island to the shore.

It seemed like a good enough place to rest, so Link made his way across the old bridge, and sat under the tree to get out of the rain.

And then he sat there, staring down over the cliff of the island to what was left of the lake water.

He tucked himself into a ball, sitting his chin on his knees and wrapping his arms around his legs. There wasn't much he could do here, and he knew that... but it was quiet, out of the way. The rain blocked out all outside noise, so there were no birds or bugs to bother him, and for a moment he forced himself to forget about the mission.

But, then that moment passed, and he someone clearing their throat. Link turned his head to see the old man standing on the bridge,

awkwardly waving.
"Hello there."



Having wings made traveling a lot easier. Whereas it took Link half a day to travel by horseback, Navi could cross that distance in almost half that time. But she wasn't headed the same way, though he considered it.

Her wings flickered as her light shone on the wooden tunnel that led into Kokiri village. She hovered over the rickety bridge, looking back and wondering if she should be here without Link, but forced herself to carry on.

Other fairies of the forest greeted her, confused as they were behind their smiles. Some of them asked if her Kokiri boy had died, but Navi dismissed them. As much as she wanted to catch up with things in the forest they weren't why she was here.

Instead, she made her way to the Great Deku Tree.

He still stood tall in his clearing, no monsters to be seen anymore... but his bark was peeling, and there was no soul in his crumbling leaves. It was a warm day, late summer sure, but not late enough for a tree to look so bare.

"Don't worry much about him," the Deku Sprout said cheerfully, looking up at her. "He might be gone but like all trees he'll return back to the soil, and his seeds will fly away on the winds. You might not see *him* again, but he'll be back in one way or another."

"I know," Navi said softly, still looking at the old tree. "But I could really use his wisdom right about now..."

"Well you can always ask me!" the Deku Sprout told her. "I've got all the memories of the old man, with a new perspective! So go ahead!"

Navi floated downward, sitting on the grass and looking up at the Deku Sprout. "Link is sad, and I can't help him."

If the Sprout could move he'd have nodded. "He's still a child in his mind," he sighed. "Lost to time."

"And..." Navi shook her head. "I don't want to say it, cause it's rude..."

"You wonder why the fate of Hyrule rests on the shoulders of someone so young?" the Deku Sprout asked. "Why couldn't the Goddess have chosen a hero with more experience?"

Navi nodded.

"I don't have the *exact* answer," the Deku Sprout admitted. "But... If I could make a guess... I believe there are forces at work here that not even she could overpower. I believe the boy is our best hope, and that Hylia has a plan in place, despite what forces fight against her, or force her hand."

Navi looked at the grass, nearly as tall as she was when sitting down. "Great Deku Sprout," she mumbled. "What if... I wasn't the best pick to help him?"

"You were," the Deku Sprout said with absolute certainty. "There is no doubt there."

"But how can you be sure?"

"You have already discovered one ability meant to help him," the Deku Sprout explained. "And in time, you will discover others."

"Such as?" Navi asked.

"This... I don't know," the Deku Sprout sighed. "But I know you will find them in time to help, when you are needed."

"So basically... just keep going," Navi muttered, standing up. She plucked a blade of a grass.

"Don't 'just keep going'," the Deku Sprout corrected. "Keep going, knowing you're going the right way!" He smiled down at her.

Navi kicked into the air, holding the blade of grass tight with both hands. "Thank you," she said halfheartedly. "...I'm going to go think."

"Hm," the Deku Sprout (would have) nodded.

Navi flew slowly back through the forest, weaving through the houses, remembering how not too long ago she followed this same path... and wound up at Link's door. She was so much more excited that day, despite knowing the bad news. Back then she knew the Deku Tree was hurting, but she thought there was a way to fix it... Now...

Now there was so much more at stake... and she didn't know how to fix it.

She entered the house in the tree, walking across the surface of the table in the center of the room. The candle in the glass jar was no longer lit, and dust had collected everywhere. It was like this the last time they came back, but without Link it just felt that much darker.

But she walked up to the glass jar anyway, her own light helping to cast a reflection on it. She clutched the blade of grass in her hands and stared at herself, how small she was that the thing people walk on was almost taller than her.

All those monsters Link has to fight on his own, she thought. And all I can do is try to point him in the right direction...

She glared at her reflection, then pointed the blade of grass at it like a weapon. She tried to look as fierce as possible, only to find the result laughable. Even to herself she looked small. She could act as a light in dark places, help Link aim his arrows, and give a second opinion... but ultimately it was up to Link to save the entire Kingdom.

Or at least what's left of it, she grumbled, walking away from her reflection. *We kinda botched it all the first time around...*

Then she passed by the little bed Link had made for her. She looked at it, remembering seeing it for the first time seven years after it had been made. She remembered how excited Link had been, still acting like a child in an adult's body.

She crawled under the blanket, and lay on her side, staring at her reflection in the jar.

Shut up, Navi told herself, and rolled to face the other way.

After the old man introduced himself as the Lake Scientist, he led Link out of the rain and into an old laboratory on the edge of the lake. He explained how he'd been studying Lake Hylia for many years, developing new ways for Hylia to dive deeper into water like the aquatic race of Zoras. He'd worked for a long time with the Zoras, also using their knowledge of sea life to create new potions he believed would one day help illnesses for *all* races.

A very noble effort, Link thought, looking around the laboratory. *I wish that were my job... save the world by coming up with medicines.*

"But my job's gotten quite a bit *easier* as of late," the Lake Scientist chuckled. "As you may have noticed, the lake's dropped in water level considerably. But while this makes it easier on me to get to the bottom of the lake and study algae, seaweeds, corals, and rocks... I'm afraid a lot of the wildlife that used to live in these waters have died off..."

Link absentmindedly fumbled with a few trinkets on the scientist's shelves. "And, how long ago did that start?" He already knew the answer, but he just wanted to make sure.

"Same time everything else went downhill," the old man sighed. "Seven years ago." He took a seat in a cushioned chair and watched Link look around. "Real shocking, isn't it?"

"So what exactly do you think is causing it?" Link asked, moving on to gathering information he *didn't* know. He sat down the glass ball and looked over to the scientist.

"To be honest," the scientist admitted. "I haven't the foggiest. The water from the lake flows down from Zora's Domain. I've sent word to them, but... they have yet to reply. Have you been that way recently?"

"I came from near there," Link nodded, looking at the ground. "But I haven't been there in... well, you know." He waved his hand limply, gesturing to wherever the end of the sentence was.

"I'm worried something might have happened up there," the scientist stated. "I've been good friends with King Zora XVI for a long time. To not hear from them in so long..."

"I was headed there next," Link crossed his arms, thinking to himself. "I should probably get going soon, too."

"Which reminds me," the old man mumbled. "I meant to ask; where did you come from? What are you doing here at a time like this, dressed like that?"

"What do you mean?" Link asked, not even sure how to answer that.

"We don't have adventurers anymore," the scientist said solemnly. "Knights are a thing of the past... travelers have become a rarity. Most keep to their homes, clinging to what safety they can find. So why are you here?"

Why am I here? Link asked himself. He knew he had to keep his promise to Navi, but he couldn't afford to waste time. He shouldn't be here... He should be wherever he needed to go next. And from the sound of it, that place should've been Zora's Domain, which was close by to Kakariko. Link will have wasted an entire day just because he promised to take a break.

"Doesn't matter," he finally answered. "I needed a stopping point, some place to... *not* think, I think."

"The troubles of the world weigh heavy on our minds these days," the scientist nodded. "Some more than others."

"You have no idea," Link sighed.

"I believe I have just the thing," the old man grinned, getting out of his chair. Link raised an eyebrow and watched the man cross the room to a shelf beside a deep concrete pool. He grabbed a vial off the shelf, and dipped it in the water, then took a pinch of dust from a pouch next to where the vial had been. After swirling it up, he returned to Link and handed it to him. "The waters of Lake Hylia, after some modification, contain certain elements that when mixed with other chemicals can produce... specific effects."

"... Specific, effects?"

The scientist nodded eagerly, shoving the vial into Link's hands. "Nothing dangerous, I assure you! I've tested each new potion on myself, and never had any adverse effects. In fact, I'd say most of them have indeed helped me live so long! Besides, the old potions were *much* more harmful in the long run, yet their magic has been trusted since the *old* times of Hyrule!"

"Old times?" Link felt more lost than before but so many different reasons.

"You remind me of a story," the scientist whispered, wagging a finger at Link as he returned to his seat. "Ah, the Hero of Man. If I remember correctly -- and I always do! -- he was a young man, no older than you. He fought against the demise of this world, until he lost his strength. But it was the old magic that saved him, a potion in which he placed his faith. It brought him back from the brink of death, and allowed him to complete his task. So we trust in potions like the one he had, so that we may too continue our path."

Link looked down at the vial in his hand. *A magic potion?* he wondered. *Is there really such a thing?* "And... what exactly... does this potion do?"

"What does it do!?" the scientist cackled. "It's exactly what you need to battle those inner demons of yours. When you come face to face with the worst of yourself, that's what this potion is for."

"I don't--"

"I can see your expression, boy," the scientist smiled, nodding to himself. "You struggle with something I don't believe I can understand. You struggle to even voice these thoughts of yours. But I've spent my life studying others, so I can always tell. Link, child, soon... you must come to terms with these demons of yours. For the sake of Hyrule, you must win."

"For the sake of Hyrule?" Link asked. "How could you--?"

"There's only one reason a boy like you is dressed like that," the scientist explained. "And there are no adventurers anymore, no travelers, no knights. But we don't need those this day. On this day, we need a hero. On this day, take that potion, and continue on, boy. Do what must be done."

Link looked at the red liquid in the glass vial, wondering what it meant, what it would really do.

Navi tossed and turned on her bed, pulling the blanket over her

head. She wasn't trying to sleep exactly, but... then again she wasn't sure *what* she was trying to do.

She wanted to be useful, to help Link figure out how to deal with all this, to battle the many enemies they came across, to bear this burden he felt the need to weigh on himself alone. But she had no answer for any of this, and in fact the more she thought about it, the more she questioned why fairies were even chosen to accompany the Kokiri in the first place.

What were they there for? Just, to keep them company? The natural magic of the fairies kept the Kokiri young for extended periods of time, and kept larger monsters away from the forest, but, she'd always believed the relationship was symbiotic, as if they each had something to offer... And while that still made sense to her... outside of the forest was different.

Navi being with Link didn't help him in the slightest... and she had no idea how to change that...

She threw the blanket off of her and kicked the blade of grass away from her in frustration. *I could have at least prevented him from going off alone!* she screamed in her head. *I could have at least been there to talk him through this! It doesn't matter if I know what to say... right?*

Navi stared at Link's bed, remembering him sleeping there when they first met and thinking to herself how lazy a boy he was.

Not so lazy anymore, Navi sighed. *Barely sits down anymore.*

She forced herself to leave the house, knowing that the day was almost over and she would need to meet back with Link near Kakariko eventually. But as she left the house she spun back around to take another look at it, and saw the drawing Saria had made at the base of it; the lizard with spikes on it's back.

Did you know? Navi asked. *Did you know what he had to face?* Maybe she had known. Saria seemed to have known a lot more than she'd let on...

Again she forced herself to flutter away. She had less answers than she did before coming here, but she wasn't sure what else to do. She felt worse, having had time to sit and fester on it all.

As she made her way out of the village, and over the rickety bridge, and through the forest, she tried to make sense of it, breaking it all into points of problems she had answers for, and answers she still needed.

First of all was of course how useless she felt. She still didn't have an answer for that.

Second was the seven year time skip. She hoped that with time, they'd be able to move on, but she knew it would be harder for Link.

Third was the fact that the world ending -- while not Link's fault -- was something Link blamed himself for. She didn't have an answer for that either.

Forth, the hardest, were the deaths of Saria and Darunia... That... that sucked... On one hand, they were now able to help Link stop Ganondorf once and for all, but it also meant that after that, Link would most likely never see them again. And for them to have been such good people, the best their respective races had to offer...

Maybe that's the point, Navi thought. They had to be the best, to become the Sages.

It was a lot. It was too much weight for one person to hold over themselves.

But I was there, Navi told herself stubbornly. I was right beside you the whole time.

As she flew towards Kakariko Village, she noticed Link riding Epona in the same direction.

This is as much fault as it is yours, Navi flew towards him, determination in her eyes. And this was not your fault!

CHAPTER 24

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER

Through the next several hours of traveling, Link and Navi compared notes on their time apart. Navi went over her discussion with the Deku Sprout, and her thoughts on what Saria might've known. Then she told Link how useless she felt, and Link laughed.

"That wasn't meant to be funny," Navi scowled.

"No I know," Link said, smiling despite his serious tone. "I know... but it is. You were talking about how much Saria might've known ahead of time, but... there was something she told me once. I don't quite remember how it went, but it was something to the effect of... 'It doesn't matter... what you can or can't do, I think, for someone... Just so long as you're there.' Or something."

Navi thought about that as they continued towards Zora's Domain.

"I guess I haven't exactly made it easy on you," Link admitted, riding Epona by the river. "I keep trying to force these thoughts out of my head... but..."

"Then something else falls apart anyway," Navi nodded.

"I'm trying to focus on the task at hand," Link said. "There's just so much..."

"I think the truth of the matter," Navi sighed. "Is that we can't do anything about it. All we can do is keep going, and fix what we can. We can get to the Sages, as complicated as the end result of that is, we can get to them."

"Yeah," Link nodded. "I just hope I'm not too late this time."

For a little while longer they continued following the river, until they noticed chunks of ice floating downstream. Cautiously, they pressed onward. The air chilled, their breath puffed in front of them, and the chunks of ice in the water got bigger and bigger until the river itself was frozen entirely.

"Something's really wrong here," Link muttered, freezing.

Navi tucked herself into Link's collar again and eventually Epona would go no further. The grass was covered in a thick layer of frost, and the air was too cold for her. Link hopped off, patted her mane, and let Epona turn around.

As soon as he made sure she was okay on her own, he looked up the path that led to Zora's Domain. It wasn't that far now, but the cold was definitely making it harder to breathe. He wrapped his arms around himself and started up the trail, leaving deeper and deeper footprints in the snow as he went.

"Look on the bright side," Navi half joked. "It's clearly been like this for a while, so we can't have been any later than we are?"

Link looked from frozen Zora to frozen Zora, all encased in ice. The rocky pathways were covered in snow, the lakes were frozen solid, and every civilian had been locked away in it. While technically Navi was right, Link didn't feel like pointing out that this was still pretty much his fault.

"But," Link hissed, clenching his fists. "I can at least fix this."

He walked out into the middle of the lake, Navi hovering over his head, wondering what he was doing. Then Link raised his hands, and summoned Din's Fire.

He slammed the ball of flames into the ground, sending a wave of fire in a circle around him...

But the ice didn't even crack.

"What!?" Link hissed. "But..." He knelt, softly punching the ice. "How do I get rid of it then?"

"... I, I don't know," Navi said, looking around as if the answer were simply written on a sign somewhere. "Maybe the King knows?"

Figuring it was worth a shot, they continued up the path through Zora's Domain, passing caves and homes that were now sealed off. Torches were unlit, there were no other footprints in the snow, and the grew colder and colder the higher they went. As they passed by Zora after Zora, Link wondered if any of them knew what had happened.

They seemed like it happened over night, in an instant. Some of them were even smiling. But were they awake? Did they at least know they were frozen? Were they conscious?

And those questions become more pressing as they arrived in the King's Chambers. King Zora XVI sat on his perch... completely encased in ice, just like the rest of his people.

"But Link," Navi mumbled. "Where's Princess Ruto?"

"I believe... she would've gone to see Lord Jabu-Jabu." Link unsheathed his sword and shield walking up the ramp to the path beside

the King. Stopping for a moment, he looked up at the massive Zora. "I brought her back once," he said, leaving the chamber. "I'll do it again."

And yet, as he made it to the altar, he felt like someone had pulled the floor out from under him.

Lord Jabu-Jabu was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Ruto. The entire lake at the peak of Zora's Domain was just as frozen as everything else, but Jabu-Jabu was gone. Link had expected him to be trapped in the ice, but no... Where could they have gone?

He looked around, remembering the Great Fairy Cave where he received Farore's Wind. It was currently sealed... but to the north, left of that cave, was another opening in the rock wall. Smaller, darker, and a strong sense of foreboding came from inside... Massive shards of ice splintered from the cave mouth, spreading out in every direction. This was where the ice originated, and it was the only other way.

"Whatever happened here," Link hissed. "Started in there."

"Are we going in unprepared?" Navi asked.

Link looked down at his hands. He'd kept trying to use Din's Fire to burn the ice, but he felt now would be the perfect time to attempt using Farore's Wind.

He focused on the magic gifted to him by Farore, and clenched his fists. A green energy emanated from his hands and he pointed his palms at the ground. The ground at his feet mirrored the energy, capturing that green light and holding it in place as a gust of wind wrapped around that point. Even as Link stepped away, it stayed.

If it weren't for the ominous feeling looming over them, the caves would've looked beautiful. With Navi's and the Master Sword's lights glimmering off the ice, reflecting in all directions, the whole cave lit up blue and gold.

And yet all the while, the ground seemed to be void of light. Every step they took cast more shadows across the icy floor.

"I don't like how this place feels," Navi muttered.

"I don't either," Link agreed, sword and shield already in hand.

The hallways were narrow, and icicles kept falling from above. Keeping his shield over his head made them easy to deal with, but the Keese were a different problem. They kept swooping down at him from out of sight, and then disappearing again. It was hard to keep an eye out for them and protect himself from icicles at the same time.

But when at last they reached the inner chamber, they came across a new problem. Staring back at them were a line of statues made of ice. A sinister face carved on top of a pillar of ice.

And without warning, they all opened their mouths in unison and blasted a freezing wind.

Link threw up his shield as he slid away, losing his footing. "Freezing bastards," he glared. Knowing he couldn't get close he sheathed his weapons and pulled out his bow and arrows. "Aim for the eyes."

Navi nodded and as Link fired she directed the arrows at their targets. As small as those targets were, the arrows hit! "Yes!" she exclaimed.

And yet the Freezards didn't even blink.

"What!?" Link scoffed.

The Freezards gave another blast of chill air, frost gathering over the Hylian shield as Link used it for defense.

He was forced to drop it for the moment as the frostbite started nipping at his arm.

"Alright screw this," Link huffed. "*Something's* going to burn!"

He summoned Din's Fire again, hoping that it would melt these enemies if not the surrounding cave. The fires pushed back against the freezing blast of Freezards, and with enough force, it melted the heads of those statues.

The statues looked like wickless candles; melted and deformed. Link picked up his shield and as he passed by those statues he sent one last casual blast of flames at the one in the center, reducing it to a puddle.

The ground froze that puddle flat anyway, but Link was just glad it worked.

At least, he was glad for a moment... until he realized the chamber beyond was full of the things. They all blinked at him, little beady red eyes watching him as he stood still and figured out his next move.

"Navi," Link sighed.

"Yup?"

"What would you assume the range is on this fire?"

"Not enough," Navi giggled. "You want a percentage?"

"No thanks," Link grinned. "I'll make it work."

He sheathed his sword, but gripped his shield in front of him. "If you want, fly around and count 'em."

Before Navi could respond, Link had charged forward. He bashed his shield into the Freezard directly in front of him, using the icy blast it let out to lift himself up. In the air he used Din's Fire to incinerate the

surrounding statues before landing behind the first and slamming his shield into it's head.

Without slowing, he turned to the rest and threw his shield at the nearest one, already running. He used it as a platform and a cork at the same time, blocking that Freezard from attacking. Luckily they were all stationary, only able to attack when he came within range. They could turn in place though, but so long as Link was faster, he could take them out in groups.

He focused their attention in one direction, then flipped over them, burning groups in circles. For those he was too slow to burn he simply bashed his shield into.

When it was finally over, Link stood at the other end of the room, tired but still standing. He waited for Navi to come back to him.

"There's a grand total of one," Navi smiled, nodding in the direction of the one Link missed.

Link pointed a finger at it and attempted to fire another shot... but no fire came. "Huh," he sighed. "You get a pass."

The Freezard watched Link as he left, then returned to it's original position of watching the entrance.



After another long hallway of dodging icicles, Link finally arrived at the end chamber. A small room with icicles coming up out of the ground in a ring around the chamber. And at the other end, was a wooden chest.

"What?" Link mumbled.

"I don't get it," Navi hissed.

"Did what's in this chest cause the problem here?" Link asked.

"I don't know," Navi answered.

Link knelt in front of the chest, cracking it open. Inside was probably the last thing he expected... or wanted, for that matter.

It was a blue tunic, made of shimmering Zora scales.

"What... is this?" Link remembered his conversation with the old scientist at Lake Hylia, and wondered if this was the invention he'd spoken about. He'd said he wanted a way for Hylians to swim like Zoras, so was this the answer to that? "But he sounded like it wasn't done yet..."

