

# The Legend of Zelda: Evil's Bane

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Chapter One: "Heart of Darkness"

“In the land of Hyrule, there echoes a legend. A legend held dearly by the royal family that tells of a boy who became a man. He embarked on a great journey to the deepest darkest corners of the earth, battling the forces of evil, testing the limits of his will. All to fulfill his destiny which is, above all else....to save....*me* .”

- Princess Zelda, 2047 HC

Sword and shield at the ready, the mighty hero leapt from stair to stair, charging the inner sanctum of the dark lord, Ganondorf Dragmire, the great destroyer of the Sacred Realm. Breaking through wave after wave of Lizalfos, Wizzrobes, Stalfos, Darknuts, and Iron Knuckles, the battle-hardened gallant pushed through insurmountable odds to reach his foe.

With the Master Sword in hand, he was but a boy with a blade. Sent on an impossible quest by his princess, he found himself just another pawn in the grand scheme, a master plan of villainy to conquer and subjugate all the free races of his homeland, Hyrule. He had failed to see the darkness behind the veil, but in turn had learned to see how things aren't quite the same in the dark as they are in the light.

Blessed with the power of the Goddesses, Link held the courage to triumph over this foreboding. With the help of his friends found along the way, some now lost to the sands of time and space, he fought through drowning lakes, bone-chilling caves, skin-eating deserts, and poisonous forests of emerald. Hunting his quarry across the very fabrics of time, no other hero of old had more proved their worth of legend.

And here, now, approaching the top of the dark lord's spire, the fate of millions living, as well as the destinies of the coming generations, were all depending on this small, insignificant boy from the forest. Armed with the weapons of his ancestors, he pillaged the King of Thieves' hordes, ground his armies into dust, and laid to waste the desert powers of an empire.

A child of destiny, he forged himself in the heat of battle and grew to unbelievable strength; courage needed for the impending conflict.

Reaching the crest of Ganondorf's castle, the steadfast Hero of Time brazenly entered, no fear in his eyes as he dauntlessly treaded upon the inner sanctum. His weapon now sheathed, he armed himself only with his faith and his resolve to set things right and return things to how they should have been.

Sitting near the end of his self-absorbing shrine upon that throne of power, the dark lord sat bemused. Seeing this speck of a child before him, he couldn't believe it. A boy with a blade had sundered the breath of an army, silenced the chants of the witches, and had released the healing waters of the Zora's. Light was again entering into the realm, and he could not bear it any longer.

Wordless, the imposing Gerudo King rose to his feet and gestured to his right, an evil leer upon his dark lips. There, imprisoned in a transcendental crystal of black magic, was the princess Zelda. Completely suspended, she was obviously aware yet powerless to intervene.

The hero's eyes grew stern and his breath fluttered. He thought the princess long since dead, as Ganondorf was assuredly to claim her piece of the Triforce from her, the Triforce of Wisdom, the power of the Goddess Nayru.

“You seek answers.” Ganondorf said darkly, his voice coarse and foreboding. “But all you will find here is your death. I will finish what the wars started, those seventeen years ago. You

were not meant to live. Your mother should have died in my tower, long before you came into this wretched world.”

The hero reached back with his left hand and withdrew the Master Sword, evil’s bane, his right hand gripping tightly his Hylian shield. His anger grew at the mention of his mother, and it was all he could do to prevent himself from lashing out at the dark king in a rage.

Ganondorf laughed devilishly. “Do you seriously think that some rusty weapon of the old-age will help you here? My power is absolute! The power of the Gods!! You’re no hero. You’re no *protector of time*. You’re a weakling, a coward, and a *Hylian*. A boy amongst men in the shadows of darkness.

“Your mother knew better than to fight when the time came, so she ran. You should do the same....while I allow it and you are still *capable*.”

As if drifting into a dream, the room blurred to white and the boy found himself alone in a grove of white. Singing softly like the wings of a butterfly, the hero could hear the princess’ voice in his head.

*Don’t listen to him, Link! He’s trying to tear you down, as he did me. Your mother died to save us all, you’ve known that all your life. Don’t let him rule you!*

*Look into your heart, Link of the Kokiri, son of Rachel, and see what is right and true. Ganondorf sees through stained glass, crooked and colored, but to defeat him you must look through the purest of waters. Leave all that binds you behind, even if it means all that you hold dear and true.*

*Remember what Rauru said, in the Temple of Light? ‘Evil cannot triumph over the pure of heart, only self-defeat can destroy hope.’*

*You ARE the Hero of Time, Link. Become the man I know you to be. Take up Evil’s Bane as your sword, and I shall be your shield! Fear not, the coming of the storm!*

Instantly returning to the room, Link refocused his eyes, the dark lord still before him.

“Fool of a Hylian!” The desert man reached behind his throne and retrieved his bladed staff, pointing the menacing scythe at his enemy. “Then let us see the doom of your race in *all* it’s faded glory!”

Focusing his dark energy, Ganondorf released a powerful wave of magic into the room. The pointed spire of the roof evaporated into nothingness and the walls of the tower melted into air. Zelda’s prison faded and disappeared, leaving the boy and Hyrule’s antithesis alone at the top of a circular pedestal, a scalding abyss of lava nine levels below them.

“Behold!” Ganondorf raised his right hand in a fist. “The power of Din!”

His hand began to glow with an unearthly heat, the mark of the Triforce of Power clearly etched into his shadowy skin. Just then, Link felt an itch the face of his left hand, the Triforce of Courage reacting to the close proximity of it’s sister shard.

“I see know.” Ganondorf said, his face turned sour. “The courage of Farore rests within *you*. All this time searching, and it was within this scrap! Had I known, you wouldn’t have lived passed opening the Temple of Time!

“So here, in my tower, all three pieces of the Triforce are within my grasp! Foolish boy! Knowing any better, you would have buried yourself under Lake Hylia when the waters raised!

“Now I need but reach out my hand and this world will end! Paving the way for a sunless paradise, my vessel in which I intend to travel the stars!”

The hero eased his thoughts and cleared his mind. Focusing the power of the Triforce of Courage that lay within his soul, he fought out the apprehension that was building and took a step forward, signifying his will to strike down evil wherever it should choose to flourish.

Ganondorf chuckled and raised his staff above his head, his muscular form filling all of Link's sight. "Then come!"

Dashing forward, his Pegasus Boots churning up dust as he flew, the Hero of Time leapt across the slim divide between him and his adversary, striking downward with the Master Sword with all the strength he could muster.

Ganondorf Dragmire grinned. Blocking the futile assault with merely his left forearm, he chuckled his intentions and swept the boy away with an inherent abominable grace, his red cloak billowing behind him from the force. Looking at his arm, he could see a slight scuff on his armor, nothing more than a scratch in the darkened steel.

"Do you see now, boy?" Ganondorf showed the score. "Master Sword indeed!"

Taken aback by the lack of damage inflicted on the Dark Lord, Link took a step back and readied his shield in expectation of a retaliatory move.

Ganondorf couldn't control his vile laughter. "Do you not see?!? I..AM..A GOD!!!"

Taking his bladed staff in both hands, the Gerudo King charged the scythe with black magic and charged at the boy. Swinging the black-fire-burning rod, Ganondorf crushed down on the boy, hatred seething through his teeth.

Incapable of parrying such brute strength, Link rolled forward and narrowly dodged the flaming cane as it smashed into the floor, creating a deep crack in the chiseled stone. Now behind the Dark Lord, the hero swung the Master Sword at the Gerudo's Achilles, an attack that would fell any creature on legs.

Glancing off, the attack only made Ganondorf even more vain. "Please, try something a little more clever. I am growing bored with these pokes and pricks."

Circling around with amazing speed, Ganondorf swung a mighty right hand like a hammer, striking the hero across his right temple. Flying to the edge of the tower, if his mind had but been a little more somnolent he would have surely rolled off the edge and down into the molten rock at its base. Gripping a slit in the rock, he pulled himself back to the relative safety of the towers facade.

Slowly raising to his feet, the boy's right eye started to swell from that crushing blow and a slight trickle of blood ran down his chin.

"Do you see, boy?" Ganondorf dropped the staff, no longer feeling the Hylian a direct threat. "Even with that magical stick in hand you are nothing more than a recreant fairy-herder! Come at me, I will not even defend! Let's see what other futile attacks you have!"

Gritting his teeth, Link dashed at the Gerudo. Jumping through the air, he quickly sheathed the Master Sword and threw his fist down to the ground, erupting the gray stone in a blazing explosion of fire and heat.

Withdrawing back a few feet, Link half-expected Ganondorf to be at least singed, but was horrified at the sight of the dark lord not even moved.