"What?" Navi asked, not having heard him.

"I don't exactly feel like wearing this," Link said, not voicing his previous thoughts.

"I have a feeling you'll need it though," Navi sighed, sitting on his shoulder. "You needed the Goron tunic to survive in the mountain, maybe you need this here?"

"But why would it just be sitting here?" Link asked. "As if it were waiting for me? Planned? I don't... I don't get it. Who put it here and why?"

"Maybe the Zoras knew they needed help when the freezing started?" Navi guessed. "It didn't seem like they had much time, but maybe they put this here -- or had it ready already -- just in case?"

Link nodded. "I suppose that makes sense," he decided. "I'll have to ask the King when we unfreeze him."

Link removed the Goron tunic, folding it up and setting it in the chest. Then he wore the Zora's tunic, tying the collar. This one came with a long hat, similar to the fins on the back of the Zora's heads, but Link only stared at it.

Navi was about to question him about it, but another voice spoke instead.

"We meet again, Link..."

Without even turning around, Link knew who that voice was. "You're like a bad fungus."

"If you came here to meet the Zoras, you wasted your time..." Sheik stepped closer to Link, but was preoccupied looking around the room. "This is all there is... With one exception, the Zoras are now sealed under this thick ice sheet..."

Link turned to face him. "One exception? Who's left?"

Sheik met his gaze. "I managed to rescue the Zora princess from under the ice, but... she left to head for the Water Temple."

"Okay, fair enough," Link nodded. "But do me one better. Where did all this ice come from? And where's the Water Temple?"

"The ice is created by an evil curse," Sheik explained. "The monster in the Water Temple is the source of the curse. Unless you shut off the source, this ice will never melt..."

Link scoffed, shaking his head. "And I suppose I'll have to do that entirely on my own too, or do you actually plan on doing something useful this time?"

For once Sheik seemed to take offense to his insult, turning away. "If you have courage enough to confront the danger and save the Zoras, I will teach you the melody that leads to the temple."

"A melody?" Link asked. "Another song?" He took a step forward and held his hand out, trying to think of words that were less angry than

the words in his head. "Look... I get that the ocarina was important to open the Door of Time... but you seem pretty adamant that I memorize a bunch of useless music. I don't really have time to listen to more."

Sheik pulled out his harp, and began playing a few notes. "Time passes, people move... Like a river's flow, it never ends... A childish mind will turn to noble ambition... Young love will become deep affection... The clear water's surface reflects growth... Now listen to the serenade of Water to reflect upon yourself..."

While Link was trying to figure out any part of what Sheik had just said, Sheik played his song. It was nothing like the Bolero of Fire. This song was calm, and seemed to cause a ripple effect in the sound itself, echoing off the icy cavern walls.

When he stopped, he lowered his harp, looking at the ground.

"Not a bad song," Link admitted quietly. "But I don't see how--"

"Link," Sheik said softly. "I'll see you again..." He disappeared in smoke, leaving Link and Navi alone once again.

"I'm sure I will," Link sighed. "Whether I want to or not."

He looked down at his fist, calling on Farore's energy. The ground beneath his feet lit up green, and a wind swept up around him.

CHAPTER 25

MORPHA

Link and Navi used Farore's Wind to return to the exit of the ice cavern. From there, they made their way down through Zora's Domain, and met up with Epona at the base of the mountain. Link had tested Sheik's song, but it didn't really do anything.

He expected some pillar of light to appear on the horizon, allowing him to head directly there, or maybe teleportation magic like that of Farore's Wind. And yet, it ended up just being a song.

Annoying, but expected, considering how much help Sheik had been already.

Instead, they made their way on horseback to Lake Hylia. Link had a hunch the Water Temple was there, and he was planning to go back anyway after he'd fixed Zora's Domain. He didn't succeed exactly, but he figured the scientist there might know more about that Zora's tunic he'd found.

When they arrived at the Lake, they found the old man taking a nap near his farmland. It was a patch of mostly dry grass near the edge of where the shore used to be. Now of course, the shore was several meters lower.

"Ooooh," the scientist mused. "This indeed the item I had intended to make! I just can't believe they made it without me..."

"But it will allow me to breathe underwater?" Link asked.

"Yes... and perhaps..." the old man walked down to the edge of the lake, looking into the deeper waters. "You may be able to reach what I could not..."

"The Water Temple," Link nodded. "It's down there, isn't it?"

The scientist smiled. "You know of it?"

"It's where I'm headed," Link answered. "Anything I *should* know before I go down there?"

"Besides the fact that you're woefully unprepared?" the scientist laughed. "Only that you have everything with you that you need." He started back towards his lab. "I look forward to seeing you upon your return, traveler!"

Link used Farore's Wind to set his return point, looked back into the water, and walked right in. Navi tucked herself under Link's hat, and

soon they were underwater.

It was an odd feeling, like he suddenly had full control over going any direction. If he wanted to float up he could float, if he wanted to sink he'd sink. It didn't even feel like swimming, from what little experience Link had with that anyway.

Last time he swam it was to sneak around Hyrule Castle. And as he sank to the bottom of the lake he remembered those times, back before everything became so complicated.

Just keep moving, Link told himself. Just don't stop.

They reached the bottom, dirt getting kicked up in the water with each heavy step. He was met with an enormous bronze gate, tall bronze pillars standing beside it. As he stood before it, the gate raised into the rocky cliff, and Link was allowed to enter.

Dirt was kicked up again as the gate slammed shut behind him, locking him in.

Link swam up through the bottom of the small basin, and climbed out into the chiseled cavern. It was a short hallway, only a few feet long before coming to a dead end drop.

Inside wasn't like any temple he'd been too so far. The rest had always had a large open room through the front door, usually with pathways to other rooms or hallways. But this temple was built like an inverted tower.

Walking to the edge of the very short hall, he looked at the square pillar in the center of the room. The chamber around it was filled with water up to the floor he stood on, but there were several floors beneath him that were underwater. The large pillar in the center of the room went all the way from the ceiling to the cave floor at the very bottom.

"There's a couple of doors we could try," Navi suggested.

"Yeah," Link nodded, putting his feet in the water. "But we're not here looking for anything particular, just the thing keeping the Zora's frozen."

"I guess," Navi nodded. "So chances are it's at the bottom right?"

Link hopped back in the water and Navi tucked herself in his hat. He watched the pillar as he sunk, each floor moving past him. He admitted, he was curious about what might be passed those doors, but he was done wasting time.

No more side quests, Link thought. No more running around. There's no reason to do that here.

He hit the bottom of the chamber and moved around the pillar until he found a door. There were two; one in the pillar, and one across from it

in the cave wall. Given the fact that the door in the pillar was locked, Link went straight for the other door.

As soon as the door opened, Link was flung through by the massive rush of water. There was air left in the chamber beyond that door, but the force of the water pushing through also slammed the door shut again. Link was left sitting flat on the ground, dazed.

He coughed up water, staring at the ceiling.

Grunting in annoyance, Link forced himself to stand. The chamber he got swept into was damp, the soft ground sinking under his feet. In front of him however was a tall stone structure, like a flat wall. To the side of it was a staircase leading up.

But, at the top of the wall... Link thought he saw something move. "What is that?" Link asked, after it had already gone. It was only there a moment.

"What was what?" Navi asked.

Link drew his sword and shield and walked quietly up the stairs. As soon as he was high enough, he peeked his head over the edge of the wall. It was a massive platform, perfectly flat stone. At the other end of it was a door, but in front of it...

"Ruto!" Link exclaimed, stepping over the ledge and walking across the platform.

Ruto jumped, clutching her chest. She turned around, wide eyed in surprise... But as she saw Link, she calmed. She still looked confused though. "Oh... you..." She knew who he was, why couldn't she remember? "If I'm right... Link?!"

Link smiled, suddenly feeling like the air got knocked out of him. "I am *so* glad you're okay."

"You're Link, aren't you?" Ruto was too stunned to process it properly. He came back... Link actually came back to her! She hopped in place. "It's me, your fiancée, Ruto!"

Link stopped dead. "U-uh, fiancée?"

Ruto didn't hear him, she was already set on her line of thought and running with it. "Princess of the Zoras!" she said proudly. "I never forgot the vows we made to each other seven years ago! You're a terrible man to have kept me waiting for these seven long years..."

And in an instant it was like she ran into a brick wall. For that moment she was a kid again, full of energy and excitement despite the circumstances. But... then all at once she remembered all that had happened, and why she was here now.

"But now is not the time to talk about love," she told herself. When

she looked up she gave Link a cold look, not because she was angry, but because she was focused. "I'm sure you've already seen it! Zora's Domain - totally frozen! A young man named Sheik saved me from under the ice... But my father and the other Zoras have not... yet..."

"Yeah," Link nodded. "I was just there... I tried to melt it, but... Apparently there's some monster here creating a curse that affects a different area several miles away."

"They're connected by the lake and the river," Navi told him.

"I want to save them all!" Ruto declared. "I want to save Zoras Domain! You! You have to help me!"

Link opened his mouth to answer, but he was never able to keep up with Ruto. One minute she'd be barking orders at him, the next she'd be excited to see him. One minute she'd be on the verge of tears, and the next she'd be an unstoppable force of determination. Link was still back on being excited to see her alive and well.

Ruto jabbed a finger at him. "This is a request from me, the woman who is going to be your wife!"

"Yeah, we're going to need to talk about that part."

Ruto ignored that part. "Link, you have to help me destroy the evil monster in the temple, okay?"

Link put his hands on his belt, looking passed her to the door. "I know. It's what I'm here for." He focused on her again. "Through there?"

Ruto nodded. "I'll lead the way. Follow me, quickly!" She turned on her heel and walked away, not waiting for Link.

She doesn't change, Link sighed, starting to move. Out of everything that's different... Even though she's suffered just as much as everyone else, somehow she made it out okay...

Link might not have agreed with her on the whole fiancée thing, and she might be a bit difficult to deal with, but he had to admit... He was glad her determination was something even Ganondorf couldn't tear down.

"Are you coming or not?" Ruto scoffed, opening the door.

Link hadn't realized he'd stopped, but as the door opened everything slowed down. Ruto's eyes went wide as the door was thrown back, and a living tendril of water grabbed her, an evil eye glaring beneath the surface.

"No!" Link charged forward, but he was too slow.

Too slow. The door was forced shut by the liquid monster, slamming in Link's face as he chased after it.

He pounded on the door, trying to pry it open. Accepting that it

wasn't opening, he took his shield and bashed the knob until it broke. He screamed in anger as he barreled down the tunnel, but it only went one way; down. The tunnel bent down and then back under itself, effectively closing off the only exit.

Link didn't hesitate and dived down the tunnel, sliding to the lower sections and dropping too far away to get back up. It was a long slide, leading back under the entire structure of the temple, and going deeper underground.

It dropped him into a decrepit hallway, stone bricks falling out of place. But in front of him was exactly what he was looking for. There was always a room like this, at the end.

The biggest chamber in the complex, usually a dead end, like this... and the monster lying in wait.

He entered the chamber. It was right below the one came from, the chamber with the massive pillar. This room however, had a deep pool filled with what looked like jelly.

It was the creature that took Ruto. It looked like water, rippling and formless, but there was something solid to it, something that held it together.

"Whatever you are," Link hissed, pointing his sword at the eye that floated in the formless liquid. "Give her back!"

In a show of force, the monster lashed out several tendrils in his direction. Like warning shots they impacted the stone around and behind him, blocking him off from everything save for the way back. It was giving him one last chance to turn around.

"Not bloody likely," Link swept his sword in an overhead arc, slashing through the liquid limbs.

The monster responded in kind, lashing out at him. It made a sort of hissing noise, like the water was boiling, as it slammed each tentacle into the ground. Link dodged each strike, weaving sideways around the pool and slashing at the tentacles that got too close.

But when one finally struck him he realized it wasn't that the water was boiling, but instead electrified. It was sizzling and sparking, and it scorched Link's right arm before he had a chance to throw up his shield.

The electric blast stunned him for just long enough for another tentacle to grab him, lifting him into the air. It crushed his arms, forcing him to drop his sword and shield.

"Let go!" Link shouted, struggling to breath as he felt a rip crack.

Another tentacle was added to the first, and like a cruel child it attempted to crush the life out of him. But like also like a child, it liked

playing with it's food.

The monster threw him at the wall, and it was everything Link had to not crack his head on the stone. His leg took most of the hit, but then he was falling. This time he didn't have enough in him to save himself, and he fell headfirst into the stone floor.

"Link!" Navi shouted. "Link get up!" She tugged at his sleeve, trying to lift him up.

Link moaned in pain, holding his side. His leg wasn't moving, and his forehead was bleeding. Everything felt both numb, and like he was being stabbed over and over.

He could only see with one eye, blood dripping into the other, so his sight was already bad, but even with his vision halved and blurred he could see the eye that floated in the living water. It bobbed up and down, weaving in circles, and sparked with electricity. That had to be the heart of it, right?

"N... Navi," Link coughed, forcing himself to sit up on his good arm. "Help me..."

"Of course!" Navi nodded. "W-what do you need?!"

Link glared at the eye that watched him in the water. "Help me--"

A tentacle cracked against the side of his head, sending him spiraling across the ground. Navi spun around in the air, no idea what to do. She flew back to Link's weapons, but she couldn't lift them. The most she could do was make them shift slightly.

"Navi," Link grunted, his good arm behind his back. Navi flew back to his side.

He couldn't see anymore, but he could guess the general direction of the thing. He'd watched it enough to guess the pattern, but he'd only have one shot.

As quick as he could, he pulled out his bow and an arrow. "Aim!" He fired and Navi reacted, sending the arrow straight through the pupil of the electric eye.

The tentacles flailed randomly, one of them slamming down on Link's gut. But the living liquid began to melt away as the eye screeched. He knew it was the water steaming from the electricity, but it sounded like screaming.

"Go ahead," Link mumbled, barely able to open his mouth. "Scream... all you want... Just give her... back."

He lolled his head to the side, forcing an eye to open so he could see the monster disintegrate.

The pool drained, leaving it completely empty. And when it was

gone... the room began to shake. Navi hovered over Link as if to protect him, but if the ceiling collapsed she wouldn't be able to do much.

And it seemed that was exactly what was happening. A perfect square the same size as the pool began to lower into the chamber. It fit into place, and the locked door Link had turned away from before opened in front of him.

"You did it!" Navi exclaimed, spinning around. "You did it! It's gone! Link!" She looked down at him, hoping to at least see some look of relief on his face.

Instead, Link was glaring at the open door, teeth barred.

"Link?"

"W-what is this?" he scowled. "Where's Ruto?"

CHAPTER 26

THE EVIL WITHIN

Link grit his teeth, propping himself up. Navi kept telling him not to push himself, but Link could barely even hear her. He half limped, half crawled, over to his sword and shield, one hand holding tight to his broken leg. Once he had his shield on his back, and his sword in his hand, he used the blade like a cane, staggering back to the open door.

"You are *seriously* injured Link," Navi warned. "*Please* take a break."

Link stood in the doorway, looking into the dark. "Shut up."

Navi froze.

"I took a break, and it made me late," Link glared at her, one eye stuck shut. "I could've stopped her..." He turned back to the floor. "So I'm going!"

He entered the dark chamber, and the door slammed shut behind him, cutting him off from Navi.

Link pounded on the door, trying to pry it open. Not that it was a *slight* opening, he took his shield and threw it at the door.

AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA

Link slumped to the ground, head pounding, lungs bursting.

You're always going to be... just a little too late.

Shut up! SHUT UP!

But don't blame her for that... You were the one that gave in...

You were the one giving up.

I didn't give up... I'm just tired.

Does that matter?

Of course it matters! I can't-- I can't keep moving forever.

Ruto did. Darunia fought to his dying breath. Even in death Saria was still fighting.

I'm not giving up... But I can't feel my legs.

Excuses.

Link pounded his fist on the ground. "It's not an excuse!!!" He held his head, leaning back against the wall beside the door.

Prove it.

A white fog crept out of the floor. The chamber glowed faintly,

and the dim lights grew brighter as the fog became thicker. It was already hard to see, but the fog and lights made it hard to see more than a few feet in front of him.

Then he felt water leaking out from under the door.

The room is flooding. Link pressed his hand to the door. *Navi...*

Link jerked back away from it. There was no wall around the door anymore. Instead the door stood alone, in a void of fog and water.

You have more pressing concerns.

Link's attention was drawn to the center of the room. The fog parted, or at least dissipated enough to see through. And in the center of the chamber was a single tree, with a figure standing under it.

Get up.

The figure walked towards him, drawing his sword.

Link found his vision clearing, his wounds began to heal.

~~Get up.~~

The figure continued closing in on Link, and Link could almost make out the figure's face.

~~Get up!~~

Link could feel his legs again, but kept his eyes on the figure as he reached for his sword.

~~Get up!!~~

Suddenly the figure stabbed forward, his sword's blade barely missing Link as he pushed himself sideways to dodge. He pushed the figure's blade away and finally saw his face clearly.

It was Link, but with ashy skin, black hair and black clothes. It was like a twisted shadow.

~~"Get up!!!"~~

Dark Link bashed Link's face with the butt of his sword. Link hit the ground but rolled backwards, landing with one knee on the ground. He held his sword tight in front of him.

"What is this?!" Link hissed. "What are you?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Dark Link smiled. **"I'm the better version of you. The version that doesn't pity himself. The version that was strong enough to stop the deaths of your friends."**

"I'm plenty strong!" Link growled. His leg wasn't broken anymore, and he could see clearly now.

"You say that," Dark Link taunted. **"But even though you've been an adult for some time, you still haven't put this body to good use."**

Dark Link darted forward, and Link threw up his sword to block,

but Dark Link kicked Link in the stomach before hitting him in the side of the head. Link fell face first in the water. Before Dark Link could attack again though, Link kicked Dark Link's feet out from under him.

With Dark Link off balance, Link took this chance to run back to get his shield.

He didn't make it far before suddenly Dark Link appeared in front of him, coming out of the water. "**Running away?**"

Link slashed but all Dark Link had to do was step back.

"**Just like when you took your break?**" Link roared in anger and slashed again. "**Isn't that why you're late here?**" Link stabbed twice, but Dark Link just dodged to the side. "**Or like how you let Darunia take on that dragon alone?**" This time Link found an opening, but like water Dark Link simply melted away.

"**That's how he died right? You abandoned him.**" Dark Link pushed Link from behind, then disappeared again. "**How about Saria?**" Dark Link struck again, melting away before Link could counter. Link was spinning place, trying to find him. "**You just walked away, and now she's dead.**"

"**SHUT UP!!**" Link grabbed Dark Link by the throat and stabbed him in the gut.

But Dark Link only smiled. Again he melted into the ground, unfazed by the attack. His laughter came from everywhere all at once, faint and haunting.

"**SHOW YOURSELF!**" Link kicked up the water in anger, spinning around again as he tried to find Dark Link. "**Stop HIDING!!**"

Suddenly he felt something kick him, and his leg snapped. He spun, lashing out, but something grabbed his arm, twisting it until he was forced to let go of his sword. Then he was on his back again, floating in the water with blood dripping from his head.

"**Why aren't you fighting back?**" Dark Link asked.

"...am... fighting back..." Link put his good arm under him to stand up, but Dark Link picked up Link's sword... and stabbed him.

Link gasped in pain, but he couldn't move. Dark Link sat on the hilt of the Master Sword, balancing as he looked down at Link. "**No... you've fought worse than me... You could beat yourself in a matter of seconds. You know your weaknesses... you have so many of them.**"

"Get... off... of me..."

"**I think I know why you can't beat me,**" Dark Link smiled. "**I think... You're just scared.**"

Link's face twisted into pure rage. "Scared? You think... I'm

scared!?"

He gripped the blade of the sword, cutting his hand, and pulled himself through it, glaring up at his shadow. "You have *no* idea... do you?"

Dark Link dropped his smile, looking unimpressed. Link threw a punch to knock him off, and Dark Link disappeared again, but at least he was off. Link pulled out the Master Sword from his gut, rolling over onto his knees and letting the blade fall to the ground.

"You make me sick."

"Isn't that, what it always boils down to?" Link grunted. "In every story ever, if the hero can't do his job... it's because he's scared..." He coughed up blood, and he felt his whole body shaking. "But this time... This time you're *wrong*..."

As much as it hurt, as much as it made his limbs burn, Link stood up, staring Dark Link in the eye.

"I'm not *scared*," he threw a weak punch, gritting his teeth. "I'm *ten*!" He threw another punch, but Dark Link just kept dodging. "My entire childhood got *ripped away from me*!"

Dark Link sneered, backing away. Link could barely stand, yet even as he couldn't feel his arms he fought.

"I'm not *scared*!" Link kicked out, barely missing Dark Link. "I'm *Hylian*! I was lied to about *who I am my whole life*!!"

Link threw a punch, leading Dark Link right into a kick to the knees. Before Dark Link could melt away again, Link punched him in the face, knocking him back.

"I'm not *SCARED*! I'm *TIRED*!!" Link grabbed Dark Link by the face and stole his sword. "I've been running around for *who* knows *how* long, and if I stop for a *SECOND*, someone *DIES*!!"

He slashed threw Dark Link, pushing him to the ground. Link drove the sword down through Dark Link's chest.

"So *I'm not SCARED*!" He pushed the sword in deeper as Dark Link stared blankly upwards.

Link fell backwards, sitting on the dry ground. The fog was gone, the lights were gone, the water was gone, it was only his shadow that remained.

"I'm not scared," Link hissed, holding the open wound in his gut as blood spilled over his arms. "... I'm just *royally* pissed off..."

He watched as Dark Link faded into the ground, leaving nothing but a black stain on the stone tile.

As he lay back against the wall beside the door he came from, he held the potion the old scientist had given him. *This was what it was for,*

right? He remembered it as soon as he saw the face of his shadow... but...
This was personal...

The potion fell from his hand and clattered to the ground.

"I don't need... some magic spell," Link sighed. "I just need... to close my eyes... for a minute..."

CHAPTER 27

SAGE OF WATER

Link... You're going to be okay... just hang in there!

...

...

[[[...]]]...

Link opened his eyes, the sound of running water all around him. But he wasn't in the water temple anymore, he was back in the Sacred Realm, the ring of waterfalls around the central platform quietly draining from the never ending source of water far above him in the black void of the impossible place.

"Link..."

As soon as he heard her voice he shut his eyes again. He didn't want to see her... not like this...

But he stood nonetheless, in the center of the platform. The Triforce on the ground glowed faintly, and Link opened his eyes again to see Princess Ruto before him.

She hovered over the insignia of the Water Temple, six drops of water in a circle with the points of each pointing inward. Her arms were at her sides, her fins softly wavering despite the lack of wind. Yet Link felt cold anyway.

"I'm sorry," Link choked.

"I would have expected no less from the man I chose to be my husband," Ruto said, a soft smile on her face. "Zora's Domain and it's people will eventually return to their original state."

"As a reward... I grant my eternal love to you," she winked awkwardly, trying to lighten the mood.

In spite of himself, Link smiled anyway, although only briefly.

"Well, that's what I want to say," Ruto mumbled, already going back on word like she always did. "But I don't think I can offer that now..."

Link made a move to step forward. "Ruto, I--"

"I have to guard the Water Temple as the Sage of Water," Ruto said defiantly. "And you... You're searching for the princess, Zelda?"

"You know?" Link asked.

"Hah! You can't hide anything from me!"

"Do you know where she is?"

Ruto shook her head. "Princess Zelda... She's alive. I can sense it... so don't be discouraged." She held out her hand, as the Sages before her had done. "I can tell that nothing will stop you in your quest for justice and peace."

Link lowered his gaze, wondering if she knew about what he was fighting in his head. He wondered if she knew how much he *didn't* want to be doing this... *Can you see it? Passed the expression on my face? Can I... Can I just tell her?*

The Water Medallion appeared in her hand, and floated towards him through the air. "You must take this Medallion, and add my power to yours."

Link held his hand out, letting the Medallion spin above his palm. Then he looked up at Ruto. "Hey..." he knew he had to say something, but he knew his time was limited. He could already feel the Sacred Realm trying to return him, but he wasn't sure what he needed to say.

Just say SOMETHING! Link felt his eyes sting as he looked at her, and probably the most childish thing he could say in that moment came out of his mouth.

"... Are you okay?"

But, Ruto smiled at him anyway. She nodded, and everything started to go white. Soon Link's vision was gone again as the Sacred Realm pushed him away...

If you see Sheik, please give him my thanks, OK?

As the water returned to Lake Hylia, the sun set over the distant mountains, casting an orange glow of Hyrule. There was a shift in the wind, a calmer air. Four of the Six Sages had been awakened, more than half of Ganondorf's darkness had been fought, and the people could feel it, even if they didn't fully understand it.

As the sun was setting, the people of Hyrule knew they would sleep a little easier that night.

"As the water rises, the evil is vanishing from the lake," Sheik said to himself, standing alone on a little island in the middle of Lake Hylia, proud of what Link was able to accomplish. "Link, you did it!"

"Well this is the first time I've gotten the drop on *you*."

Sheik nearly jumped, but he'd spent too much time training to allow his surprise to show. Instead he simply continued looking out at the

lake as Link came to stand beside him.

"Ruto told me to thank you for her," Link said, crossing his arms.

"Ruto wanted to thank me?" Sheik chuckled. "I see... We have to return peace to Hyrule for her sake too. Don't we?"

"Were we not already?" Link huffed, annoyed at Sheik's selfishness. He took a deep breath, watching the waters. "But I suppose I should thank you too, for trying at least... You got her out of the ice, gave her more time..." He sighed, not sure what else to say.

"Look at that, Link..." Sheik turned in place slightly, looking at everything all at once. "Together, you and Princess Ruto destroyed the evil monster. Once again, the lake is filled with pure water. All is as it was here."

"No," Link said sadly. "Even with Ruto awakened as the Sage, we're still missing someone else... I didn't get a choice..."

He heard footsteps behind him, and knew that Sheik had left. The place beside him was empty now...

But as he turned around...

Link almost dropped to his knees as Navi came flying towards him. She nuzzled into his neck and he patted her head with his finger, careful not to crumpled her wings as she fluttered.

"How did you find your way out!?" Link asked, holding her in his hands.

"You didn't think you get rid of me *that* easily, did you?" Navi laughed, glowing brightly. "Your return point! Didn't you call me back here?"

"I thought it only worked with the magic I was given," Link said. "Like it's a connection between myself and return point. I didn't think it would work."

"So..." Navi looked up at the sky. "I guess... if there were every anyone else who could use Farore's Wind..."

Link turned back around and sat at the water's edge, sitting Navi back on his shoulder. *Someone's looking out...*

Together they watched the sunset, feeling the lighter wind as day turned to night.

I'll do better now, I promise. I'm sorry I've been beating myself up over all this....

He looked at the happy look on Navi's face.

But thank you...

Link tucked up his knees, wrapping his arms around his legs.

Thanks for watching out...

Thanks for being there.

CHAPTER 28

NOCTURNE OF SHADOW

"So you've come back safe and sound," the old scientist mused. His leather chair squeaked as he sat down, lacing his fingers together. "The lake has returned to normal, and I assume you had something to do with that?"

"Yeah," Link nodded.

"I trust my potion aided you well?" the old man raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"Ah, yeah," Link chuckled.

The old man laughed, cackling like a fool. "It was just sugar and some red cocoa powder!"

There never has been, and there never will be, a moment where Link was more done with anything than this moment right now. He walked back to the door.

"Hold it hold on," the old man laughed, settling back down. "I knew you wouldn't need it... I had every ounce of faith that these struggles you were going through could be dealt with, and I know that temple. I knew it would make you face them."

Link narrowed his eyes. "So you knew about--"

"Ahp! Don't tell me anything..." the old man shook his head slowly and leaned back in his chair. "I've studied ancient texts of that place, and they all spoke of a chamber within that would force you to confront the worst of yourself. I believed you were strong enough to do so, but... I worried you would doubt *yourself*."

"So you gave me a fake potion, just in case," Link realized. "Knowing I'd win in the end anyway."

The old man nodded. "Yup! So whatever trials you have left to face, know that you can face them with a lighter burden."

Link hung his head, smiling. "Thank you," he bowed. "I don't exactly have--"

"Just, save Hyrule," the old man told him. "Go."

Link nodded, and stepped outside, closing the door to the laboratory behind him. Epona was there waiting for him, ready to get moving again. She shoved him with her head.

"Why're you acting weird?" Link asked, petting her.

Epona whinnied, kicking into the air a bit. She landed and huffed, shaking her head, and pacing.

Looking around, Link couldn't see anything wrong. "Something's spooked her..."

Navi floated into the air, but the rocky hills around Lake Hylia blocked a lot of things from view. "I don't see much, but the higher I get the more I do sense something... odd."

Link nodded and hopped up onto the horse. "I say we head back to the Temple of Time, try and figure out where the next Sage will be."

Link looked on in horror as smoke rose from the rocky foothills of Death Mountain. After a bit of traveling through Hyrule field they could smell the smoke on the wind... A bit further and they could see it...

But as he raced towards the town, more smoke seemed to billow out. He could see the fires now, and when they reached the stairs to the town, where Epona would go no further, Link leapt off and rushed into town, drawing his sword and shield.

"What *happened* here!?" Navi exclaimed.

Link covered his face as he walked through the streets, looking for any sign of people. He couldn't find anyone, and he didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. They either all got out alive, or...

He grit his teeth, circling flaming buildings, ducking smoke that billowed from windows, and called out for survivors.

None answered, but when he made it to the back of the town, he finally found *someone*... It just wasn't who he expected.

"Sheik!" Link grunted, making his way up to him while still keeping an eye out. "What's going on here?"

Sheik glared down at a well beside the town's back wall. "Go back, Link," he said sternly.

"Not a chance."

Suddenly the wooden rig over the well snapped, and some unseen force threw it across town into a building. The house collapsed, but then the same invisible entity grabbed Sheik.

"What!?" Link gasped.

Sheik was tossed around like a rag doll until finally being thrown aside. He hit the ground, seriously wounded. Link ran to his side, but as he watched a dark shadow crept over the town. There was nothing above to

cast it, and it move sporadically.

"What are you doing?" Navi hissed.

Link held his shield in front of him, preparing to strike as he watched the shadow draw nearer. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't going to get passed him. Sheik reached out to stop him, wanting to pull him aside before he was hurt.

But it charged him, and he was thrown back as easily as Sheik had been.

"... Close, but not yet... I guess I'm a little early."

"What? Who are you? What's going on?"

"I'll come back later when this is over."

"That... doesn't make much sense."

"It will later. See you then."

Link grunted, reaching out to whoever that voice belonged to.

"Looks like you're coming around..."

Sheik was sitting over him, Navi fluttering around his head. She finally sat down on Link's chest. "Wake up!" she told him.

"Sorry," Link muttered, sitting up. "Really thought I had that."

He looked around. It wasn't quite morning yet, the sun was still behind the mountains, but a light rain had started putting out the fires.

"Did everyone make it out okay?" Link asked. "Where did they go?"

Sheik looked up at Death Mountain. "A knight brought them to stay with the Gorons... They'll be okay, for now."

Jorol, Link thought. "So what do we do about that monster?" Link got up slowly, the muscles in his leg twitching. "Where did it go?"

Sheik stared at the ground. "Another one of Ganondorf's demons... It was sealed in the Shadow temple, but it found a way out..." He looked up at Link. "Its seal broke, and it's escaped into the world... but..."

"But?" Link raised an eyebrow, waiting for Sheik to say what was on his mind.

"Impa, the leader of this village, had gone to the Shadow Temple a long time ago, to keep the seal from breaking. If it's escaped... she will be in danger without help!" He looked at himself, his wounds that would keep him from being of any use.

"Impa's alive!?" Link exclaimed. "Has... she been in the Shadow Temple this whole time...?"

Sheik glanced away, not wanting to think about what trouble her

old friend has gotten into.

"I'll take care of it," Link told him. "I'll go and find her."

"Link," Sheik said. "Impa is one of the six Sages. You need to save her. There is an entrance to the Shadow Temple beneath the graveyard behind this village."

Link nodded and started to leave.

"Link," Sheik said solemnly. "I know you do not understand right now what they are for, and I know you have little time to move, but I must play my part. If you would allow me..."

Sheik pulled out his harp, and -- still sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall -- he played a few notes. "This is the melody that will draw you into the infinite darkness that absorbs even time... Listen to this, the Nocturne of Shadow."

It was a haunting tune, something that sent a chill down Link's spine. He didn't know how Sheik managed to make the Harp sound like that, echoing and ancient, but he could hear the magic in it. He kept dismissing these songs as something that didn't really matter, things that interrupted his time, but listening to this one, he started to hear things he hadn't before.

Maybe I just hadn't been paying attention, Link thought as he listened. *Or maybe I just didn't want to hear it...* Faintly, behind the wailing notes that Sheik now played, Link could hear the beating drums of the Bolero of Fire, the calm strumming of the Serenade of water, the whistling tune of Saria's Song, and even the echoes of the Song of Time.

Here, it was all so faint, on the wicked song of the Nocturne of Shadow truly standing out, but it made him realize what it was all for. It was the song of each Sage, working in unison.

When they say they are adding their power to mine... Link hadn't even realized he'd taken out his ocarina.

So you can finally hear it, Sheik thought. He stopped playing, setting the harp on the ground beside him. "Let me take care of the village," he told Link. "I'm counting on you, Link!"

Link nodded. "Don't worry," he promised. "I won't screw up this time."

He headed off to the graveyard, and Sheik tried to stand. As he watched Link hurry off, he held his chest, feeling his heart pounding. *I'm worse off than I thought I was...*

Sheik removed the lower part of his mask, spitting blood at the ground. *That's fine... right?* He picked up his harp and put his mask back on. *I just have to... hold out a little while longer...*

CHAPTER 29

DEAD HAND, DEAD END

Wanted for the murder of 17 Hylians, 17 Gorons, and 17 Zora, Mr. Nij had finally been brought to justice. But the then King of Hyrule dealt with matters such as these his own way. In the catacombs beneath the graveyard, he had constructed what he so bluntly called "the Criminal Reprimand Chamber."

He wanted criminals like this to be buried where they wouldn't be found. He wanted troubles like this to be forgotten, with no proper grave to mark their lives. They would be left behind, and that was that. And it was here, in this chamber, where Mr. Nij was bolted to a large wooden X.

"Any last requests?" the King of Hyrule snarled.

Mr. Nij smiled. "Just, bury me with my hands intact."

Mr. Nij's own hands had long since been replaced with some poor creature's claws. He'd always been a fan of body modification. No, the hands he referred to here, were the hands of his victims. It was a sick obsession of his, collecting the hands of the dead, and it was what earned him the nickname... Dead Hand.

"I did take so much care of them," Mr. Nij laughed. "I have many hands."

The King turned his back to the criminal. "Kill him."

As the King made his exit, a knight carried out the kill order. They never left marks on the murderers, knowing most of the ones who ended up down here enjoyed it, so they made do with simply snapping their necks.

Mr. Nij fell limp, and they pulled him off the X, bringing him to the dumping room. The knights that carried him wore masks, so they would not contract whatever diseases festered here, but it helped with the smell as well.

They locked the door, leaving him in the rotten darkness.

...

But Mr. Nij did not stay dead.

"Crack, crack, crack," Mr. Nij chuckled, moving his head back into place. "Mr. King you will be next." He clawed his way to the door, petting it, waiting. "One day you will come again, to deliver another one like me. I can wait."

He grinned maliciously... but none ever came.

His neck always hurt, and he kept twisting and stretching it, trying to ease the pain. But nothing worked. "Stretch, stretch, stretch." And as time went on, he grew hungry. He gorged himself on the dead, feeding himself with their crippled meat. "Bite, bite, bite." As he ate, he always made sure to leave the hands behind, stretching and playing with the arms, keeping them safe in his corner. "Safe, safe, safe."

His body decayed, rotting from the inside, and his skin grew pale from lack of sun. But he refused to die, still waiting.

Little did he know however, that he would be the King's final criminal executed here. There would be no one coming back for him, no one to let him escape.

He waited and waited, growing tired and angry.

And then came the flood.

Something gave way above him, and water flooded the room.

He drowned in that flood, and the water bloated his decayed form. It washed away the dirt and the grime, and made the rest of the corpses soggy. They squished beneath him as he shifted, the water draining through the pit of the dead.

But something clung to him. Some scrap of consciousness refused to leave. Some evil curse forced him to remain, ever wanting, ever hungry, ever caring about his obsession.

"One day," Mr. Nij said in a voice no longer his, no longer remembering his name. "I will add your hands to my collection."

He couldn't remember the King, or that it was the King who was his target, but that didn't matter to him. He had no concept of the amount of time that had passed by now, which had been many... many years...

All that mattered, was revenge.

It no longer mattered who it was taken out on.

—

"I don't like this place," Navi hovered close to Link, head on a constant swivel.

It was nothing but long hallways, every wall lined with graves marked by skulls embedded into the stone. Link told himself the skulls were stone as well, but he didn't want to take a closer look to confirm.

"What are the odds one of those graves will just, crack open, or something?" Link stayed to the center of the hallway as best he could, keeping his shield ready.

The path kept splitting up, going in opposite directions. In some cases the paths ended or went deeper underground, but it was around the corners that Link had the most trouble with. Every time he turned around there were more skulltulas dropping down on him. Webs blocked his way and caught at his boots, and the hissing in his ears was driving him mad.

The deeper they went though, the more like a Temple it actually seemed to be. Pillars and structures changed to be more regal, if not still ominous. There were less graves in the walls, but instead there were faint drawings that had worn off with time. Skeletons in armor stood guard along the wider halls, and they almost appeared to be watching as Link and Navi made their way deeper and deeper.

And finally they came to a door. Above the trim was the faded marking of Sage of Shadow.

"Impa's through there," Link said.

"She's alive," Navi said. "She *has* to be!"

The door creaked open, and Navi hovered behind Link's shoulder as they entered. Flickering torches sat burning their last embers in a few places around the walls, but it was enough light to see what stood at the other side of the room.

In the center of the room was a large wooden **X**, chains dangling from the tops of the planks. Blood was dried to the floor beneath it, and the whole thing was covered in rust. But just that would've been horrible on it's own...

All around the room were different kinds of weapons and tools Link had never seen before, each deadlier than the last. Prison cells were placed near the entrance to the room, and heaps of rubble covered large sections of the floor. They couldn't tell what the rubble was, but much of looked like it used to be something organic.

"This isn't a temple," Link realized. "This isn't even a crypt... This is hell."

"Which way do we go?" Navi asked.

There was a path leading to the right, and a door to the left. Neither option looked like the right one, nor did they look particularly pleasant, but there was a trail of dried blood leading to the right. There was no telling how old it was, and even as he watched there were rats trying to scap it off the ground with their tongues.

"I'm going to make... a really bad decision," Link started for the path on the right.

Navi wanted nothing more than to turn around and leave this place far behind them, but she knew that wasn't an option. They had to do this,

no matter what that meant, so she bit her tongue and stayed with Link as he made it to the end of path.

There he was faced with a door that was boarded up. The wood was rotten, but the lock seemed almost new. And above the door, was another mark of the Shadow Sage.

Link jiggled the door handle. "Locked."

"Oh well, time to go back the way we came," Navi told him. "No use in trying when the door's just locked, right?"

Link shook his head. "This is the door with the marking," he took out his shield. "Besides, I've gotten pretty good at doing this."

He bashed his shield into the door handle, breaking it clean off. The brass clattered to the ground, and Link pushed against the door. It got stuck on something, but he managed to move it enough to enter the room.

There was no light, but Navi was able to glow bright enough to at least see if anything was in front of them... There wasn't.

The ground squished under his feet and it felt sticky. Worse than that though was the smell, rancid and putrid and ugly.

"I have... many... hands..."

The door slammed shut behind Link, trapping them in the darkness, and Link felt something crawling up his leg. He drew his sword and slashed at it, the gem on the hilt lighting up the ground.

... It was nothing but bodies... severed limbs reaching up to grab him...

"Stretch..."

Link held his breath as he felt something shuffling towards him.

"... Stretch..."

From out of the darkness, barely illuminated by Navi's light... a face appeared. Long and squinting, impossibly large and swollen, its jaw detached and hanging...

"... Stretch!"

It laughed, mouth hanging open.

Navi clutched Link's shoulder as more limbs grabbed up at him. He tried to swat them away, tumbling over the discarded deceased beneath him. They grabbed at his sword, his shield, his legs and arms.

"Link!" Navi shouted, trying to help but only managing to float frantically beyond the reach of the arms. Her light flickered with her heartbeat, her wings flapping so fast they buzzed. "Link what do I do!?"

A rotten polished hand had clamped over Link's mouth, and his arms were held behind his head. He was forced to the ground, struggling on his back. His shield lay on the ground beside him, his sword standing

upright, piercing a rib-cage.

The light from the sword shone on the monster before him, it's body plump and sloshing, it's neck long and broken, it's claws sharp and bloody. Its eyes were soulless, but it breathed heavily, anticipating it's next kill.

"Link!" Navi cried.

Link roared in anger, reaching behind him as best he could.

Dead Hand lowered it's head, reveling in the culmination of his years of waiting. "*Soooo loooong, I have waited,*" it chuckled, jaw twitching. "*You have... such nice... hands...*"

Link grit his teeth and pulled an arrow out of his quiver. With a flick of his wrist he sliced the arm of the hand holding his own arm down. Dead Hand jerked back, startled, but he didn't back up far enough.