"Din's fire?!? Ganondorf himself couldn't believe it. "By the Goddesses, boy, what do you think I am *made* of?!?"

Repeating Link's attempt in his own fashion, Ganondorf snapped his fingers and the entire top of the tower was engulfed in a conflagration hot enough to rival the liquefied rock at the base of the tower.

Ducking behind his shield to defend himself from the blast, the boy was surprised to see himself encapsulated by some kind of blue-tinted crystal, shielding him from the heat of the fire.

*Link!* The hero could hear the Princess calling him from some nethermost plain. *He's too powerful to defeat with just a blade! Realize the truth! The Master Sword is just that, a sword.*

*YOU are evil's bane, Link. You ARE the Master Sword! The power is in you....and me.*

Link didn't understand.

*The Triforce, Link! He holds the power of Din, force and fire his only weapons! You can't fight him with that power; your not strong enough! You can't be! Only courage and wisdom together can defeat the dark lord.*

*I entrust it to you, the power of the Goddess Nayru. May her love descend upon you in this dark time and give you the strength you need.*

Link felt a curious swell within him, as if being lifted up from the ocean. Simultaneously he felt a pinch, the Princess Zelda's voice going silent and the feeling of her presence leaving the boy.

Taking in a deep breath, Link dropped the shield and stood to his feet, the force of the blazing inferno at the top of the tower passing around him like a rock parting a stream. His eyes turning solid white, Link removed the Master Sword from its scabbard and pointed it towards Ganondorf, the sheen of its blade starting to glow brightly.

The Black King ceased his display of fire and stood astonished, the boy before him standing firm against his colossal strength. Seeing the Master Sword returned to such power as of legend, he quickly retrieved his staff, holding it in a defensive position.

"Still just a boy." Ganondorf said defiantly.

Culminating a ball of dark-energy in each of his fists, Ganondorf rushed the boy and swung his staff, the blade close enough to shave off the boy's left ear.

Ducking and rolling, Link made the same move as he did before, coming about and facing the back of the dark lord. Sheathing the Master Sword, he quickly whipped out his fairy bow and instinctively loaded an arrow. He didn't know why he did it, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

"What are you going to do?" Ganondorf stared down the arrow that was pointed at his chest. "You have the Master Sword and yet you threaten me with a sliver of wood? Enough of this charade! You're end is now!"

The giant of a man charged at the minuscule boy, his burning staff flailing wildly in the wind. Link knew he should fear it, but he didn't. Instead he felt a calming peace come over him, and the sage Rauru's presence could be felt in Link's fingertips. Carousing across the shaft of the arrow like arboreal vines of light, Link's entire body turned luminescent with the powers of the Light Sage. A paragon of light amongst the dark and dreary landscape of modern Hyrule that could be seen all across the land from the high mountaintops all the way to the distant lakes of Hylia.

*Fill him with light. Rauru's thoughts could be heard. And he will fall.*

Loosing the shaft from the taut strings of the fairy bow, Link closed his eyes as the missile struck home.

Falling back a few feet, his mind disbelieving, Ganondorf looked down to see the arrow protruding from in-between his ribs, firmly lodged within his right lung. A sliver of a crack appearing in his armor, he could see a faint light coming from within.

"What is this?"

Ganondorf felt a numbing sensation in his chest and for the first time felt weakness. Looking up to his adversary, he, for a brief, intangible moment, held a begrudging respect for one who at last could challenge his superiority.

"I will not fail." Ganondorf said antagonistically. "You're people will wither and die, my kind *will* rule the stars once again!"

Wordlessly answering, Link reloaded his bow and fired another arrow into the dark lord, this one hitting him cleanly in the gut.

Gasping as the power of light started to fill his darkness-infested body, Ganondorf fell to a knee and gripped the shaft of the second arrow. Trying to remove the arrow, he spit out a vile darkness that was his blood, the shaft unwilling to budge.

“Is this how you would defeat me?” Ganondorf’s ways were never to change. “Like a coward in the distance? Still no honor in your wretched house. Your father was the same, unwilling to risk his own life but plenty able to send those whom served him to their deaths.”

Link stood to his feet and selectively launched another arrow into Dragmire’s other lung, the poisonous light of the Sages starting to make his skin lighten.

“Fine.” Ganondorf placed a hand on the ground to steady himself. “Murder me. It is you’re descendants that will pay, if not you. I will have my vengeance, wether in this life or the next, and you will be long dead when I return to conquer! I curse you!”