Driving the arrow into Dead Hand's empty eye socket, Link freed himself from the zombie limbs and dove to retrieve his sword. Dead hand swatted the arrow away and slashed at Link's side, tearing through his side.

Link pushed back, cutting through the bloated lower body of the beast. No blood, no guts, only rot came spilling out.

As the long fingers of the polished hands reached for him, Dead Hand made his final move.

He stretched his neck forward to eat Link whole, and as the hands began to pin Link down again, Link stabbed through Dead Hand's open mouth. The blade slipped through, and pierced the demon's skull.

For a moment, everything froze. The hands twitched, and Dead Hands' claws lowered...

...

But Dead Hand did not stay dead.

He laughed, arms twitching as if he just couldn't let go of this fight. No matter what happened to his body, he would finish what he... what he... well he couldn't remember... but this pain... This boy was responsible for his pain! He'd- he'd...

"*Bite... Bite... Bite...*"

Dead Hand slowly moved towards Link, and Link sliced upward.

As he pulled his sword from Dead Hands' head, the grotesque body slumped to the ground along with the many hands he'd cared so much for.

"Another of Ganon's demons?" Navi asked, shaking as she returned to Link.

"No," Link growled. "This place... this isn't Ganon's doing... this was here long before him..."

He tried the door and to great relief it opened.

But before he could leave, there was one more thing he had to do. Standing just outside the room of the dead, he summoned Din's Fire and sent a ball of flames to burn up whatever remained of that monster.

Then he shut the door, and walked away.

...

Yet, amongst the fires, Mr. Nij laughed. Even as his body burned, he laughed. Even as his flesh melted away, he laughed. Even as his liquified organs spilled out of him, he laughed. Even as his bones, ribs, and claws clattered to the ground, he laughed.

Mr. Nij, known in the early days of New Hyrule as the Criminal "Dead Hands," laughed until his skull was reduced to ash.

There would be a soul to haunt that place, if Mr. Nij had had a soul to leave behind.

CHAPTER 30

SAGE OF SHADOW

Keese, Skulltulas, pits of acid, torture chambers, zombies... Every turn Link made he felt he found something worse and worse. But it was in the last chamber where he started accepting Impa's fate.

He hadn't been to find any trace of her this whole time, and now there was only door left, the Triforce embossed on the front, with the symbol of the Sage of Shadow above it. Golden chains hung from the trim, and an ancient lock lay on the ground to the side of it. Someone had gone in... and hadn't come back out.

"Is she in there?" Navi asked.

Link drew his sword and pulled open the door. "She better be."

The chamber he stepped into was pitch black, and as such he misjudged his first step. Assuming there was solid ground beyond the door, he fell through the pit and was sent tumbling down the deep hole. Grasping at the walls didn't help him slow down, but at least he was able to correct himself. Looking down, he could see a large tanned surface.

No way I can dodge that, Link grit his teeth. Tucking in his knees, he prepared to roll using the momentum of the fall.

When he actually hit the ground though, he bounced.

It was some kind of leather, stretched across a large circular platform. It was a massive drum, sitting in a pit of acid, at the bottom of a rocky chamber.

"W... what?" Link was lost, and the trippy glow of the lights cast by the glowing acid didn't help. It looked like skeletal shadows dancing around the walls, and the hissing almost sounded like laughing.

Then the shadows over took a large part of the wall. Lights flashed near the base of the wall above the acid, making faces that melted away and reformed over and over. And out of that large shadow, appeared two hands each bigger than Link's whole body.

A figure followed, dangling upside down from the ceiling, it's arms detached from it's hands at the wrists. It's flesh was opaque, showing the obsidian muscles underneath. As for it's head, it was replaced with a flower, the center of which being a large glowing eye.

The hissing that Link thought was laughing, *was* laughing, and it was coming from this... *thing*.

"I don't know what you are," Link drew his sword and shield. "But you end here."

The severed hands clapped in the air, then slammed down onto the surface of the drum. It sent Link flying upward, and as he landed again the hands repeated their movements. They beat the drum in rhythm, not giving Link a chance to stand up. It wouldn't let Link get close enough, always pushing him away, and even if Link *did* get close, they would just grab him and throw him at the ground.

Okay a sword won't cut it this time, Link spat, sheathing his sword before he lost it. *Fine*.

He pulled out his bow and arrows again, aiming for the eye of the monster...

When suddenly the whole thing disappeared.

The beat kept going, the hands still moving at random, but the body of the beast was gone! Link spun around in the air, trying to find where it went, all the while the giant hands swatting him around.

He couldn't get a good shot in, every arrow either fell from his hand or missed it's mark. Navi couldn't even help, as she held tight to Link since the hands would've crushed her already.

What do I do!? Link swore this thing was cheating somehow. Every time he lost sight of one of the hands it would hit him from behind, and he couldn't aim for the body since he couldn't see it anymore! *This is impossible!*

"Link!" Navi screamed as they flew up into the air again. "Think of something!"

"I'm trying!" Link grunted, hitting the ground.

The drum sent them flying back up before he could find his footing and Link ended up upside down as well. He flipped back upright before he landed, but he got an idea.

Not sure if it was just something stupid because all his blood suddenly rushed to his head, but it was the only thing he could think of.

Link pulled out his ocarina. "You like music!?" he shouted. "Well I picked this one up not too long ago."

He hit the ground and bounced back up, and while he was in the air again, he started playing the Nocturne of Shadow. The beat of drum went right in rhythm with his song, and for a moment Link felt like he was floating. He stayed in the air for a little longer than he had been before coming back down.

The hands no longer attacked him, now only focused on the music. And Link found that when he landed this time, on the edge of the drum, he

wasn't thrown up again. He stood and played his song, and the demon played with him. The shadows dancing to the music, and the lights sparking in beat with the drum.

The haunting wailing of the notes echoed eerily through the cavern chamber, and at last the demon showed himself.

Link brought the song to a close, and the demon clapped. Then he lowered himself, hovering over Link. For a moment, Link thought it would crush him... but instead it moved away slightly. It was only looking him over.

"... It has been a long time since one could play music such as that," the demon spoke. *"I know that instrument, and the ones who played it long ago. Though it was recently when that song was played last."*

Recently, Link thought. "Impa, of the Sheikah? Was she here?"

The demon nodded. *"I ferried her across... to the Other Side."*

I don't like how you said that... Link stood his ground. "May I speak with her? I need her help."

"You speak of Ganondorf's magic, this is what you face." The demon floated upwards. *"I find you worthy, hero, but the emissary's time has passed for now. Though you will speak to her as I know you have spoken to others who do not abide by my ruling."*

"You're ruling?" Link asked.

The demon laughed. *"I am the great Bongo Bongo! Watchman over Death!"*

Link paled, not because he was afraid... after all he'd seen and all he'd faced the sight of this demon was no worse than any other... No, he was angry that once again someone he'd needed to save had died...

"Must I defeat you?" Link asked, his voice quiet in his own ears. "Is that how I speak to her? Each time I needed to save the Sages, there was always one of Ganondorf's monsters in my way." Link raised his sword to the demon Bongo Bongo. "Do I need to defeat you?"

"... No," Bongo Bongo stated. *"I said I find you worthy. As the Sages do not abide by my ruling, I do not abide by Ganondorf's, no matter what magic he may use to control me."* He moved his hands to the sides and opened a portal of darkness. *"Consider this... a Hero's trial, a final test. You have passed."*

Link stood before the portal. "How do I know this isn't a trap?" He looked up at the demon. "How do I know his magic doesn't control you still?"

"You misunderstand," Bongo Bongo laughed. *"This door... it is*

not for you."

As he watched, in the distance in the darkness, Impa walked towards him. She soon stepped out of the portal, and stood over Link.

Crossing her arms with that usual disapproving stance of hers... she smiled down at him. "The boy with the noble Zelda's ocarina... As I expected, you have come."

"Impa," Link gasped.

"I am Impa," Impa nodded. "One of the Sheikah. I am Princess Zelda's caretaker, and I am also the Sage who guards the Shadow Temple." She looked up at Bongo Bongo before turning back to Link.

"What happened?" Link asked. "What happened when I was gone?"

"We Sheikah have served the royalty of Hyrule from generation to generation as attendants. However... On that day seven years ago, Ganondorf suddenly attacked... and Hyrule Castle surrendered after a short time." She looked tired, sad, thinking about all the lives that were lost before the surrender. "Ganondorf's target was one of the keys to the Sacred Realm... the hidden treasure of the Royal Family... the Ocarina of Time... My duty bound me to take Zelda out of Ganondorf's reach. When last I saw you, as we made our escape from the castle, you were just a lad... Now I see that you have become a fine hero..."

"I know all this," Link said quietly. "But... what *happened*? Where's Zelda?"

"There's nothing to worry about..." Impa smiled again, though it was more faint this time. "The princess is safe now. Soon you'll meet Princess Zelda face-to-face, and she will explain everything... That is when we, the six Sages, will seal up the Evil King and return peace to Hyrule."

Link looked at the ground. "That leaves one more... The last Sage..."

"I have to stay here," Impa said. "You go to Princess Zelda's side and protect her on my behalf."

"To her side?" Link asked. "Do you know where she is?"

Impa held out her hand. "Now I put my power, which should be helpful to you, into this Medallion." Her medallion appeared in her hand, spinning slowly in the air.

For the first time with any of the Sages, Link was close enough to take it from her without it having to float through the air. And Impa took this opportunity to grab Link by the arm. He looked up at her.

She gave him a stern look, then let go. As she turned to leave back

into the portal of darkness, she looked over her shoulder and said one last thing.

"Please look out for the princess."

Then she was gone, fading into blackness as the portal closed.

Link nodded to himself, stepping back.

"You've been a given a great task," Bongo Bongo said solemnly.

"And now it is time for you to get moving, young hero."

Bongo Bongo raised a hand over Link, and darkness fell over him.

When Link opened his eyes he was standing on the platform overlooking the graveyard of Kakariko Village.

"I guess that's that," Link said, numb all over.

"Five down... One to go," Navi said.

"What was that last place?" Link asked, leaning on the wooden rail. "A far away desert?"

"Yeah," Navi nodded.

"That's... where Ganondorf came from... isn't it?"

"... Yeah."

"The home of our villain," Link hissed. "And the place of our final Sage..."

Rain still poured from the sky, though it had turned to day while Link and Navi were below ground. Lightning struck in the distance, and thunder rumbled over them. The fires of the village were gone, and the heavy air that weighed on the village had been lifted.

But that was still one more task they needed to complete before this was over.

"The home of our villain," Link said again. "... Gerudo Desert."

CHAPTER 31

BEFORE YOU GO...

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Malon patted Epona's mane.

Link sat against the fence of the corral, looking at the western skies. "I don't put her in danger, don't worry."

"Oh? Ah, I guess you've been through a lot too," Malon joked.

"Ha ha," Link laughed dryly.

Malon leaned on the fence beside him, watching the clouds. "I've always felt like Hyrule was a small world," she said. "But I've never been to see it."

"It's not *fun*," Link chuckled. "Definitely not now..."

"No," Malon disagreed. "I think things have changed since you've showed up. For the better, I mean."

Link shook his head. "I'm cleaning up my mess."

"I thought you were over this," Navi huffed, punching his neck. It didn't feel like anything more than a tap, but it sent the message.

"Did you show up just to be a downer?" Malon asked. She'd intended to be sarcastic, but...

"Yeah," Link answered seriously. "Sorry about borrowing Epona for a while, it made it easier to get around."

"... You're leaving her here," Malon nodded. "And going somewhere without her."

"I've been all over Hyrule," Link told her. "Somehow I managed to fix things, despite how often I've screwed up. But this final destination, before I can put this all to rest for good..."

"You'll make it back," Malon told him.

"That's what *I've* been saying," Navi scoffed.

Malon smiled. "I think your fairy is jealous, Link."

Navi's light flickered and her cheeks puffed out. Link patted her head to calm her down.

Moving away from the fence, Malon turned around and looked out at Death Mountain. "We could see the smoke from here. Was that you who fixed it?"

"The rain put out the fires," Link answered. "A... ah, friend, I guess, helped move the villagers. I just stopped it from happening again..."

"Okay, so trade has been frozen between us and the Zoras for a while," Malon continued. "Recently, yesterday, we got word from them that they're okay. Was *that* you?"

Link nodded.

"And when Death Mountain was acting weird," Malon said, glaring at him. "That stopped. Was *that* you?"

Link nodded.

"So whatever it is you're doing," Malon scolded. "I'm sure you'll make it back."

Link looked at the ground. "Yeah," he sighed.

"You were a lot happier when you were a kid," Malon huffed, crossing her arms. "I mean... a lot's happened, but still... You were awful quiet last time you were here too."

Link moved away from the fence, turning to face Death Mountain as well. "You have no idea..."

They were silent for a long time, watching the cloud ring over the mountain. Then Link suddenly backed away. "I should get going."

"The Gerudo Desert isn't close," Malon told him. "You could have just gone there with Epona then sent her back." She turned to him. "Do you have another way there?"

"I'll... figure it out," Link nodded.

"No," Malon decided. "Wait by the gate, I'll have a cart ready in a moment."

"That would--"

Navi elbowed him.

"... Yeah, okay."

Link nodded and walked back out of the ranch to the front gate. Since it was facing directly north he could see the Castle Town from here. The great stone wall rising around it... and the burning houses beyond it... and the evil black castle that hovered over it...

He'd gone through Hyrule piece by piece, destroying whatever spells Ganondorf had placed, and defeating his monsters... But that was the final piece. That was the dark spot he had yet to get rid of. And once he had... Ganondorf himself would be nothing more than a dark spot.

I don't need to fight myself anymore, Link reminded himself. *There are bigger concerns here.*

Wanting to believe he was passed the worst of it, it wasn't like having all this stuff thrown at him was any easier all of a sudden. Having faced it head on, he felt better about it, but the problem was still there. He still felt too young for this, too inexperienced.

He remembered the vision of skills he'd never learned that he'd gotten from one of the Great Fairies. It felt like cheating, like the world knew there was no way to justify him being in this role, and was giving him something he didn't earn.

Link made a fist, looking at his hand. *I guess I've paid for that help by now*, he thought. *But... is it on me to pay for the sins of Ganondorf's evil? When all is said and done... What does that mean for me?*

"Lost in thought again?" Navi asked, startling him.

"Yeah," Link nodded. "I thought, after dealing with the Water Temple I was over the worst of it, but seeing Impa reminded me, I'm..."

"The best there is for the job," Navi told him.

"How?" Link asked. "How could I possibly be the best--"

"How many people do you see running around right now?" Navi pointed to the very empty Hyrule Field. "Anyone else even *attempting* to try and stop him? And here you are, just moving from decrepit temple to decrepit temple. There's nothing you could do to save the lives of the Sages, but either way they're doing their jobs."

She hopped off his shoulder and crossed his arms. "And while it's *my* job to help you along the way, I can't keep picking you up every time you fall apart."

"That's why I don't *say* anything," Link rubbed his forehead, embarrassed. "It's not like I *like* feeling like a burden, or having to stress you out about this stuff... But I can't be the only one who thinks this is a little unfair."

Navi shook her head. "You're not... With the death of the Great Deku Tree... I don't think any of this is fair." She looked up at him, a mix of worry and determination on her face. "But this is the last time I'll say it: I'm right here next to you, you're not alone."

"I knew you've been through hell," Malon said, walking through the gate with a horse drawn cart in tow. "But... I guess I've been a little secluded all the way out here."

"One of the lucky ones, then," Link chuckled. "I'd have killed to just be working on a ranch while everyone else bothered with the big world problems."

Malon smiled. "You seem in brighter spirits," she noticed, stepping up beside him.

"I did a better job of cheering him up than you did," Navi grinned, flying up in her face.

"You *are* jealous," Malon booped Navi's tummy.

"Alright knock it off," Link laughed. He looked at the cart. "This'll

take us to the desert?"

"It'll get you close enough," Malon said, patting the horse. "Thanks for taking care of Epona, though. She deserves a rest."

Link nodded, getting up onto the cart.

"It knows the way, so just let it lead," Malon told him. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you," Link bowed. "For helping out."

Link started to take his leave, but...

"Before you go..." Malon took a few steps to catch up, stopping him. "You're a bit depressing sometimes, but, so is everyone nowadays."

"Sorry about that," Link chuckled nervously. "I don't mean to."

Malon smiled. "That being said, when you make it back from this... The ranch could always use another hired hand, if you've got nowhere else."

Link hesitated, no idea how to answer. Navi pulled on his ear, whispering harshly.

"Uh, yeah," he nodded, smiling down at Malon. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"Good," Malon slapped the back of the horse, sending the cart off to the desert. "Good luck!"

The cart shook and hopped as they went speeding off down the road.

CHAPTER 32

HIDDEN FORTRESS

Standing on the edge of Hyrule they could see the canyons that lead to the Gerudo's territory. It was far, but this was the horse's limit. The edge of Hyrule and back was all it could do, so Link hopped off and sent the horse back. From here he was on foot.

There was no grass here, just dirt, and there were too many rocks for horses to travel on anyway. The hills were steep, forcing Link to slide down most of them before just working his way around their bases. It would difficult to climb back up, but it seemed Hyrule was built pretty high up, at least from here everything was mostly downhill.

For a while, anyway. After a day of walking he finally reached those canyons where everything leveled out. Rock walls rose up around him, and the air was heavy. Sand made his eyes itchy, and the wind blew strong through the narrow paths of the canyon.

When at last the canyon opened up, he was met with the bridge into the edge of Gerudo territory, their flag clearly marked above it. Just beyond that bridge however, was a tent, an older man sitting outside of it.

"Hey, you!" the man grunted. "What are you doing all the way out here!?"

"I'm going to talk to the Gerudo," Link answered, his voice hoarse from the desert air.

"Need water?" the man asked.

Link nodded and the man stood, motioning for Link to follow. They entered the tent and the man took a seat, handing Link a glass bottle of water. Link cleared his throat and sat the bottle down.

"So why are you going to see the Gerudo?" the man asked.

"Depends," Link answered. "Are *you* Gerudo?"

The man laughed. "The *Gerudo* are a mostly female race of warriors." He looked down at himself. He wasn't exactly weak, but most of his muscle had turned to fat in his old age. "No, I'm no Gerudo. And you clearly haven't met one, or you wouldn't be coming here." He narrowed his eyes. "Or you *have* met one, and that's *exactly* why you're here."

Link, young and ignorant, didn't know what he meant. "I have met one," he said grimly, hand twitching. "Ganondorf."

The man paled. "You... yo-- uh..."

Link shook his head. "So what brings *you* here? Camping just inside their land?"

"I am a master Craftsman," the man answered. "We came and fixed the bridge there, but we were ambushed. Those Gerudo... They left us alone, but, all my workers are gone!" He slammed his fist down on a wood crate. "They said working as carpenters isn't cool, and they went to the Gerudo fortress to become thieves..."

"They went to work with the ones who attacked you?" Link asked, confused as to why anyone would do that. "That... doesn't make much sense..."

"They never were the brightest," the Craftsman admitted. "But... they were good people..." He looked up at Link. "If you're going to the fortress, would you mind finding out what my workers are doing over there?"

Link nodded, getting to his feet. "I'll see what I can do." He didn't want to make any promises at this point, knowing there were going to be things out of his control, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to try.

"Thank you," the Craftsman nodded. "That means a lot."

Link ducked out of the tent, thanking the man for the drink, then continued down the path. Eventually the rock walls gave way to stone brick, and a sign hung over the road. Another marker for the Gerudo people.

The second he crossed it, he heard shouting.

"Halt! Stay where you are!"

Link looked up and saw the warrior women standing on the ledges above him. They held spears and swords, and two of them dropped down, holding their weapons to his back.

Before he could even talk they'd knocked him out.

"Stupid kid!" they swore, throwing him into a pit. "Get in there and stay quiet!"

Link had only just regained consciousness before they tossed him in jail. He hit the ground hard, and the dirt didn't do much to cushion the fall.

Grunting in pain, he sat up and leaned against the wall, rubbing the back of his head. "So much for just talking," he muttered. "You still here Navi?"

Navi twinkled from under his hat, peeking out from the hem. "I had to stay quiet, but there wasn't much I could do to stop them."

"That's fine," Link told her. "Saved me the trouble of getting here myself... I mean if they're just gonna take me to their base... The only question is, how do I get out?"

Navi looked up at the hole they came through. "It's night..."

"So this was a way's away from where we were anyway," Link sighed. "Glad I didn't have to walk that whole way." He stood up, checking himself for any other injuries. For the most part, he was okay.

"So what do we do?" Navi asked.

Link tested the bricks in the wall. Shifting the sand a bit, the bricks were barely held in place. Most of them were so old and brittle that he could pull pieces right out of them.