Ganondorf was clearly losing control of himself, growing desperate as the power of Din and light started to consume him. “Curse you!! And your house!! And your Children!! All the comings of the ages are for me to command, and you shall never be rid of me! This I swear, the Triforce of Power within my soul, that you will never be complete without me!!

Ganondorf pushed himself to his feet, his armor cracking and his red cloak turning to shreds. “I am Ganondorf Dragmire! King of the Gerudos! High Lord of Hyrule! Commander of the Triforce of Power! I am a God amongst men, and you are nothing but a shadow in the dust!”

Lifting up his staff he charged at Link, the Gerudo’s eyes turning red with hatred. Reacting defensively, the boy dropped the bow and unsheathed the Master Sword once more, throwing it like a spear into the heart of the Black King.

The force of the blade entering his body threw Ganondorf backwards and onto his back. Unnaturally still alive, he struggled to remove the blade which seemed to leech onto his body like a vine, holding firm against his strength.

“Not yet!” Ganondorf screamed, tearing the sword out of his body, his heart still attached to the ardent blade.

Rolling over in agony, the dark lord shivered and convulsed, his hands holding over the gaping hole in his chest, but soon fell still.

Taking in a deep breath, Link closed his eyes and felt a sense of relief pass over him. It was done, Ganondorf had been defeated and shuffled loose. Hyrule was safe again, the progeny of civilization will continue to thrive and rebuild. Walking to the edge of the tower, he spied outwards across Hyrule field and the great beyond of the Wildlands.

*Link!* The boy could hear the voice of his childhood friend, the Kokiri sage of the forest, Saria, whispering in his mind.

Turning his head back to Ganondorf’s corpse, the boy could see that the heart of the villain, while pierced by the sword and no longer within his body, was still beating. Glancing over to where the body should have been, there only lay a smudge on the rock, a shadow of the man.

The ground started to quake and pieces of the tower started to crumble, the base laughter of the Black King carried on the wind and echoed amongst the distant mountains. Link wasted no time in retrieving the Master Sword, sliding the black heart off with his boot and kicking it off the tower and into the charring lava below.

*Run, Link, run!* Saria screamed into Link’s mind.

Little did he know, those would be the last words he would ever hear his friend speak.

Running to the opposite ledge of the tower, Link saw a distant arm of a flagpole,

dramatically jutting forward about halfway down the cylindrical castle. Nearly four flights down, Link quickly dove off the edge of the tower and flipped out his Hover Boots, using them with his hands to slow his drop enough.

Hooking the pole with the inside of his elbow, Link slid down the angled shaft and flew through a stained-glass window, one that previously was in old-Hyrule castle in the throne room. Rolling against the near wall, the hero was surrounded by falling rock and fleeing Iron Knuckles who paid little attention to the regicidal maniac in their midst while the tower collapsed.

Ignoring his enemies as well, Link got to his feet and started to make for the nearest stairs when he heard a faint call, coming from somewhere deep within the castle. Throwing away all inhibition the hero ran to the cry, hurdling over the crumbling stone and the dead he had left behind while he ascended the tower only minutes before.

Coming to a vaulted door, he pushed through the heavy iron-clad slats and entered what looked to be a sacrificial chamber, the Princess Zelda strapped to a gold and purple-velvet covered table. She looked like she wasn't breathing.

Rushing over to her, Link quickly cut the leather cords that held her down and heaved her slender frame over his shoulder. Invoking the powers of Nayru, Link erected an impenetrable shield of reflecting crystal to shield the Princess from the falling rock and scant defenders still in the tower.

Kicking out a near window, the hero pulled out his hookshot and took aim at a near wooden timber that made up a canopy over the main entrance to the castle. Launching the spring-loaded grappling hook at the timber, it firmly took hold and yanked the two out of the window and into the open air.

Locking the chain at its distance, Link swung around the front of the castle. Perfectly timing the descent, he released the clamping mechanism on the hookshot and dropped the two on the Light Bridge that connected the castle to the mainland; a passage to supposed safety. Nearly sliding off the side of the bridge, a fortuitous gust of wind from the underside of the bridge steadied the boy and the comatose Princess in his arms.

Relieved to have had made it out of the castle, Link turned and watched as the imposing shrine to death shifted and crumbled into the lake of lava, in turn ending the symbol for the seven years of tyranny and oppression that had plagued the Hylian people.