"I'm guessing no one's been in here in a long time," Link noticed. "So I'm guessing it'll be a while before they realize what happened."

He started pulling bricks, making footholds. As he climbed he pulled more bricks out, dropping back down into the dirt. The hole at the top of the pit wasn't that high up to begin with, just out of reach without some other way to climb up. And with that problem solved, Link peeked out of the hole.

There was no one around, clearly they didn't expect him to escape so easily.

"Well surprise," Link spat, climbing out.

From here he could see almost the entire complex. There were a few flags waving in the breeze, and a handful of guards on patrol, but for the most part it was just sand and dirt. Everything looked old and bleached.

"This place is a lot older than most things in Hyrule," Link mumbled.

"I wonder why that is," Navi agreed.

"It almost looks like the buildings grew out of the rock itself." Link leaned over the wooden rail, looking down. "There's a platform to the side, and it's not too far."

"You gonna jump?" Navi scoffed. "You'll break your legs."

"I've fallen from higher," Link told her. He watched the guards, waiting for them to look the other way. It took a while, but there was an opening.

As quick as he could, he backed up and threw himself forward, kicking off the rail and launching himself to the platform. He rolled across the stone, skidding to a stop and going flat against the wall to hide in the

shadows.

It didn't sound like anyone was alerted to his movements, so he figured he was okay for now. To his side was an open doorway, and as it was the only way he could go, he peeked inside.

"A kitchen?" Navi whispered.

Link nodded. "Smells good actually," he admitted, refusing to hear his stomach growling. "Do you see anyone?"

Since the kitchen was at the bottom of a ramp leading from the door, and as Navi could get closer to the floor, she crept along the ground and leaned over the edge. There were two women standing in the kitchen, making food for the rest of their people. They seemed pretty preoccupied with that, but there was no way they could quickly get around them without making noise.

Navi flew back up to Link and explained the situation.

"Think you could distract them?" Link asked. "Fly around their heads and draw their attention while I circle around them to the door on the other side?"

"I could," Navi nodded. "But do you think they'd suspect that you got free?"

"I don't know, but I don't have any other ideas."

"Alright," Navi huffed, psyching herself up. "Move quickly."

She flew off towards the kitchen guards. "*HEY!*" She buzzed around their heads, making faces as her lights flickered. "*LISTEN!*"

Link hopped down behind them, staying low as the guards bickered back and forth.

"A fairy!?"

"They exist!?"

"Nabooru wasn't kidding!"

"We shouldn't have doubted her!"

"It's *adorable!*"

"Don't let it go!"

Instead of trying to swat her out of the air, the guards ended up just trying to catch her. Link hurried across the room, ducking behind the counters.

"I gotta go!" Navi said, trying to stay out of reach.

"Nooo!" one of the guards whined. "Are there more like you? Will you come back!?"

"Ah, uh, sure!" Navi smiled. "Yeah! Totally!" She watched as Link finally got out of sight. "But that'll have to be later! Bye!"

Navi zipped off, leaving the guards behind. They both wanted to

follow, but restrained themselves. One moment of weakness over a childhood fantasy was enough for today.

Link waited for Navi just around the corner, ready to keep moving as soon as possible. As soon as they were out of earshot, down the hall, they started moving slower.

"That went better than I'd hoped," Link sighed.

"Well they didn't try to cut me half," Navi nodded, tucked under his hat.

"Well, now that we can take a breath," Link stopped and stayed against a wall, keeping an eye out in both directions. "What's our plan?"

"Well, are we looking for their leader?" Navi asked.

"I don't know," Link sighed. "Considering they're Ganondorf's people, I don't exactly think they can be trusted... but if the next Sage is supposed to be here or at least related to this place..."

"Yeah... But, I guess in the meantime, we can look for those carpenters?" Navi suggested, peeking around the nearest door.

Working their way down the hall all they found were rooms full of guards or crates of supplies. The more he saw though, the more it looked like they didn't exactly belong here. The furniture didn't match the structure of the building, the crates were too new, and in most places where there were people there didn't seem to be a spec of dust.

It was like they moved everything in here just to mark it. The flags on the tops of the build weren't put in right, like they were built to be put into more modern constructions, and in some places inside they had put in doors, but they were also clearly something else...

"They're not suppose to be here," Link finally said aloud as they went deeper into the thieves base. "I think... I think they're planning to attack the rest of Hyrule. The survivors of Hyrule... Kakariko... Goron City... Zora's Domain... Kokiri Forest..." Link hung his head. "And Lon Lon Ranch is going to get hit first..."

"If they were planning this," Navi whispered. "Why didn't they attack seven years ago when Ganondorf took over?"

"I think you were wrong," Link decided. "When you pointed out to Hyrule Field and told me no one else was fighting... I think you were wrong... I think they are fighting, they just have homes to fight for and protect. They're not going out and saving the world, they're defending themselves and their people..."

Navi felt her heart sink. All this time, *both* of them sort of assumed the rest of Hyrule had just accepted their fate, and this was as bad as it got... but the fact that the Gerudo clearly weren't done, meant the Hylians,

Zora, and Gorons, *had* to have been fighting back this *whole* time...

His head felt heavy as he entered the lowest chamber of the Gerudo fortress.

"... Nothing here," Link sighed. After sneaking past all the guards, stealth-ing through the dungeon, and taking great care not to get caught, he was actually surprised it just dead ended like this.

"I've seen your fine work."

Link drew his sword, spinning and holding the tip of it to the face of the woman who had walked up behind him.

"To get past the guards here, you must have good thieving skills."

"Who are you?"

"I used to think that all men, except for the great Ganondorf, were useless..." She drew her own swords, lightly pushing Link's to the side as she stepped back. "But now that I've seen you, I don't think so anymore!"

She looked him over, judging whether to fight or not. When Link didn't move to attack, she put her swords away, deciding not to bother with it... for now. "The exalted Nabooru, our leader, put me in charge of this fortress."

"Nabooru?" Link asked, not lowering his own blade. "Who is that?"

"Nabooru is the second-in-command to the great Ganondorf, King of the Gerudo Thieves."

Link grit his teeth. "So she's just as much at fault here for all of this," he muttered to himself. "Where is she?"

"Her headquarters are in the Spirit Temple," the woman answered. "Which is at the end of the desert." She narrowed her eyes. "Say, you must want to become one of us, eh?"

Clearly you've misinterpreted my intentions, Link thought. *But hey, if it works.*

Link lowered his sword. "Not much left for me in Hyrule," he told her. "Then again, didn't have much to begin with, apparently."

"All right then!" the woman laughed. "You're in from now on!" She handed him a sort of tag on a wire, red with the mark of the Gerudo people. "Take this. With it, you will have free access to all areas of the fortress!"

Link felt dirty taking it, but it would allow him to get to where he was going. Deeper into the desert... to the Spirit Temple.

"From now on," the woman continued. "You're free to come and go as you please through the gate to the desert. You'll find the Spirit Temple, where the exalted Nabooru lives, out there in the desert."

"Thank you," Link bowed starting to move passed her. "One more thing... There was a band of carpenters that came this way. Any idea what happened to them?"

"Like you they came to join us," the woman answered, a sinister look on her face. "But, unlike you, they weren't worthy of acceptance. Like fish too weak, we threw them back out."

"Hmm," Link mumbled. "I guess that's that then. I'll tell Nabooru you said 'Hey'."

The woman waved goodbye before disappearing in a puff of smoke.

"I *really* need to figure out how to do that," Link sighed.

And with that he was off for the desert. Hoping it wasn't too far, he made his way out of the base, showing the tag only to the guards who tried to corner him. Finally he made it to the gate and convinced the guard stationed there to let him through.

When he stepped out to the other side though... He saw the endless desert expanding around him.

This base really was just their foothold in Hyrule... They come from much further away than I thought...

"I've always felt like Hyrule was a small world," he remembered Malon saying. "But I've never been to see it."

Link took his first steps into the vast desert. *It's a lot bigger than we thought.*

CHAPTER 33

EVERYTHING YOU NEED

It was impossible to see anything in the desert sand storm. Link was sunk knee deep in the sand dunes, barely able to claw his way forward while keeping his shield up to protect his face. Navi was tucked away his hat, trying to cheer him on, but her words of encouragement were whisked away on the winds.

Flags stood on wooden posts every few feet, marking the way to the temple, but they were almost impossible to see. He didn't even see the stone structure until he'd already walked inside it.

Confused, he lowered the shield, looking out the exit. The doorway had a faint orange glow and the hall felt... familiar somehow...

Is this the Spirit Temple? Link wondered, walking deeper into the tunnel.

It led downward, and the dust sandstone gave way to grey bricks. When he saw the torches and the waterfalls, Link remembered why it felt so familiar.

"A Great Fairy Fountain," Link mumbled. "All the way out here?"

Navi peeked out. "Whoa... But, the Gerudo had no idea Fairies were real! They must not realize this place exists..."

There was a blue shimmer throughout the water, but it wasn't like that creature from the Water Temple, this was calmer. The flames in the braziers were blue as well, slow and wilting. As Link stood at the edge of the pool at the end of the chamber, the water glowed.

And from the darkness beyond the pool, the woman clad in vines and leaves made her entrance, floating above the waters. "Welcome, Link!" she laughed. "I am the Great Fairy of Magic."

"It's been a while," Link smiled. "I guess, after everything I happened I kind of stopped looking though..."

The Great Fairy shook her head. "This is the final door," she told him. "And as such, I will give you your final magic spell, please take it."

She held her hands out, and once again Link was encapsulated by a bright light. Floating in nothing, Link felt weightless. And in his hands appeared a blue orb of fresh water, sealed inside a glowing diamond.

But it didn't feel like water. Just looking at it, he knew the surface

of this water was nearly unbreakable. And just like how he knew the Fire was from Din, and the Wind was from Farore, he knew this was from Nayru.

As it absorbed into him, it felt different than the others though. It felt more personal. The others were gifts from the Goddesses themselves, meant to aid him on his quest to save Hyrule... But this magical shield, a powerful protective barrier, was meant for him and him alone.

And in his head, he heard her voice.

"*My gift to you,*" she said. "*Chosen hero... Thank you for your bravery.*"

The lights died down and once again Link was standing before the Fairy's Fountain. She crossed her legs and folded her arms, giving Link a look of pride. "You have done well," she told him. "To come so far... But now, to wake the final Sage."

She bowed low, and disappeared back into the shadows beyond the fountain's light. "Go now, young hero, for you have everything you need."

Link stepped away, feeling the power of all three goddesses within him. "Thank you."

As he turned to leave, Navi hovered behind him for a moment. She wanted to ask the Great Fairy what it was she was meant to learn, what powers she was meant to develop along the way... But something had stuck with her, just after the incident at the Water Temple...

Everything from the way she'd been shut off from Link when he needed her most, to her suddenly appearing outside the Temple as if being teleported to Link's return point. There was a memory missing there, something she wasn't sure about.

Do I ask? Navi wondered. Would she answer?

"Are you coming?" Link asked, waiting for her.

Navi hesitated, watching the water. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Yeah, let's go." She turned back to him. "The Spirit Temple should be just around the corner! Right?"

"Right!"

It was not.

Another full day of walking through the desert, sun beating down on them through the sandstorm, and they still weren't there yet. Tired, hungry, and wishing their destination was closer, they rested for the night.

It wasn't until the next morning they finally reached the Spirit

Temple, as the sun was rising behind them. But at last it stood towering over them, the sandstone temple, a statue of a warrior woman carved in the building and twenty times the size of a normal person. The place had been in disrepair for a long time, no longer habitable for people, but it was marked with more flags that looked out of place, the sign of the Gerudo people.

"The flags look too new," Link said, standing in front of the temple doorway. "Even this wood is new..."

"What does that mean?" Navi asked.

"It means they're from farther away than even this," Link placed his hand on the wall, feeling the brittleness of the stone. "How big... is this world?"

"I guess that makes sense," Navi nodded. "I mean, these temples were sacred to the Hylian people and their allies, right? Why would they have a temple dedicated to their invaders?"

"Exactly," Link entered the temple. "This place was here before them, and they used it as just another stopping point between their people and ours."

Inside, everything looked much more preserved. There were large stone tablets that said things he couldn't read, pictures carved into the walls that he had no context for, and statues of people he never knew.

... But, there were no doors.

As big as the temple looked from the outside, there was only this one chamber inside, a dead end. There were stairs leading up to a raised part of the chamber, but that was it.

"Did we miss something?" Navi asked. "Or, maybe these tablets say something important..." She tried to read them but it was in some ancient form of text that they couldn't identify.

"Let's check back outside," Link suggested, headed back. "Maybe there's another door?"

They exited the temple, and Link stood in the doorway, looking up at the large stone arch that was in front of the temple. Standing on top of it, was a figure.

"Sheik," Link called. "You made it all the way out here?"

Sheik hopped down, sinking a bit in the sand before walking over to Link. He sat down on the stone platform in front of the door, looking out at the desert. "Past, present future..."

Link narrowed his eyes. "More riddles," he sighed, sitting down next to Sheik. "Okay, what's this one?"

"The Master Sword is a ship with which you can sail upstream and

downstream through time's river..." He held his side and looked at the ground. "The port for that ship is here in the Spirit Temple..."

"... What?" Link gasped. "Wh-... what does *that* mean?"

Sheik was quiet for a long time, staring up at the sun. "I think this is the last time... we'll meet like this, isn't it..."

"How do you mean?" Link asked. "You're not gonna stick around to see how things turn out?"

Sheik laughed, stifling a cough. "... I wanted to apologize-"

"Don't," Link told him. He remembered back to when he spoke to Jorol, and how he'd tried to apologize then... He knew the situations here were different, but he also knew that Sheik didn't have anything to apologize for.

"Whatever you're going to say," Link huffed, getting up. "Don't. I think I can see things a little clearer now... I get that I'm not the only one fighting here... I have a lot to be sorry for myself."

Sheik shook his head. "Yeah, we're all pretty sorry people, aren't we..."

Link looked down at him, wondering where his thoughts were. "What did you mean, a second ago when you said that stuff about the Master Sword being a ship to travel time?"

"To restore the Desert Colossus and enter the Spirit Temple, you must travel back through time's flow..." Sheik pulled out his harp. "I hope you won't mind listening to one last song."

Link nodded.

"Then listen to this... the Requiem of Spirit."

Sheik plays his final song, the harp strings twinging. It was crisp and clear, and behind played all the other songs of the Sages. This new song stood out in volume, with the rest of the songs playing under it's notes... but it was all the pieces put together.

Discordant and out of balance... waiting to be fixed.

Link looked at Sheik as he played, wondering who was beneath that mask. Impa was a Sheikah, and she hadn't worn a mask. He wondered what this boy's reason was.

His curiosity getting the better of him, he hadn't even realized he'd started to reach out his hand to pull Sheik's mask away. But the boy was gone before he could, a sudden gust of wind kicking up the sand and blocking Link's vision.

Link sat there for a moment, going over what Sheik had said. *Using the Master Sword... I can go back?*

Though he was gone, Sheik's words echoed on the desert wind.

Trust your allies, and yourself, Link... You have with you, everything you need.

CHAPTER 34

BACK IN TIME

There it was... In the back wall of the raised structure, a blue stone with a slot the width of his sword... It resonated with energy, and the gem on the sword's hilt reacted.

Like a key, he placed the sword in the stone, and turned it.

As the blue lights enveloped him, he heard a far away voice calling to him. He couldn't hear her words, but he knew her... somehow...

Flashes of the sword techniques raced through his mind, as well as places and events he never knew of. None of it made sense to him, but it was like he was there, even if just for a moment. He was there, saying good morning to the people in that village in the sky, fighting demons he'd seen only in dreams, and finally placing this sword... *his* sword, in a temple to be sealed away.

He stepped away, leaving the hilt of the sword embedded in that stone.

"Link?" Navi asked. "Are you alright?"

Link looked down at his hands... they were the same hands he'd gotten used to. *I suppose it was too much to hope for.*

For some reason, he felt cold, like ice had run through his whole body all at once. But his eyes burned, and his head felt hot.

"Are you okay?" Navi asked, sitting back down on his shoulder.

"Yeah," Link answered in a voice he'd never thought he'd hear again.

"I haven't seen *you* around, kid..."

They turned around to see a Gerudo woman standing over them. She didn't look particularly angry, but she definitely wasn't happy. Behind her, the temple had changed slightly. It wasn't *quite* as old, but there was little difference other than that.

"What do you want?" the woman asked, drawing his focus.

"Looking for the Sages," Link answered.

"A Sage?" the woman scoffed. "I don't know anyone like that."

It's too early, Link sighed. *I guess she wouldn't know then.* "No, I'm just looking around the temple."

"You're just a kid!" the woman scolded. "The temple is no place for kids!"

"Well I'm not really *doing* anything," Link argued. "And I'm not a kid, I'm just younger than *you*."

"You have nothing to do?" the woman looked around, fixing her gaze on a small crack in the stone wall. "What good timing! Can you do me a favor, kid?"

"... Favor?"

"Wait a second, I want to ask you first..." She looked around again, then knelt down and whispered. "You wouldn't happen to be one of Ganondorf's... *followers*... would you?"

Just the mention of his name was enough to make Link furious, and he knew it showed on his face before he had a chance to hide it. He sighed, no way of convincing her of a lie now. "I hate Ganondorf," he said truthfully. "And everything he stands for."

"Uh-huh!" she grinned. "You've got guts. I think I like you."

She stood up straight and put her hands on her hips. "First of all, let me introduce myself. I'm Nabooru of the Gerudo. I'm a lone-wolf thief!"

The way she said it made her sound so proud of the fact, but Link couldn't help but think how undesirable a quality that was.

"But don't get me wrong!" Nabooru huffed, seeing the look on his face. "Though we're both thieves, I'm completely different from Ganondorf. With his followers, he stole from women and children, and he even killed people!"

Now *that* was something Link could believe. That being said, Link still didn't look very impressed.

Nabooru took a deep breath and started over. "A kid like you may not know this, but the Gerudo race consists only of women. Only one man is born every hundred years... Even though our laws say that lone male Gerudo must become King of the Gerudo, I'll never bow to such an evil man!"

Finally taking him seriously, she looked back down to him, crossing her arms. "By the way, what is your name, kid?"

"Link," Link answered. "And stop calling me kid."

"Link?!" Nabooru gasped. Her naturally dark desert skin turned almost Hylian pale. She shook her head, pretending like nothing had happened. "What kind of name is that?" she scoffed. "Well... anyway... I want to ask you a favor..."

Nabooru crossed the room and knelt down beside the crack in the wall. "Will you go through this tiny hole and get a treasure that's inside?"

"Treasure?" Link asked, following her.

"A pair of Silver Gauntlets," Nabooru nodded. "If you wear them, you can easily push and pull very heavy things!"

"Those... would be useful," Link said out loud, looking at the Goron Bracelets that had already been helping him for so long.

"No, no, no, kid!" Nabooru growled. "Don't even *think* about taking this treasure for yourself! The Silver Gauntlets won't fit a little kid like you! I want you to be a good boy and give them to me!"

"Yeah because *that* makes me want to trust you," Link countered. "I told you, I'm not some *kid!*"

"You could just ask nicely!" Navi agreed, glaring at Nabooru. "If you want someone's help, just ask!"

Nabooru stared wide eyed at the fairy floating before her. "Whoa... Are you... are you from Hyrule?"

"Yeah," Link nodded.

"So you really have Fairies..." Nabooru backed away, sitting against the wall. "I guess they do just flock to the good children..."

Suddenly Link and Navi felt guilty about making the Gerudo woman re-think her life of thievery, but before they could find a way to justify that to themselves or say something to her, Nabooru spoke up.

"Ganondorf and his minions are using the Spirit Temple as a hideout. Only the Silver Gauntlets will allow me to sneak deep into the temple. Once there, I'm going to steal all the treasure inside and mess up their plans!"

"So you're really fighting him," Link said, looking at the crack in the wall. Too be honest, Nabooru probably could've fit better, since he had a sword and shield and she didn't... But then again he did just leave his sword in the wall so he could do this... Still... "I *guess* we're on the same side."

She turned her attention to the temple's door. "How about it? Will you do it?"

Link sighed, kneeling down to look through the hole.

"Thanks, kid!"

"Don't call me kid!" Link grunted, squeezing through the hole in the wall.

"You and I, let's give Ganondork and his followers a big surprise, shall we? If you can successfully get the Silver Gauntlets... I'll do something great for you!"

Why does that sound like an empty promise?

Clambering out of the hole and dusting himself off, Link looked around the chamber he crawled into. And this place... *this* was the kind of

place he expected to see not just in this temple, but in the rest of them as well.

In the center was statue several stories tall, sitting down. Her legs were crossed with her arms at her sides palms up, but she wore armor and swords on her back. Parts of the sculpture were broken off due to it being so old... but just looking at it Link knew who it was.