But the question remained and the boy searched for signs of him all over the ruined grounds: where was Ganondorf?

Gently laying the Princess down on the mainland, Link placed a dirtied hand on her slender neck, feeling no beating of her heart to the touch of his fingers. She looked angelic, her skin light and her face showing no signs of pain. She was as Link always wished to remember her: a Princess of Hyrule.

Defeat settled in. Even though Ganondorf received a mortal blow, the cost seemed too high to the young man. The land was devastated. The inhabitants all but enslaved and destroyed. The Kokiri were gone, the Deku tree dead. The Zoras were encased in ice, perhaps never to awaken. The Gorons were sacrificed to a fire-breathing dragon, few remain. The Gerudos, whom a male was only born every one-hundred years, was without a heir and would quickly die out and fade into the other races.

Even then, with all this death and destruction supposedly behind them, had anything really changed? The Black King was still out there. Link could feel it, and it was only a matter of time before he resurfaced again.

“Link?”

The boy jumped to his feet, startled by a familiar voice.

“Is it done?”

The hero looked down. The Princess’ eyes were open, tired-looking against the setting sun. Incapable of reacting to the sudden sight of Zelda being alive, he stood there emotionless like a statue.

“Is it done, Link?” The Princess asked again.

Just then, a slight rumble could be heard coming from the base of the ruined castle. Link turned to Zelda and shook his head, knowing now that this fight may never end.

“Help me.” Zelda held up a gloved hand to her friend.

Taking the young woman’s delicate hand, Link raised her to her feet and helped her steady herself, her footing seeming to be feeble and unsure.

“I’m fine.” Zelda reassured her companion. “At least for the moment. Don’t worry about me. All that matters now is *him*.”

Unbeknownst to the two would-be saviors of Hyrule, down in the bottomless depths of the lava flow was Ganondorf’s heart, slowly sinking as the molten rock tried hopelessly to consume the mantle of evil that pervaded it’s sole existence. Still beating, the heart was a testament to the dark lord’s intentions: eternity absolute.

Branded upon the heart’s surface was the form of a triangle on top of two others. Starting to glow and pulsate, the power of the Triforce could not be undone.

Bursting forth from the lava, the demon-god *Ganon* forced it’s way to the surface. It was the body of Ganondorf, unmistakably so, but the soul of the man that once was no doubt had been consumed. It’s eyes shooting flames that licked across the creature’s face, it vaulted into the air and took space above the ruins of the castle.

The sky grew dark, but no clouds or stars were anywhere to be seen. Darkness crept into the world, though not through the absence of light. Evil had just been birthed. Anything before had just been a fluttering of infamy. This was pure sin amongst the living, the dead in their tombs turning to ash and the very fabrics of the Sacred Realm starting to unwind.

Lightning struck. Thunder roared through the impenetrable heavens. It was all Zelda could do to prevent herself from falling into terror, her piece of the Triforce still in Link’s possession.

“Ganondorf.” Zelda spoke into the open.

Answered only by the demonic laughter of the beast before them, the phantom raised a hand and with a lifting motion the lava field below lifted up to the level of the castle and the mainland. Link and Zelda stepped back, but didn’t flee. A grin could be seen on the face of the distant *Ganon* and he screamed a ghoulish screech, the lava answering by instantly cooling and reverting back to solid stone.

Dropping to the ground with an aerial grace, *Ganon* moved his head to the side and stared at the reflecting beauty of the Light Bridge. Then, with a disgusted wave of his hand, the bridge turned to ash, cracked, crumbled, and fell to the ground. Appeased with his own wretchedness, *Ganon* folded his arms and awaited a response from the two Hylians before him.

Link again took sword in hand, holding evil’s bane in his left grip. Offering his fairy bow and his quiver of arrows to the Princess, he knew that he would need her help if there were to be any hope of defeating this immortal.

“I can’t.” Zelda said, backing away. “I’m not strong enough.”

Link placed a dirtied hand upon the Princess’ cheek, feeling a warm tear pass down over his knuckles.

“Never fear.” The hero whispered with a weak smile.

Link returned the Triforce of Wisdom to Zelda, never once considering of keeping it for himself. Her strength of mind returned, Zelda nodded to the Hero of Time and took the bow and quiver without further thought or speech. Loading a shaft onto the tense string, she closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to herself. Invoking Rauru’s power within her, Zelda infused the arrows with that same evil-burning light that Link had and stepped forward first towards the demon-god.