"Din," Link said, standing before it. "That's you, isn't it?"

There was no answer, of course, it was just a statue. So Link continued looking around the room, finding a staircase leading up across from where he entered. It circled back in the same room, ending at a walkway that crossed over the chamber.

The door there led into a throne room, red carpet and carved pillars leading up to the throne at the end of the room.

Sitting in the chair, was a suit of armor, massive war ax in hand.

Link approached it, keeping his shield ready. *Nabooru had said that Ganondorf's followers were here... is this one of them?* "Hello?" he asked. "Anyone in there?"

The suit of armor clanked as it slowly began to rise.

"Okay you're a person," Link hissed, backing up.

The armor moved, rigid and with intent in every step. It was slow, but it's war ax would still pack a punch.

Link held up his shield, darting forward. As soon as the armor swung, Link ducked and smashed his shield into the ax from below. He snapped the hilt of the war ax and the head of it crashed into the ground, embedding it's blade in the stone. The sudden jerk in momentum threw the armor off balance, and Link struck.

As it tripped forward Link slammed his shield on the body armor from behind. The armor broke, revealing a slim figure inside of it.

So they are all women, Link thought.

In a split second decision, Link brought his shield down on the back of the knight's head. The helmet flew off and the woman landed face down on the hard ground. That was at least two concussions, front and back.

Link froze. She'd landed on her face but bounced slightly, and her head lay sideways. She was just unconscious, but Link could see her. It was the woman who would later be in charge of the hidden fortress.

Good thing I didn't kill you, I think, Link thought backing away. *Let's just hope you don't remember me in seven years.*

He headed to the door that was behind the throne, and stepped outside. Sand blew in the wind as he stood on the edge of the platform

overlooking the desert. Behind him was the statue of the warrior woman who he could tell now was also the same statue inside.

Link was standing on her arm, and in the palm of her hand was an old chest.

But before he could reach it...

"Hey, what's up, Link?" Rauru asked, in owl form and perched above him. "Surprised to see me?"

"I thought you lost the owl look when I opened the Sacred Realm," Link said. "... Which... hasn't happened yet... right."

"A long time in this world is almost nothing to you, is it?" Rauru chirped. "How mysterious! Even *I* thought that the tales of a boy who could travel back and forth through time were merely legends." He looked proudly down on Link. "Link, you have fully matured as an adult. From now on, the future of all the people in Hyrule is on your shoulders."

Link looked away, facing the desert. "As if it wasn't already," he said. It was annoying... but, maybe not as much as it had been.

"Maybe it's not my time anymore," Rauru sighed, knowing Link no longer needed his wisdom. Or perhaps, he thought, maybe the boy never needed his help. "Here is my last advice... Two witches inhabit this temple, in order to destroy them, turn their own magic power against them. Hoo hoot!"

Rauru flapped his wings and landed in front of Link. "Do you want to hear what I said again?"

Link smiled. "No, but thank you."

Rauru nodded. "I will continue to watch over you..." He flapped his wings again, and kicked off. "Hoo hoo hoo hoot!" The desert winds carried him off, and he flew back to Hyrule...

"Next time I see him," Link joked. "I'll be seven years younger, I think."

He opened the chest, and sitting at the bottom of it, gathering dust and sand, were a pair of Silver Gauntlets. They could easily fit him, despite what Nabooru had said... but he'd promised to give them to her.

"She's on our side, right?" Link asked.

Navi nodded. "I really hope so. It'd be great to have someone else to talk to."

"Hey," Link mumbled.

"Hey!" Nabooru shouted from below.

At first Link thought she was responding to him, but when he looked down...

"Where are you taking me?!" Nabooru thrashed in the arms of a

pair of witches. "Yeearggh! Let me go!"

They dropped Nabooru on the ground, spinning in circles around her. Nabooru couldn't escape before a hole of darkness opened up beneath her, sucking her in.

"You... you fiends!" Nabooru struggled. "Ganondorf's minions!" She looked up at Link, motioning for him to leave. "Link! Get out of here! Now! These witches! They're using black magic on me!"

Then her head was below the sand, and the witches flew off.

"What... what do we do?" Navi stammered.

Link shook his head, lost. "I... don't... know..."

CHAPTER 35

ANCIENTTIES

Link raced back through the temple, returning to the main room where he'd left his sword. The witches had gone back this way, when they left Nabooru, but by the time Link got here they were gone.

"Well?" Navi asked frantically. "Aren't you going to get your sword? You have to fight them!"

Link moved his hand, but he didn't grab the sword yet. "That will send me forward in time... back to where I was before... Nabooru... It'll be too late."

"I don't think so," Navi argued. "Those Gerudo guards, when they were chasing me in the kitchens, Nabooru told them fairies were real!"

"Yeah," Link nodded. "So?"

"Nabooru didn't know fairies were real until she met *me* just earlier!" Navi crossed her arms, standing on the hilt of the Master Sword. "And just now, that Gerudo knight in armor was the *same* one who later leads that hidden hideout! Besides, I don't think she's hurt. If what the others said was true, she was -- in our time -- working as Ganondorf's right hand woman! But here, she didn't want anything to *do* with him!"

"So if we go back to the future," Link said, finally grabbing the sword. "We just need to fix whatever they did to her..."

"Exactly!" Navi flew back up to Link, tucking herself under his hat. "So don't leave me behind!"

Link turned the sword in the slot again, and pulled it out of the blue stone. In an instant the world around him got sucked back into the crystal, replaced with the world he'd gotten to know. It felt wrong, having the opportunity to go back to that time he used to know, the life he missed... but it didn't work that way... His job *here* wasn't done yet...

Maybe... Maybe he could go back, someday, when this is done...

He returned his sword to its sheath and his shield to his back, and turned around. They had to be around here somewhere, the witches.

—

The Silver Gauntlets were far more powerful than he'd expected. Solid stone and certain metals so far were the only things he couldn't

outright break, but even weakened or cracked stone couldn't stand up to the magic of the Silver Gauntlets. Link kind of wished he'd just gone here first, if for no other reason than making things easier.

Opposite the crack in the wall in the main room, was a brick wall that Link had tested the strength of the gauntlets on. It didn't break easy, but it broke. He managed to punch in a hole that he could fit through and found another chamber beyond that.

It mirrored the other chamber with the large statue of Din, but this one was different. Here, Din still sat in the same way as before, but it had been vandalized. Her face had been broken off, her hands were cut off, and Gerudo graffiti was painted over her body, most likely curses of their people.

"Why this one and not the others?" Link asked.

"Their way of venting frustration on the Hylian people?" Navi suggested.

In the rest of the temple, torches had been lit, but here it was dark. The only source of light came from a hole in the side of the building, which was probably just more vandalism. In front of the statue however, were two empty torches.

"I think this belongs to you," Link said quietly, lighting the torches with Din's Fire. The flames cast an orange glow on the chamber, throwing shadows on the now angry looking statue that towered over him.

Link stepped away to look around the room, try to find some way forward, but as he did the statue rumbled. Her head lowered to look directly at him, even though her face was gone. Then where he had been standing before he'd stepped back, between the torches, the floor raised.

The block of stone, large and hollow with an open side facing Link, held within it... a shield. Red steel, with an incredibly reflective silver surface. And clearly marked on that surface, was the sign of the Gerudo people.

"... What?" Link gasped. "This had to have been here since... *forever*, but, the Gerudo didn't originate here... did they?"

"I don't know anymore," Navi admitted. "They *couldn't* have, but..."

"Before this war with them..." Link shook his head, trying to piece everything together. "Were we the same?"

"The same?" Navi asked.

"The Forest Temple was a bridge between the Hylians and the Kokiri," Link explained. "The Fire Temple was a bridge between the Hylians and the Gorons. The Water Temple was the bridge with the Zoras,

the Shadow Temple with the Sheikah... The Temple of Time was the marker for the Hylian people themselves, which leaves *this* temple..."

"Which... must have been an older bridge," Navi finished. "A bridge they burned a long time ago... The bridge to the Gerudo..."

Link held that shield in his hands, a feeling like suddenly everything should be clear, but the answer was just out of reach. All this time, he'd hated Ganondorf, and by extension the Gerudo people... But thinking of it now, he was currently fighting to save Nabooru, a Gerudo woman... someone he considered to be on the same side of.

"Navi," Link mumbled. "I think... we've been lied to again."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't think... this war needs to be fought," Link took out his other shield, looking at them side by side. "This is entirely Ganondorf's fault, that fact's never changed... But I don't mean it's just the two of us that were lied to... I think the Hylian people, and the Gerudo people, were lied to about each other... Something bigger than this is happening right now, something bigger than just Ganondorf taking over Hyrule."

Navi looked at her reflection in the Gerudo shield. "So... what are we going to do?"

Link lay the Hylian shield in the stone block. Accepting it, the block retracted back into the ground.

"I'm not just fighting for myself," Link said, fitting the new shield on his back. "I'm not just fighting for the Great Deku Tree." Once he adjusted the belt to fit it, he kept it on his arm. "I'm not just fighting for Zelda." He unsheathed the Master Sword. "I'm not just fighting for Hyrule, or for the Gorons or the Zora or the Shiekah."

Link looked up at the walkway that mirrored the walkway in the opposite chamber. "I'm fighting for the Gerudo too, because this isn't their fight. All there is, is Ganondorf, and the trouble he's caused for *all* of us."

He made his way up to the top of the chamber, standing in front of a large door. This door was the only structural difference about this room. It wouldn't lead outside like the other, but instead to another chamber deeper in the temple.

It wasn't even locked.

"So let's get this over with." Link opened the door, and prepared to face the final stopping point on his journey to save Hyrule, and everything else.

There they were, standing across the hall from him, the two little witches. Wrinkled faces, stark white hair, bulging eyes, and crooked noses.

"Ho ho ho!" one laughed. "Looks like someone is here, Koume."

"Hee hee hee!" Koume laughed. "Looks like it, Kotake!"

Koume kicked into the air, followed by her twin. "What an outrageous fellow he is to intrude so boldly into our temple... Ho ho ho!"

"We should teach this outrageous fellow a lesson! Hee hee hee!"

They turned back around, parting to reveal another suit of armor. "Oh, loyal minion..." The armor stood. "Destroy this intruder on our behalf!"

The witch sisters Koume and Kotake flew off, hovering near the ceiling like insects. Meanwhile the suit of armor was inching closer. Something about it felt off though, the way it moved. Assuming it was another Gerudo woman as Nabooru said they all were, Link expected this suit of armor to be too heavy again. But instead she was faster, capable of carrying the full weight of the suit.

Whoever you are, Link grunted, jumping to the side as the Gerudo Knight's ax crashed into the ground where he'd been. *You're a lot stronger than that other knight!*

CHAPTER 36

SAGE OF SPIRIT

Link bent over backwards as the blade of the ax swept right over his head. Back-flipping away, he threw up his shield as the next strike came. Forwarding the momentum, Link diverted the attack to the side and stabbed towards the knight.

The knight stepped sideways on one foot and used her other foot to kick Link, but Link jumped and swatted her ax away with his shield as he sliced down on her with his sword. The knight blocked with her arm, taking the full brunt of the attack with her armor. It stopped Link dead and as he hit the ground she slammed her head down on him.

Not letting the hit make contact, Link swerved away, slicing at the hilt of the ax and hoping to break it. But the knight let the strike slide across the hilt's surface and parried, knocking Link back. He skid backwards, keeping his shield in front of him.

They stood there, facing each other, breathing hard.

"I'd be grateful if you'd stop," Link panted. "I'm starting to figure out that not all Gerudo are jerks like Ganondork."

The knight froze. She'd almost begun another attack but she stopped while holding her ax over her head. Link used that opportunity to dash forward and kick the helmet off of her, pushing her to the ground.

She landed on her back with Link on top of her, holding her sword to her throat.

And as soon as he saw her face Link jumped off.

Nabooru's head was spinning, her eyes unfocused. "Unnnh... Where am I...?"

"Nabooru!?" Link exclaimed.

"Well, well..." Kotake sighed. "Looks like she's back to normal... Koume..."

Koume floated down from the ceiling. "She's just a little girl, but she commands a lot of respect among the Gerudo, Kotake..."

Kotake followed, thinking for a moment as she perched on her broom. "Maybe we should make her work for the great Ganondorf for a little while longer! Ho ho ho!"

"Then we should brainwash her again! Hee hee hee!"

"Hey back off!" Link shouted, throwing himself in front of

Nabooru to defend her.

But the witches' magic moved around him, swirling around Nabooru. Link reached for her but in an instant Nabooru had disappeared.

Before Link could do anything else, the cackling witches took their leave, flying away.

Link gave chase following into the next chamber.

There was a long hall, lit by a line of red torches, leading to a door of ancient wood. As warm as the torches were, the air was cold, and when Link reached for the door he could see his breath. But what's more, was that he could *feel* the power on the other side.

These witches weren't just another monster at the end of a dungeon. They were things that were placed here by Ganondorf during the last seven years to stop the Sages from being awakened, they were here a lot longer than that. Even if this place hadn't been taken over until recently, the witches themselves were beyond old, and they'd had a lot of time to build up that power.

But I'll beat you anyway, Link thought, opening the door. *Because I've come too far just to fail now.*

The final chamber of the Spirit Temple was pretty much exactly what he'd expected; an arena with a raised platform in the center. At some point in the past, this chamber might have been used for some kind of spectacle with cheering crowds, but now it was empty, quiet.

Above the platform the witches flew, circling in the air as they waited for him.

"Look at this stupid kid!" Koume laughed. "He came on his own to offer himself as a sacrifice to the great Ganondorf!" She landed on the platform as Link met them. "With my flame, I will burn him to the bone." She held a small fire in her hand as her hair erupted into flames.

Kotake cackled, landing behind Link. "With my frost, I will freeze him to his soul!" Shards of ice formed in her hands as her hair crystallized.

They laughed, sitting on their brooms as they hovered just above the ground. They spun around him, moving faster and faster. Link couldn't keep an eye on both of them at the same time, but he decided he wouldn't have to.

Just take out one at a time, Link thought, watching Koume as he knew fire would be more dangerous.

"Don't ignore me!" Kotake shouted, sending a blast of ice his way.

Link jumped to the side, but even as he escaped the blast he could feel the intense cold. And with Link distracted by Kotake, Koume took her shot and threw a ray of fire directly at him. Link barely had a chance to

react, throwing up his shield.

The hit sent him flying, skidding across the ground, but Link noticed he hadn't been hurt by the fire itself. So long as he could stay on his feet, this new shield could take the hit. He only hoped it held up to the cold as well, remembering his time in the ice cave where the Hylian shield froze over.

Taking a chance, Link jumped to his feet and rushed the nearest witch, Kotake, slashing with his sword. He knew he'd miss, but he just wanted to test his theory. When Kotake dodged and sent another blast of ice at him, Link defended, taking it and letting the blast rebound.

The witches snarled at him, realizing what tool he was wielding.

But you knew I'd find it, Link thought, remembering Rauru's words. *They have each other's weaknesses.*

Koume shot a ray of fire and Link threw up his shield, redirecting the attack towards Kotake. The fire hit her dead on, knocking her off her broom. As she fell Link rushed to her, stabbing out with his sword.

But he didn't get close enough. Koume had swooped over her, catching her from the air and bringing her up.

"Ok, let's get serious now Kotake!"

"Oh! Ok Koume!"

They laughed wildly as they spun in place faster and faster. They spun so fast that the ice and fire blurred together, and Link couldn't tell one from the other.

"Kotake and Koume's Double Dynamite Attack!"

In a blast of heat and cold, a new form emerged. Taller, regal, and more like the other Gerudo women Link had seen. No longer did they appear as old hags, but instead a younger white haired warrior. But it was *one* figure, not two. The twin sisters had formed together one solid entity.

And Link realized that as twins, separate... they were holding back.

This new form smiled down from the air as half the chamber around the arena erupted into flame while the other half froze over completely. She held her hands in the air, cackling and spinning. "I am... *Twinrova!*"

Link stepped back, no longer sure how to face this opponent. As one person, did they have the same weaknesses? Was she immune to her own attacks?

Only one way to find out, Link hid behind his shield, waiting.

Willing to prove him wrong, Twinrova sent a massive blast of fire at the center of the arena. Link threw up his shield, kneeling to withstand the force of the attack, but even as it protected him and sent the attack

back at the witch... she smiled.

She *was* immune. Arms folded and hovering in a power stance as flames and ice swirled around her, Twinrova *knew* how powerful she was.

And just to prove it further, she blasted both fire and ice at the same time. It was too powerful for Link to get away fast enough, and he was knocked away from the arena, hitting the ground by the door.

Twinrova only laughed, done with words, done toying, done caring about whatever game she thought she was playing.

"Fine," Link huffed, leaning against the wall as he stood. "If fire and ice won't hurt you... then steel will have to be good enough."

He climbed back on top of the arena platform, drawing his sword.

Twinrova's laughing grew hoarse from having laughed for so long, but it was like she couldn't stop herself. She just kept cackling, eyes bulging as she threw balls of fire and shards of ice wherever Link went. He was running around the edge of the platform, trying to get a shot in.

Only when she stopped attacking did he realize that he'd been trapped.

Twinrova charged up her magic, ready to deliver a final strike. Link held his shield up, and whispered behind it.

"Navi. Can you aim for her?"

Navi was confused at first, but got a mischievous look as she considered what her ability could do. "Which direction?"

"Down." Link peeked over his shield.

Twinrova held up a giant ball of fire and ice, and she was moments away from throwing it at him.

"I can do that," Navi nodded.

"Do your worst!" Link shouted.

Twinrova launched her final attack down at Link, and he jumped, flipping. Navi propelled the blast downward so he could jump over it, and Link used his shield to defend against the force of the attack. He flipped through the air, returning his shield to his back and holding his sword with both hands.

He struck down on Twinrova before she knew what had happened, stabbing straight through her heart. She fell from the air and Link landed on top of her, pushing the sword in deeper.

She lay there motionless for a moment, blood leaking from her mouth and wound. The twisted look of insanity on her face was calming. In her last moments of consciousness, she forced herself to lift her head.

As she looked at her wound, Link removed his sword. Twinrova stopped moving, staring dead at the ceiling.

Link returned his sword to its sheath, stepping away from her as the arena slowly went back to normal. "Now don't you *dare* tell me... that Nabooru is dead too..."

Twinrova burned and evaporated into mist and smoke, reforming back into the two distinct figures of the little witches Kotake and Koume. But they weren't alive, not anymore. They flew but no longer on brooms.

"Shoot! What a fresh kid! This time we'll get serious. Right, Kotake?"

Kotake smiled, then looked at her sister, confused as to why she could see through her. "What?" she scoffed, not believing they could've actually died. "Hey, Koume, what is that above your head?"

Koume looked up, and though Link couldn't see it there was a halo over her head. "I don't know, but you have one over your head too, Kotake!"

"But I'm only 400 years old!" Kotake complained.

"And I'm just 380 years old!" Koume whined.

"We're twins!" Kotake barked. "Don't try to lie about your age! You must have gone senile!"

"Who are you calling senile!?" Koume countered. "Is that how you treat your older sister?"

"We're twins! How can you be older!"

"Keeeyaaah! How heartless you are!"

"How can you be so ungrateful!?"

"You're heartless!"

"Ungrateful!"

They bickered and bickered as they floated off into who knows where. Their spirits faded away before they reached the ceiling, but their words were sharp. And though he wasn't sure who exactly, Link heard one of their voices as if it were spoken over his shoulder.

I'll come back to haunt you!

Link shivered... but they were finally gone. The witch twins had been defeated... which meant...

"Was I too late, again?" Link asked, looking at the spot on the arena platform where Twinrova's body had been.

"Link," Navi said. "... Turn around."

Judging by the tone in her voice, Link didn't want to turn around. He knew what he'd see... It would be just like every other time... wouldn't it?

"Hey kid," Nabooru said. "Let me thank you."

Link swallowed his fears and turned to face her. And there she

was... "Nabooru," Link choked. "You're... alive."

"Look what the little kid has become in the past seven years," Nabooru smirked. "A competent swordsman!"

So she doesn't know it's the same day for me, Link smiled. "Still not a kid."

Nabooru looked away from him, lowering her arms. "By the way... I really messed up..."

"Huh?" Link figured it was usually *him* who apologized for screwing up... "Why are *you* sorry?"

"I was brainwashed by those old witches and used by Ganondorf to do his evil will..." She couldn't look Link in the eye, remembering all the things she'd been forced to do.

Link realized it was different for her. Whereas it was only earlier today that Link had seen her go missing... For Nabooru that was seven full years of torment...

"Yeah," Link mumbled. "That's what I was afraid of."

"But isn't it funny?" Nabooru said, trying to find the positive side. "That a person like me could turn out to be the Sage of Spirit? And now I'm going to fight them as one of the six Sages! Heh heh..."

"To be honest," Link admitted. "It's not that surprising."

With all that she'd done, the people that she'd hurt, the things she'd been forced to do... Nabooru was shocked that Link would think she was anything other than a monster like Ganondorf.

"As soon as the witches took you, I knew." Link took off his shield and looked at his reflection. "And then this showed up... and it just confirmed it." He looked directly at Nabooru. "There's a connection between our people, the Hylians and the Gerudo. And that connection... is you."

Link held out his hand. "Same team, right?"

Nabooru felt sorry for treating him like a kid all those years ago, this was clearly someone stronger than that. Naive, maybe... but not a kid. She grabbed his hand, matching his look of determination. "I'm going to pay them back for what they did to me!"

"Ganondork will never see it coming," Link smiled. He stepped away, returning the shield to his back.

Nabooru crossed her arms again. "Kid..." she shook her head. "No... Link... I promised I'd do something great for you... So I'll add my power to yours, and give you this medallion!"

She held out her hand this time, and the final Sages medallion hovered in her palm. Link took it, and for a moment he looked down. It

was only for a second, but when he looked up... Nabooru was gone.

But her words lingered behind.

If only I'd known how strong you were back then... I would've liked to fight by your side, just a little longer...

CHAPTER 37

ZELDA



Thunder rumbled in the distance, storm clouds pulsed on the horizon. Sandy winds swept up around him, but the heavy atmosphere kept it low to waist level. As Link and Navi watched the coming storm, the sun set behind them and the moon rose above those dark clouds.

Rain fought against them, beating them down as they trekked back through the Gerudo hideout in the canyons. The Gerudo themselves let him pass, watching from the windows. The tall canyon walls shielded them from the worst of it, but it made the winds stronger, almost pushing them back.

Damp ground swallowed his boots, forcing him to struggle every step as the storm pressed on. It got angrier the closer he got to Hyrule Castle, telling him to turn away. Link wanted nothing more than return home, and make good on his promises. He wanted to go and play hide-and-seek with the Poe Sisters, he wanted to go and be with Malon on the Ranch... but he had a more pressing promise to keep.

Zombies and crippled dead grabbed at him, the residents of a Castletown from a time long ago now restless and hungry. They pulled at his arms and legs, trying to slow him down, but as much as it pained him to hurt them... Link did what he had to make his way to the Temple. He gave them rest at last, refusing to let Ganondorf's magic torment them any longer. His fires burned quickly, and the rain put out the flames when the bodies were gone.

Link shut the doors to the Temple of Time, rainwater pouring off of him. The place was empty and bright, complete contrast to the world he'd just walked through. Somehow, this place had remained untouched...

He ran his fingers over the altar that held the three Spiritual Stones that had once seemed so important. "I guess the time has finally come."

"Link, the hero," Rauru said. He stood behind the altar, having stepped down from the Sacred Realm. "Finally, all of us, the six Sages, have been awakened. The time for the final showdown with the King of Evil has come..."

"I'm ready," Link nodded.

"Before that, though," Rauru raised a hand, pointing behind Link. "You should meet the one who is waiting for you..."

Rauru disappeared, his form fading to save his power for what's to come. And Link turned around, to see Sheik standing in the center of the hall. He looked small in the temple chamber.

"I have been waiting for you, Link," Sheik moved closer, and Link saw how he was holding himself, like he was in pain. "Link, the chosen hero..."

"Sheik!" Link hissed.

"Are you okay!?" Navi exclaimed.

"You have overcome many hardships and awakened six Sages," Sheik continued, walking towards them. "And now you have a final challenge -- a showdown with Ganondorf, the King of Evil..." He reached them, and again all Link could see of him was his eye, the other hidden under his hair, and the rest of his face concealed by his cloth mask. "Before that... I have things I want to tell only to you."

He turned away, sitting down on the steps beside the altar. "I was wrong," he said quietly. "All those years ago... I was wrong..."

"Wrong about what?" Link asked. "What are you talking about?"

"The legend of the Triforce," Sheik answered. "As a kid... I heard bits and pieces... and like a kid... I drew my own conclusion..." He couldn't look at Link, and he clutched his side like whatever pain he was in was getting worse.

Link knelt beside him. "You need to rest," he told him. "You're hurt. Let us take care of this, you've done enough."

"No," Sheik shook his head. "Because this is all my fault..."

"I don't get it," Link hissed. "What are you trying to say?"

Sheik took a deep breath, staring off into space. "A long time ago... The Triforce was gifted to the Humans to protect... It was used, in Old Hyrule, and was sealed away to be watched over... That place became

known as the Sacred Realm...

It was never lost... just kept secret... It is a place with many doors, a place which can be opened only under special conditions... The door of time was opened once before, and another entrance was made in the New Hyrule... then it was locked away. Only pieces of the story were passed down over time, and those pieces were hidden and scattered like the secret itself. So many lies were told, and so many people told them, that the stories became like mud over time, distorted and darkened... But in the end, the truth is simple. The Triforce was given to us to use in peace, and this time we failed. Now its power is being used for evil, and that's all that matters.

The resting place of the Triforce, the Sacred Realm, is a mirror that reflects what is in the heart... the heart of one who enters it... If an evil heart, the Realm will become full of evil; if pure, the Realm will become a paradise. The Triforce... it is a balance that weighs the three forces: Power, Wisdom, and Courage. If the heart of the one who holds the Triforce has all three forces in balance, that one will gain the True Force to govern all. But, if that one's heart is not in balance, the Triforce will separate into three parts: Power, Wisdom, and Courage. Only one part will remain for the one who touched the Triforce... the part representing the force that one most believes in. If that one seeks the True Force, that one must acquire the two lost parts. Those two parts will be held within others chosen by destiny, who will bear the Triforce mark on the backs of their hands.

Blood was bleeding through Sheik's mask, but he wouldn't let Link help. He raised a hand and continued his story.

"When Ganondorf laid his hands on the Triforce, the legend came true," he coughed. "The Triforce split, only the Triforce of Power remained in his hand. But his dark ambitions were not satisfied." He held out his hand for Link to take. Link gave him his left hand, the one he'd reached for. "To gain complete mastery of the world, Ganondorf started looking for those chosen by destiny to hold the two other Triforce parts. The one who held the Triforce of Courage..."

Sheik removed the gauntlet from Link's left hand, revealing the

mark of the Triforce. Link gasped. It hadn't been there before, he knew it hadn't... did it appear when he woke the final Sage?

"And the other," Sheik continued, strained. "Who holds the Triforce of Wisdom... is the seventh Sage, who is destined to be the leader of them all..."

Sheik stood, removing the glove on his own hand. There, on the back of it, was another mark of the Triforce... But Sheik didn't stop there.

He stepped away, and held his hand out palm down. A ring of light formed around his feet, and it enveloped him. "This form... I've had trouble sustaining it as of late... I apologize for meeting you in disguise, but it was necessary to hide from the King of Evil."

His voice changed into a voice Link had heard a long time ago... but older now... and he couldn't believe it. All this time...

The lights faded, and there in Sheik's place... stood Zelda. Thin trails of blood dripped from the corners of her mouth, and she staggered.

Link caught her, but at last, back in her true form, she could stand. "It is I," she smiled. "The Princess of Hyrule, Zelda."

"How... how did this happen?" Link stammered. "All this time... Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you just tell me? Even if you had your own mission, you should have let me know."

Zelda looked away, knowing he was right... to a point. There were many things he didn't understand that she couldn't explain... "I saw you as I was escaping from the castle with my attendant, Impa. I thought I should entrust the Ocarina to you... I thought that would be our best chance... As long as you had the Ocarina in your possession, I thought Ganondorf could never enter the Sacred Realm, but... something I could never expect happened..."

"When I opened the Door of Time," Link said. "The Master Sword sealed me away in the Sacred Realm... and the Triforce fell into Ganondorf's hands."

"He went on to invade the Sacred Realm," Zelda wiped her tears. "An Hyrule... and... I passed myself off as a Sheikah and hoped that you would return. I waited seven years..."

"And now I'm back," Link nodded. "I've been back... And now Ganondorf's dark age can come to an end!" He shook his head. "So what's the plan? How do we defeat him?"

"The Sages will fight beside us," Zelda said firmly. "And as one of them, I will add my power to yours... I have no Medallion to give you, but you will not need it. I will stand with you, in the final fight against this Evil King."

"Will it be enough?" Link asked. "Can we stop him for good?"

Zelda shook her head. "Ganondorf... like the Triforce... is an ancient power... We cannot destroy him, but we *can* defeat him! Of that, I am certain."

Link nodded. "Then that's good enough for me," he took a step backwards. "Let's not keep him waiting."

Zelda smiled, but faltered. Her full strength had not returned to her. "Link... In order to do this, I need your courage again. Please protect me while I do my part."

Link held his hand out to her. "Of course," he told her.

"Of course I understand," Link said firmly. "I know this can't have been easy for you. I mean, you haven't even been able to go home yet..." He shook his head. "I don't care if you used me, use me! That's what I'm here for."

Memories of another life once more flashed through Link's mind, yet even now he meant those words. "That's what I'm here for," he promised as Zelda took his hand.

"Oh!" Zelda exclaimed, ducking behind the altar. "I wanted to give you another surprise." When she came back up, she held a green tunic in her arms. "You left this behind... I thought you might want it back."

It was the same one he'd woken up with when he retrieved the sword. Patched up and cleaned... but it was his. He took it, feeling how light it was. It wasn't armor like the Goron or Zora tunics... but something else had changed. He could feel Zelda's magic reinforcing it.

As he considered putting it back on, the whole temple began to shake. Link and Zelda were nearly knocked off their feet and the marble structure started cracking.

"That rumbling," Zelda gasped. "It can't be!?"

Link was thrown aside as a crystal formed around Zelda, trapping her.

"No!" Link screamed, running back to her. He pounded his fist against it. "Zelda!"

"Princess Zelda... you foolish traitor!"

Link and Zelda froze as Ganondorf's voice echoed in their ears.

"I commend you for avoiding my pursuit for seven long years. But you let your guard down... I knew you would appear if I let this kid wander around!"

"Ganondorf!" Link shouted. "Let her go!!"

"My only mistake was to slightly underestimate the power of this kid," Ganondorf's rage sent electricity through the air, stunning them.

"No... It was not the kid's power I misjudged, it was the power of the Triforce of Courage!"

Suddenly Zelda was lifted into the air. Link tried to grab onto the crystal, but it slipped through his fingers.

"But, with the Triforce of Wisdom that Zelda has... When I obtain these two Triforges... Then, I will become the true ruler of the world!!"

Then she was gone, Ganondorf's laughter the only thing left. The rumbling stopped, the air stilled, but Ganondorf wasn't done taunting yet.

"If you want to rescue Zelda, come to my castle!"

Link grit his teeth, screaming in his head since he couldn't get his voice to work.



Everything was burned; the path, the grass, the stone arches that led to the castle, even the air smelled burnt. Tarnished suits of armor lay scattered across the path, like warning signs to stay away.

And that path led to the worst thing Link had ever seen...

Where Zelda's castle should have been, was a hole in the ground, filled with fire and lava. And floating above that, was a new castle. A monstrosity of wickedness and evil, levitating an omen of death.

Sword in hand, shield at his side, and back in green, Link stood before that monstrosity, fully prepared for what was to come. He would defeat Ganondorf here and now, and end this once and for all.

CHAPTER 38

THE HERO

AND THE SAGES

Keese chirped in the distance, and the smell of rot and decay was thick. Link stood on the edge of the cliff overlooking the pit of lava beneath the castle, and stared up at the castle doors just out of reach.

But he wasn't alone anymore. The time for puzzles and games had passed. Wasting time was not an option here, and at last the Sages could do the job they'd been saving their energy for all this time.

"Link... Can you hear me? It's Rauru, the Sage." Though Link could not see them, he knew they were there, behind him, waiting to help. "We six will gather our power to create a bridge to the castle where Ganondorf dwells... The castle's keep, which is known as Ganon's Tower, is protected by six evil barriers. We will help bring down the six barriers, and save Princess Zelda!"

Even as Ganondorf's dark powers pushed them away, the Sages used their magics to create a bridge of light, shimmering every color. Link didn't have much time, and could see it wavering already. But this was the time to use everything he'd learned.

On the edge of the cliff, Link raised his hand and summoned Farore's Wind, creating a return point. His plan was to go in, take down Ganondorf, and warp back out.

Leaving the green glowing circle of light behind, Link headed across the rainbow bridge. His footsteps trailed behind him, creating ripples in the light as the whole thing fell away. By the time he made it to the castle doors, the bridge was gone.

Link took one last look at Hyrule before breaking down Ganondorf's doors with his bare hands. A wave of darkness flew through him, trying to force him down, but Link wasn't going out that easy. He drew his weapons and entered the hall of the castle.

The first thing he noticed was how big the chamber was, but the second thing he noticed was how filled it was with Ganondorf's monsters.

So your own people aren't even the full force of your army, Link thought. "It's still not enough though."

As he ran he blasted his way forward with Din's Fire. It took out a few on the front lines, but it made an opening for him to use his sword to

carve a path through the monsters. Only a moment later however he noticed his fires were moving, and shifting colors and floating through the air.

"I thought you could use some help," Saria said.

Link cut down moblins and wolfmen, blocking attacks as well as he could. But soon the enemy was focused on something else. The floating fires revealed their true forms as the torches held by the Poe Sisters. They were fighting back, drawing the enemy way to allow Link to continue.

The oldest sister, Joelle, fought beside Link.

~~"You haven't forgotten, have you?!"~~

"No," Link answered. "I made a promise, I'll live to keep it."

Joelle nodded and flew off to fight alongside her sisters again. As for Link, he made his through the chamber, and approached the first barrier.

It was a wall of green energy blocking a door.

"This is where I leave *you*," Saria joked. Her power made an opening in the barrier as Link struggled through the hoard of monsters. "The First Barrier is dispelled! Hurry up Link!"

Link smashed the head of a moblin with his shield and launched himself over it, rolling through the barrier as it closed.

"I'm right behind you!" Saria told him. "Keep moving!"

Link nodded and threw open the door, entering the next chamber. And before the next hoard of enemies could swarm him, a Goron was tearing them apart with the legendary Megaton Hammer.

"I am Link!" the Goron shouted. "Hear me roar!"

"Sorry I left the way I did," Link apologized, slicing up monsters beside his namesake. "I should've been better than that."

"No worries!" Goron Link laughed. "Father explained it all! He said you needed my help!"

Link smiled, watching the kid pulverize the monsters. "Couldn't have asked for better."

"But now it's my turn," Darunia said.

Link and Link II split the enemies in half as they reached the barrier. It cracked open and Link II looked up at his hero. "I'll hold them off!"

"The Second Barrier is dispelled!" Darunia said as the barrier opened enough for Link to get through. "Hurry up, Brother!"

Link saluted his Goron brethren and leapt through the barrier, kicking down the door on the other side. This time he didn't wait for anything else to happen, and started off like he did in the first chamber. He

fired an intense blast of Din's Fire, taking out a bulk of the enemies before him.

"Hahaha! You forget! A princess has an army of her own!"

As Princess Ruto's words chilled the air, the gap in the enemy forces Link had made created an opening and armed Zoras began fighting the hoards. It made a direct path to the barrier as the Zora stood fighting shoulder to shoulder.

Link charged full speed ahead as the barrier split.

"The Third Barrier is dispelled!" Ruto said cheerfully. "Kick his butt my love!"

"I'll do my best," Link promised, going through the next door.

It opened to a large spiral staircase leading straight up. And with the enemies stampeding down those stairs directly towards him, it would've been a challenge to not get knocked off.

But as the monsters reached him and he began fighting his way up the tower, more allies came to help. The Sheikah clan leapt from the shadows, flipping over Link or maneuvering around him.

"You would have made a worthy member," Impa mused as Link fought seamlessly alongside the Sheikah. "I set a high bar for you, and you didn't let me down."

"Glad I could help," Link laughed, jumping over a Sheikah and slicing through a row of monsters. "You got this?"

"We got this," Impa nodded. Above him, the next barrier broke, a horizontal wall of purple energy. "The Fourth Barrier has been dispelled! Please save the Princess!"

"I will," Link promised, jumping above the barrier and running up the stairs as it closed behind him.

He was almost there, still fighting wave after wave of monsters. Stabbing, cutting, slashing and slicing or just knocking them over the side, Link did everything he could to stagger his way through.

Of course, he didn't have to wait long for more help to arrive.

"Don't leave me out of this!" Nabooru laughed as she picked up where the Sheikah left off. "I decided I owed you a few."

"We got to fight together after all," Link nodded.

"I'd have loved to spare against you myself, kid!" Nabooru threw Link up the stairs like he was nothing. "But that'll have to wait! The Fifth Barrier has been dispelled! Get moving!"

"He'll never see it coming," Link hurtled the fifth barrier, tackling monsters and knocking them aside.

Looking up he could see the final barrier, a golden wall of light.

More and more monsters seeped out of the walls, flooding the stairs. Through them, just a few flights of stairs away, passed that barrier... was Ganondorf. Zelda would be close.

He hated having to leave everyone behind, letting them face the monsters, but his fight was with Ganondorf, and they'd saved their strength for this battle. They saved their strength then, so he could save his now. They had to let him get there as quick as possible so he could defeat Ganondorf once and for all.

And to break the final barrier, who else would it be but Rauru. In his giant owl form he came flying up through the center of the spiraling stairs, snapping his wings out when he got close to Link and swatting the monsters that got too close.

"He's just ahead," Rauru said. "Get on!"

Not giving him a choice, Rauru grabbed Link with his talons and flew straight up. "The Final Barrier has been dispelled!" he shouted. He threw Link into the air. "Finish this, Link!"

"Thank you!" Link said even as the barrier closed beneath him. "Thank you! All of you!"

He landed at the top of the stairs, no more monsters passed this point. No... all that was left was a door, a simple door. No lock, no tricks or traps, just the door.

"No more stalling," Link growled, grabbing the doorknob. "Let's end this, once and for all!"

CHAPTER 39

A CYCLE INCOMPLETE

Walls of gold, red carpet, brilliant lights, and chilling music played on a massive pipe organ piano. It was nothing like the dark obsidian the rest of his castle was made of. Here, and only here, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. But it was disjointed by the sound of that music.

Link was ready for this final fight as he stepped into that room. And there they were, right in front of him.

Zelda, still trapped in her crystal, hovered above the grand piano... And below her... playing that piano... was Ganondorf himself.

Even with his long hair and cape blocking his body from behind, Link could still tell how strong he was. He was as tall as Link sitting down, and almost as wide at the shoulders.

As Link came closer, the music grew more distorted, and he felt a burning in his left hand. He froze, seeing the glowing mark of the Triforce appear through his glove. He saw the same happen to Zelda, and he could feel the same happening for Ganondorf.

Suddenly the music stopped.

"The Triforce parts are resonating," Ganondorf said. "They are combining into one again..." He stood from his seat, leaning on the piano, the floor creaking beneath his weight. "The Two Triforce parts that I could not capture on that day seven years ago... I didn't expect they would be hidden within you two! And now, finally, all the Triforce parts have gathered here!"

He looked over his shoulder, and Link could see his evil eyes glowing with power. He smiled as he turned around, and Link could see just how strong he really was. The floor almost cracked beneath Ganondorf's feet, and the air crackled around him.

"These toys are too much for you!" Ganondorf hissed. "I command you to return them to me!"

He held up his fist and sent a blast of dark energy through Link. It wasn't an attack, and it didn't hurt, but it was disorienting. Link felt nauseous, but Navi was worse off.

"Link!" Navi panicked, holding her head. "I can't help you! This wave of darkness... I can't aim! I'm sorry, Link!"

"Take a break," Link told her. "It's okay."

Navi, head spinning, ducked under Link's hat. She wanted to be more useful, but here in this final battle... it wasn't fair.

To make matters worse, suddenly Ganondorf jumped into the air. Slamming his fist into the ground, the floor shattered. Link barely managed to grab on to the ledge before falling into the chamber far below, but Ganondorf wasn't done.

The Evil King hovered above what was left of the floor and threw a massive bolt of lightning at Link. The shock hit dead on and Link was falling.

As if in slow motion, Link could see as he fell, the organ piano falling with him, Ganondorf charging his next attack, and Zelda in her crystal rising upwards and disappearing through the lights. Pieces of the floor flew passed him, hit him, and the floor was coming up fast.

But he wasn't going to give up here.

Shaking off the momentary daze, Link grabbed large chunks of the floor, and with the increased strength of the Silver Gauntlets he hurled them at Ganondorf. It would only stop him for a few seconds, but that was all he needed.

Aiming his descent towards the piano, he jumped off of it like a platform and punched the wall, skidding down it. If nothing else it meant he wouldn't hit the floor and flatten himself as everything else came crashing down on top of him.