*Ganon* laughed.

Rushing forward, Link threw all his strength into his Pegasus boots and darted towards *Ganon* with blinding speed. Launching one carefully aimed Light Arrow, Zelda hit her mark and it exploded into a brilliant fireball of light. The demon momentarily blinded, Link pulled out his hookshot and shot it forward, the piercing tip latching onto *Ganon*’s armor.

The hookshot pulling the boy at his foe at an even faster rate than the magic boots could manage, Link flew through the air like an arrow in his own right. Master Sword at point, Link surged the blade through the chest of the demon and twisted it upwards, lodging the blade firmly within *Ganon*’s body. The blade went straight up his throat and into his skull, the hilt pressing deeply into his chest.

Swiping the boy away with a claw that could shred steel, *Ganon* giggled and started to move towards the boy with a victor’s gait.

Lying on his face on the rock, blood rushing from him freely, the demon gripped Link and lifted him up by the scruff of his neck, proudly displaying him for Zelda to see.

Zelda couldn’t help but load up another Light Arrow and launch it at *Ganon*. Reacting as if he could see it before it happened, Link grabbed *Ganon* by the neck with his right hand and swung himself around, giving the demon what looked like a bear hug just as the arrow struck the hero square in the back.

Zelda gasped and dropped the bow, terrified of what she had done.

The bolt firmly in him, Link managed to look up at the demon in his grip. *Ganon* grinned at first, ecstatic to see the Hero of Time finally vanquished, but then his face turned to horror when he saw the boy smile back.

His body virtually infected with the healing powers of pure light, Link melded himself with the Master Sword embedded within *Ganon*’s body, causing the demon’s body to also be drawn into it’s reflective blade. Belting out curses in indiscernible languages, *Ganon* breathed his last free Hylian breath as he disappeared into the Master Sword, his evil permanently imprisoned.

Zelda rushed to the sight, the sword falling from the air and clattering upon the craggy surface. Stooping over evil’s bane, she shed a tear onto it’s glossy blade and for a brief moment saw the face of her champion, a friendly smile was all he gave as he faded into the light.

All that remained of *Ganon* and Link were their shadows, permanently etched into the rock below from the brilliance of the light.

Taking the sword in hand, Zelda empowered the blade with the Triforce of Nayru, Goddess of Wisdom, and the three pieces of the relic were again whole. The blade was returned to the Temple of Time and again sealed, the three Spiritual Stone Keys returned to their native peoples. No one knows what happened to the Ocarina of Time, the final key to the Sacred Realm where the Triforce now rests, but most think it sang it’s final note as the sun rose the following day; a lament for the fallen hero.

Kokiri friend, son of Rachel and Carnelian, the Hero of Time, the savior of Hyrule, the Master of the Winds. These are all names of the legend that would be told amongst the peoples of Hyrule for generations to come, but to Zelda he would simply be known as Link, her quiet hero.

As for the hero himself, only time could tell where he had gone.

## Chapter Two: "A Cold Awakening"

"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."

- The Composer Brothers

Link's sleep was restless, frigid, and dark. Flashing images of old wounds and past foes cut through his psyche as a sickle glides through wheat. He could see faces. Hundreds of faces, ally, enemy, and stranger alike, flickering around him as his memories faded into one another.

Some were just as he remembered them, warm and friendly. Others were not so pleasant.

“Link...” Their voices were ethereal and distant, many blending into one. “Brave Link...dost thou still have the courage?”

Just then, Link felt Saria’s presence singled out from the horde. He couldn’t see her, but he knew she was near. Even in this dreamscape, he realized he was in danger as his childhood friend only came to him when menace lay in wait.

Frozen down to his soul, Link desperately tried to wake himself, only to find he was trapped within his own mind. Confused, he searched his thoughts for what brought him here, for what entangled him in this madness.

All he could see was a blank slate; darkness begetting shadier schemes. But somehow he knew who he was. He could feel his friend Saria, somewhere in this labyrinth of suppressed memory. He knew he wasn’t alone, but he couldn’t help but feel that way.

Then there was a light in the distance. At first hazy and intermittent, it soon grew and brightened. Warming the chill in his veins, Link could feel the sweet breath of life fill his slumbering body. His eyes opened, as if for the first time, and laying before him he could see it: the Master Sword in its pedestal.