However, angered that Link was bothering to fight, Ganondorf swooped down, lightning in hand. Link kicked off the wall and used his shield to smash Ganondorf's hand, then slashed with his sword. Ganondorf dodged in the air and grabbed Link.

He flew back up and threw Link down on what was left of the floor. Not giving much time to let him get back up, Ganondorf then slammed his fist into the ground again. Link flipped backwards out of the way, but again the ground shattered, sending more pieces falling into the room below.

And then again, Ganondorf threw a bolt of lightning. Link hoped to deflect it with his shield like against Twinrova, but the blast was too strong. It threw him back, too far to strike with his sword, so instead he used fire.

It surprised Ganondorf, hitting him. It gave Link a chance to find his footing, standing against a wall with a deep pit taking up most of the floor. Over that pit Ganondorf glared at him. Fists tight and electricity running up his arms, his cape flapped violently... but his expression showed no more than a mild concern.

"He's not budging," Link hissed.

"If you could just get close enough," Navi suggested. "That sword was *meant* to defeat him, right? One good hit!"

"One good hit," Link nodded.

Ganondorf charged his attack, and Link started running, ringing around the edge of the room. Bolt after bolt, Link barely outran until one hit a little too close. It sent him flying again, but this time Link used Din's Fire to change trajectory. He blasted the wall and rocketed off, flipping over and aiming himself towards Ganondorf.

Ganondorf swiped out to grab him, but Link spun in the air, and drove the blade of his sword through Ganondorf's shoulder. It pierced and slid down to the hilt, forcing Ganondorf down.

They fell together, each blasting lightning or fire and spinning out of the way as they tumbled through the air to chamber down below. Link held on to the blade of the sword, refusing to back off but trying to stay out of reach.

And as the ground got closer and closer, Link kicked Ganondorf in the face and pulled his sword out of his shoulder. Hitting him with fire one last time, Link smashed Ganondorf into the ground before hitting himself.

Laying on the ground, Ganondorf held his wound, trying to sit up. Link however, was already on his feet. He was tired, his limbs fried, and leaning against a wall, but he was still on his feet.

"The Great Evil King Ganondorf," Ganondorf hissed, out of breath. "Beaten by this kid?!" He couldn't believe it. All his power, all his hard work, and this fairy boy comes to tear him down?! Impossible! He coughed up blood. "Link...!"

Ganondorf staggered, forcing himself to get up. Blood dripping from his mouth and wound, he built up energy in his whole body.

Link stepped back, holding up his shield as Ganondorf roared in anger. The whole castle started shaking and cracking, coming down on top of them. But it fell away from Ganondorf, as if he were the force destroying it all.

He is, Link realized as electricity surged through Ganondorf's body. *He's using all his strength...*

It was now or never, if this was the final strike...

Link closed his eyes as the room lit up with Ganondorf's power, and summoned Nayru's Magic. He felt her shield wrap around him as everything exploded around him. Like water, like ice, like iron, Nayru's Magic protected Link from Ganondorf's last desperate attempt.

And when he opened his eyes, he was standing outside. The floor

and the rest of the castle was still intact, but the walls of the room they were in and the ceiling were gone entirely.

But Ganondorf remained. He stood there, a wicked grin on his face... before all the blood in his body leaked out of him. He fell to the ground, defeated at last.

Nayru's Magic faded and Link fell to his knees.

"You did it!" Navi exclaimed. "I don't sense Ganondorf's magic anymore! He's gone!"

"Zelda," Link mumbled, staring at the sky.

The storm clouds that had been over the castle were beginning to fade, and from them Zelda descended. Her crystal lowered towards them, cracking. Link stood again, and placed his palm on the crystal. It broke, splintering into nothing, and Zelda fell. Catching her, Link sat her down.

At long last, the Evil King was defeated. It took everything they had... but he was gone now, finally. Together, they looked at the Evil King, a King no more.

"Ganondorf," Zelda sighed. "Pitiful man... Without a strong, righteous mind, he could not control the power of the gods... and..."

"What is that?" Link gasped, feeling the ground shake. "Is the castle falling?"

"Link!" Zelda exclaimed, helping him up. "This tower will collapse soon! We'll be crushed in the ruins of the tower! We need to hurry!"

"Don't worry," Link said, holding out his hand. "I already planned for this."

Zelda took his hand, and Link summoned Farore's Wind. Holding her close, the green lights enveloped them, and the winds took them to the return point. As the winds died down and the lights faded, they stepped back.

Right in front of them, the whole castle fell apart, collapsing into the pit of lava, sealing it. Boulders and stone rained from the sky, but Link held his shield above them until it settled. Once it was done... there was nothing left.

"It's over," Zelda whispered. "It's finally over..."

"Link," Navi said, peeking out of his hat. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you in the battle before!"

"Don't worry," Link smiled. "He was easier than I... thought..."

"What's wrong?" Zelda asked.

Link stepped in front her, looking at the rubble. "I thought I heard something..."

"It's probably just still settling," Zelda suggested. "I don't sense... um..."

Link grit his teeth. "Ganondorf..."

He approached the castle slowly, keeping his shield in front of him. Zelda tried to follow, but Link told her to stay behind. Navi however flew by Link's side.

But it was a trap...

As soon as they were close enough, a wall of fire separated Link from Zelda, and the rubble shifted. All of this as the ground shook, and Ganondorf's figure tossed aside chunks of floor.

"Ganon--"

Ganondorf knocked Link's shield away with incredible speed and flung the Master Sword from his hand.

"Ganon," the Evil King hissed, his eyes pale, as if possessed. "You... are Link..."

A sword appeared in Ganon's hand... and as Link struggled he was stabbed through the heart.

"*LINK!!*" Navi screamed.

Ganon swatted her away, summoning a second sword, and skewering Link a second time. He kicked him to the ground as Link went limp, and Ganon laughed, his form changing.

Navi grabbed at Link, trying to get him to wake up. His eyes were open, but he wasn't breathing. "Link!" Navi cried. "Link! Please get up!"

Behind them, Ganon was changing. His shape was warping, getting bigger. Horns grew from his head, his features shifted, his feet were replaced with hooves and his hands were replaced with claws. His swords grew with him, and lightning struck the ground where he stood, giving him power.

Ganon, this beast, screamed and roared and howled, stomping his hooves and bellowing into the storm as it returned in greater force.

But Link could only lay there, bleeding out.

With Zelda trapped behind the fire, Navi too weak to fight something like this, and Link having been their only connection to the Sages... There was no stopping Ganon now.

Again, their choices had only made things worse...

Now... Hyrule would face it's true demise.

CHAPTER 40

SACRIFICIAL DIVIDE

In the vast, deep forest of Hyrule... Long have I served as the guardian spirit... I am known as the Deku Tree... The children of the forest, the Kokiri, live here with me. Each Kokiri has his or her own guardian fairy.

However, there is one boy who does not have a fairy...

...

She hovered above the little boy still snoring on his bed. "Hello, Link!" she said cheerfully. "Wake up!"

...

"We'll need to find another way through," Navi whispered. "I'll sneak up behind 'em and knock 'em out! You make a mad dash for the front-"

"No," Link chuckled, hanging his head. "We'll uh... we'll go around. Can you fly around and see if there's an opening?"

"On it!" Navi kicked off and into the air again. The castle was too big to circle entirely, but paying closer attention to the lowest level of the castle in the immediate area she found something that might work.

She landed back on Link's shoulder, ready to explain her plan.

"So what did you find?" Link asked.

...

Link wasn't sure what the old man was talking about, but he forced himself to stand... and when he looked at himself...

"Look, Link!" Navi exclaimed. "You're big now! You've grown up!"

He felt different... Taller for sure, but something else. It didn't feel like his body. It felt...

Link growled at himself, balling his fists. He couldn't quite piece it together but it was wrong. Whatever this was, whatever was happening now... it was wrong!

...

Link got up and crossed the room to a little shelf. Sitting on it was a stitched together mattress and blanket, a small pillow sitting on it. "I made this, for when I finally got a fairy," he said, sitting it down next to Navi. "We left the forest so quickly after everything happened..." He sat down on his own bed as Navi crawled into hers.

"It's comfortable," Navi smiled. "Thanks."

Link laid down, his feet hanging over the edge. His own bed was a lot less comfortable now... but even then it felt safer than anywhere else he'd been in seven years... Seven years packed into almost two weeks...

"Goodnight," Link said.

Navi was already asleep, her light dimming and glowing in rhythm with her breathing.

...

Navi looked at the grass, nearly as tall as she was when sitting down. "Great Deku Sprout," she mumbled. "What if... I wasn't the best pick to help him?"

"You were," the Deku Sprout said with absolute certainty. "There is no doubt there."

"But how can you be sure?"

"You have already discovered one ability meant to help him," the Deku Sprout explained. "And in time, you will discover others."

"Such as?" Navi asked.

"This... I don't know," the Deku Sprout sighed. "But I know you will find them in time to help, when you are needed."

...

"You are seriously injured Link," Navi warned. "Please take a break."

Link stood in the doorway, looking into the dark. "Shut up."

Navi froze.

"I took a break and it made me late." Link glared at her, one eye stuck shut. "I could've stopped her..." He turned back to the door. "So I'm going."

He entered the dark chamber, and the door slammed shut behind him, cutting him off from Navi.

...

Link... You're going to be okay... just hang in there!

...

"How did you find your way out!?" Link asked, holding her in his hands.

"You didn't think you get rid of me that easily, did you?" Navi laughed, glowing brightly. "Your return point! Didn't you call me back here?"

"I thought it only worked with the magic I was given," Link said. "Like it's a connection between myself and return point. I didn't think it would work."

"So..." Navi looked up at the sky. "I guess... if there were ever anyone else who could use Farore's Wind..."

...

As he turned to leave, Navi hovered behind him for a moment. She wanted to ask the Great Fairy what it was she was meant to learn, what powers she was meant to develop along the way... But something had stuck with her, just after the incident at the Water Temple...

Everything from the way she'd been shut off from Link when he needed her most, to her suddenly appearing outside the Temple as if being teleported to Link's return point. There was a memory missing there, something she wasn't sure about.

...

"And now it's time you remembered..."

Everything froze as the voice in Navi's head called out to her. Everything disappeared as the whiteness of the void enveloped her. Everything was silent, as a young woman came to sit beside her.

Dressed in green, hair up in pigtails, young and beautiful. Navi knew who this was... The Goddess, Farore.

"I showed you myself, once before," Farore told her. "How to heal him."

"You did!?" Navi exclaimed. "W-well show me again! Please! Bring him back please!" She begged, tears blurring her vision.

"I can't," Farore said sadly. "His wounds at the time hadn't killed him."

"So he is..." Navi choked on her words, not wanting to ask the obvious and painful question. "He's... dead?"

Farore nodded.

Navi grabbed Farore's arm, her touch light, weak. "... Bring him back," she sobbed. "Please."

"That's what you're here for," Farore said, looking out into the white void.

"What?" Navi gasped. "I ca--... I can't... do that."

"Yes you can," Farore told her. "That's your purpose. It's why the Great Deku Tree chose you all those years ago. It's what fairies do; they give life to children, protect them."

"But I didn't!" Navi choked. "I failed! I didn't protect him!"

"But you can bring him back," Farore turned to her. "Though... it *will* cost you."

Navi pulled away, silent and fearful. "What... will it cost me?"

"... Everything," Farore answered sadly. "A fairy can give their

life... to bring a life back."

Navi turned pale, her light dimming. Her heart was beating a thousand beats a second. That was the power she had? That was why she was chosen? That's why she was with him all this time?

She looked at her hands. "That's not fair," she mumbled, falling to the ground and sitting on her knees. She crumpled. "We... were supposed to go on more adventures together... He was supposed to go and live on the Ranch... and I was gonna... I was... I..."

"I'm sorry," Farore said softly. "This is the way it must be... This was your mission from the very beginning..." She looked away. "You can choose not to, but it will throw Hyrule into pure chaos... If you bring him back... Hyrule will be saved."

Navi was shaking, her fists clenched tightly. "You think this is a *choice*?" she squeaked. "You think I wouldn't give my life for him in a heartbeat!?" She kicked up into the air, staring down the Goddess despite the tears pouring from her eyes. "What he's been through! What *we've* been through! And this is what it amounts to!?"

Her light was a faint red, and she felt like she was burning up. Her nose and ears hurt, and she could hardly see, the words in her head swimming around, but she wouldn't let it end like this.

"How do I bring him back!?" Navi demanded.

Farore nodded. "Go back to him, and don't let him go."

The Goddess stood, and as she walked away the white void went with her. Soon, Navi was returned to Link.

She held tightly to his tunic, sobbing. "Don't go," Navi begged. "Link... please... don't go..."

She shook, but she didn't let go. "I give my life for yours!" she cried. "*Link come back!!*"

Even as her tiny hands could feel Link's heart beating once more, she could feel her own heart breaking, slowing. Link started breathing, and Navi's light went out.

... And as Link opened his eyes, his wounds healed... Navi looked at him one last time.

Goodbye... Link... Please... be happy... for me...

Link could move just in time to catch her as she fell off of him. Navi landed in his hand, and closed her eyes.

"Navi," Link said, his body numb.

But she had already faded away, her small form already gone. She had given up everything, her power, her life, her body...

Link clenched his fists, and reached for his fallen sword and shield.

Gritting his teeth, he stared up at Ganon. The monster was massive, and hadn't noticed him yet. It was still throwing it's own tantrum, pounding the ground.

"You will pay," Link hissed. "For every life you've taken... *YOU WILL PAY!!*"

That caught his attention, and for a brief moment he froze, staring down at the thing that would defy him.

Using Nayru's Magic to protect him, Din's Fire to propel him, and with the power of all six Sages behind him, Link screamed, driving the blade of the sword through Ganon's chest. The Sages used their power like weights, forcing the beast to it's knees as Link drove the sword deeper. And as Ganon's power weakened, the wall of fire died and Zelda rushed to add her strength to the fight.

The Sages chained him in place, Link held his sword tight, and Zelda summoned the full power of the Triforce. With all three pieces together in one place, she used it's magic to crush Ganon from the inside.

Ganon doubled over and Link jumped away, pulling his sword out as Ganon was pressed flat against the ground.

"We're using our power to hold him!" Zelda shouted, straining against the Triforce's magic. "Use your sword and deliver the final blow!"

Link roared and plunged his sword through Ganon's skull.

The monster lashed out, breaking free of the Sages' hold.

"Sages!" Zelda called. "Now!"

A holy light broke the storm, glaring down on Ganon.

"Ancient creators of Hyrule!" Rauru summoned. "Now, open the sealed door and send the Evil Incarnation of Darkness into the void of the Evil Realm!!"

The light consumed him, silencing him, tearing at him and pulling him down.

But still he fought. "YOU... CURSE YOU... ZELDA! CURSE YOU... SAGES!!"

His beast form was stripped away from him, his magic was stripped away from him... There was nothing left but the Gerudo man who was once King of the desert Thieves.

"CURSE YOU... LINK!" He clawed at the ground, refusing to be defeated. "Someday... When this seal is broken... That is when I will exterminate your descendants!! As long as the Triforce of Power is in my hand...."

Link stood over him, and kicked him. Ganon fell into the void, the Evil Realm... Far, far away from Hyrule.

"Go to Hell," Link spat. "You bastard."

As the light blinded him, concealing him, he returned his sword and shield to his back, and closed his eyes.

EPILOGUE

YOUR REWARD

The sky was bright again, clear. Small, white, puffy clouds floated slowly down below. Birds chirped in the air as they returned home, and the storm was gone at last. High above, the sun was shining, and the air was warm. Peace... had finally come.

And Link stood there, standing in the sky high above it all, looking down on it.

"Thank you, Link..." Zelda came to stand beside him, looking down at the world they'd saved. "Thanks to you, Ganondorf has been sealed inside the Evil Realm!"

"Yeah," Link nodded, telling himself that at least those who survived would get their happy endings...

"Thus, peace will once again reign in this world," Zelda said. "... For a time."

"For a time?" Link grumbled. "What's...? Never mind... I don't..."

"All the tragedy that has befallen Hyrule was my doing..." Zelda lowered her head, watching as the people of Kakariko left their houses, feeling the change in the world.

Link didn't respond. He knew it wasn't her fault, it was Ganondorf's... but he didn't know how to say it.

"I was so young," Zelda continued. "I could not comprehend the consequences of trying to control the Sacred Realm. I dragged you into it, too. Now it is time for me to make up for my mistakes..."

"We all screwed up," Link said. "Everyone of us who tried to stop this thing from the beginning... It's over, but... I don't think we get to make things right..."

Zelda shook her head. "You must lay the Master Sword to rest and close the Door of Time..."

There was a moment of silence between them. Link knew what needed to be said, and didn't know how to say it. Zelda knew what needed to be done, and didn't know how to say it. When finally that silence was broken, it was Zelda who spoke first.

"However," she whispered. "By doing this, the road between times will be closed..." She held her hand out to him, stepping away. "Link, give the Ocarina to me... As a Sage, I can return you to your original time."

Link practically jumped out of his skin, and if he were still the kid he used to be he wouldn't have been able to hide his surprise too well. Instead, to Zelda, all she saw the brief expression of shock on his face.

"I can... go back...?" Link shut his eyes, trying to think if it was even worth it. "Can I... go back?"

He held the Ocarina in his hand, thinking of all the Sages who gave their lives to awaken their powers... thinking of Navi who gave her life to bring him back... *They'd be alive then... right?*

But, if he went back to that time, would things change? Could he force things to change? Could he stop all this from happening in the first place?

...

Should he stop all this from happening?

Whether or not he was able to didn't matter... But, every decision they'd made so far made things worse. Was it worth it to risk a second chance? Risk making things worse again?

Link stared at his reflection in the blue instrument. *I could leave well enough alone*, he thought. *I could say no to this... move on... go find Malon, and just... live...*

He hadn't even noticed he was crying until his tears hit his reflection. *Why do I have to choose?*

"I'm only going to say this one more time; You are not alone."

Link grit his teeth, and handed the Ocarina to Zelda. "I'll go back," he told her. "... I'll go back."

Zelda held the Ocarina in her hand, a sad expression looking away from him. She knew how painful a decision this must be, but she felt giving him a second chance was the best she could do.

"When peace returns to Hyrule," Zelda said. "It will be time for us to say goodbye..." She took the Ocarina and held it close to her. "Now, go home, Link. Regain your lost time!"

"Home," Link nodded, stepping away.

"Where you are supposed to be," Zelda said. "The way you are supposed to be..."

"I'm ready," Link clenched his fists, looking down at Hyrule, praying it would put itself back together.

"Thank you... Link..."

As Zelda began playing her song on the Ocarina, Link heard footsteps all around him. Surrounding him, each of the Sages appeared, playing their songs on their own instruments.

Zelda and Saria played their ocarinas, Darunia played the drums,

Impa played the harp, And Rauru, Ruto and Nabooru sang. Each of their songs played in harmony, finally in balance. And as their songs reverberated through the open air, a light formed beneath Link's feet.

"Good-bye," Zelda said, disappearing.

"Farewell, brother," Darunia said, passing on.

"Good job," Impa said, vanishing.

"We won't forget you," Rauru said, leaving.

"I'll miss you," Ruto said, departing.

"Keep your head up," Nabooru said, receding.

"Link," Saria said.

"Saria," Link stopped her from leaving. "Could you... tell the Poe Sisters I'm sorry? I... wanted to keep my promise... But, I couldn't..."

Saria smiled. "They'll understand," she told him.

"And... could you let everyone else know..." Link blinked away his tears. "No, I'll tell them myself... I'm going to see you all again anyway... right?"

"Right!" Saria nodded.

"... Thank you," Link said.

Saria opened her mouth to speak, but she found she had nothing left to say. Instead, she just smiled bright as ever, and faded away.

Then Link let the lights take him.

—

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As Link began to see again, he was standing in front of the Master Sword. It was back in the pedestal in the Temple of Time, returned to its sleeping place.

He let go, seeing how small his hands were. He was back... back to being ten years old... seven years gone and back again...

Navi, he thought, staring up at the window high above him. It's light shone down on the sword, making the blade glow. *You're not here, with me... But I'll find you... Like you brought me back, I'll bring you back...*

He turned around, walking away from the Master Sword.
But first... there's something I have to do...

Zelda peered through the window of the courtyard, looking into the throne room where Ganondorf was meeting with the King. The Gerudo man knelt, but his expression was anything but sincere. She wanted to say something to the King, her father, but what? What could possibly convince him not to make a deal with the Gerudo?

She'd tried everything, even telling him the details of her prophetic dreams... But nothing worked. Her father kept saying that he would at least try to negotiate...

Then she heard the sound of footsteps approaching her, and she turned.

There, entering her courtyard, was a lone boy clad in green.

Was this... the hero from her dream? Was this the one who would help her save her people?

He stood in the center of the courtyard, a look like the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