Surrounded by crumbled stone and feral vines, the blade was rusted and dull; a sign of age and neglect. Link was worried of what had become of it, seeing a steadfast relic of the ages in such a state of decay.

The boy looked around him, seeing at once foreign and familiar places. Odd, old things littered the ground, debris and ruins long since cast aside and forgotten. Shattered mirrors, tumbled statues, and fallen chandeliers were all about the legendary blade. Long, arching fingers of stone clawed their way into the sky overhead; the bones of a kingdom.

As his memories returned, Link finally recognized where he was: the Temple of Time.

In awe at the rampant chaos about this sacred grove in the forest, Link moved towards the upright blade in the ground. Not one part of the blade was as it should have been. The blade was rusted and chipped, a slight crack running across its center. The hilt was covered in drooping vines of gossamer hedge. The pommel was slightly crooked, as if someone intent on taking the sword tried to crush it with a hammer when the blade wouldn’t budge from its nest.

Link reached out to touch the once mighty weapon of the Goddesses, but jerked back as he heard a wicked laughter fill the grove. Searching around for the source, he couldn’t see anyone else in the grove, but Link knew that he was definitely not alone.

Rummaging about his clothing for weapons, Link found himself lacking. Drawing near the Master Sword, he stood by it to await his foe from the darkness.

“It is time, boy!” Ganondorf’s coarse and powerful voice echoed into the decrepit temple. “For all your meddling, for all your triumph, here we are in the ruins of what you saved. And for what? For your beneficiaries to destroy it themselves!”

Link’s face was stern, unmovable. It was as if it were yesterday that he sacrificed himself to defeat the Gerudo King, and yet things had changed so much.

“I am free once again!” Ganondorf said with wicked glee. “The Triforce of Power in my fist, there is nothing to stop me! You, trapped within these walls of air, are doomed to be imprisoned within the very magic you used to destroy me!”

“Look! The very blade you would use against me is broken!”

“So tell me then, Hylian spawn, where are your Goddesses now?”

Then Link saw him. Entering the grove as if from nowhere, Ganondorf’s towering frame of black armor dauntlessly ventured forth. Carrying a luminous sword that looked as if it were

made of light, he charged forward at the boy, hatred burning in his eyes.

Link instinctively reached out and gripped the Master Sword. With all his might he pulled on the blade, its body refusing to budge.

Swinging that foul blade, Ganondorf Dragmire cut clean through the Master Sword as Link rolled away, the hilt and pommel of *Evil's Bane* flying off into the trees with a dark, whistling sound. Link looked at the severed blade in horror, the weapon of the Goddesses destroyed so easily.

Guttural laughter escaped from Dragmire's lungs. "Now do you see, boy? It was all for nothing!"

Ganondorf lunged at the small boy, the fearsome tip of his engulfing sword flying through the air like a stream of liquid rock. Link was despaired, but his courage and his will to defeat evil didn't falter.

Rolling forward under the singing blade, Link flew into Ganondorf's legs, causing the Dark Lord to tumble and fall, nearly onto his own sword. Seeing no chance in defeating him in this meeting, Link bolted off towards the trees, snatching up the Master Sword hilt as he went.

"Curse you, Link!" Ganondorf screamed into the jungle as he watched the boy run. "Your days are numbered!"

Returning to the pedestal with the shard of the Master Sword jutting profoundly into the air, the Dark Lord grinned.

With his vile tongue dancing behind his teeth, he whispered ever so softly into the grove. "And so are the days of those of which you are ancestor."

Link ran and ran and ran through the drooping trees and wind-blown rock. Never before in his previous adventures had he chose to flee rather than fight. Unsettling in its nature, Link had to accept defeat for this day.

After many arduous miles of overgrown jungle, Link finally came to rest at the base of a trickling waterfall. Judging by the shape of the land, he was sure it was once a grand river, now just a small stream bubbling amongst the rounded stones.

Dropping to his knees, he held the Master Sword's hilt in his hands and looked at its once wondrous form. Rusted to the very core of the steel, the knife was useless, cancerous, and defeated. Gripping the hilt tightly, he held it to his chest and cradled it like a child in his arms, praying for strength to return.

Looking at his left hand, he could see the outline of the Triforce of Courage, though it was faint and barely visible. Link wondered to himself how long had he been trapped with the Dark Lord within *Evil's Bane*, the prison made by the goddesses to contain evil. But even with Ganondorf caged, it seemed like the land had still fallen into turmoil and regress.

And then the thought hit him: where was *Zelda*?

### Chapter Three: “Old Friends - New Friends”

“The flow of time is always cruel... its speed seems different for each person, but no one can change it... A thing that does not change with time is a memory of younger days...”

- Sheik

Physically exhausted from the speedy flight and mentally exhausted from the shock of recent events, Link fell into a comatose state in the soft earth and bushy hedges near the river. He couldn't think at this point. What was he to do? Ganondorf was back out into the world and the only weapon against him had been shattered. He needed to get some bearings.

Then, as he lay there motionless, a tall, gaunt person came into the corner of his eye. Close, a mere ten feet away, the figure was stooping over the stream and gathering water in a

leather pouch. He must have been an adventurer: a woodsman out in the forests and mountains, possibly on the run.

Unsure of the man's leanings, Link quickly sprung up and wrapped around the man's back, neatly placing the rusty Master Sword at his neck.

"Whoa, there!" The man said, obviously not afraid as he put his hands in the air. "Didn't know this stream belonged to anyone. Apologies."

Link sensed this man wasn't a dark being and released his grip. Backing away he lowered his fragile blade and showed his hands in earnest.

The stranger turned to face the boy, hiding any expression at the sight of Link's pointed ears.

"Quite a weapon you got there." The woodsman commented on the rusty blade. "You new to the region?"

Link pondered the thought for a moment, but then relented with a nod.

"Well then, let me be the first to welcome you!" The man said cheerfully. "I am known as Cale, and this jumbled mess of a woodland is known as Creydo, the royal forest. What's your name?"

The boy responded quietly.

"Link, eh?" Cale said with a warm smile, having seen a myriad of lost travelers in the region lately. "Welcome, Link of the Creydo. This is a place of new beginnings for many, and I hope it will be good to you. I'd ask where you've come from, but most would rather it be forgotten.

Cale finished filling his water pouch and strung it to his hip. "I'm heading to the Fortress City for a festival. One of the biggest of the year. Care to join me? We could get you set up until you figure out where you want to be?"

Link was unsure if he wanted to see the world so changed, but knew it was the only way to set things right before it was too late. He gave the woodsman a nod.

"Good!" Cale approached and put a firm hand on the boy's shoulder. "Then come with me, Link of the Creydo, and I'll show you the time of your life."

Following the adventurer for a few miles, the two came to an opening in the forest, the choking foliage shifting into roving grasslands of amber. Link thought of Hyrule Field when he saw it, but couldn't be sure as the landscape was so vastly different to all those sunsets he grew up with.

"See there?" Cale said, pointing due east at a massive castle in the center of the field. "Ersatz Fortress, this kingdom's seat. Impressive, yes?"

Link nodded, taking note of the similarity of the fortress design to Ganon's Tower, mixed with Hyrule Castle.

Cale turned back to his new friend. "It's been there for centuries. You ever hear of it?"

Link shook his head, his eyes never leaving the dark towers.

"Good! It'll give us something to talk about for the remainder of the journey.

"It was built after a great war, the two fighting hardly even remembered now. The tale goes that the old country that was here, High Rule I believe it was called, was decimated by disease, famine, and desert raiders before succumbing, the very forests taking back the land that was stolen from it.

"And after decades of neglect, the land was finally raised up again under a new king, supposedly descended from the very knights that first tamed this land, and he built his castle in the very center of the realm. Not a very wise decision, as it would be impossible to defend all around

at once, but a strong statement of the man's will to control the kingdom.

"And soon after that, the entire realm under his rule, he vanished. No statement, no reason, no heir, no nothing. Just up and gone! Can you believe that? Becoming king just to run away?"

Link couldn't take his eyes off the fortress as the two plodded on.

"He must have been mad." The woodsman continued. "Anyhoo, after the kingship failed, a tribe of warrior women came and snatched up the realm for their own, and here we are.

"Which leads me to my first point that you *must* understand." Cale stopped and turned to Link, looking him square in the eye. "Ersatz can be a very unforgiving place, especially in times like these with strangers coming from all over the world to live. You may not be welcomed, least of all with...."

Cale looked at Link's ears. "You better cover them up. Most people here, myself included, have never seen Highlander before. I thought you were all wiped out centuries ago with the fall of your kingdom, or even just a piece of legend. Forgive my asking, but where did you come from?"

Link didn't know what else to do other than shrug, the truth being too difficult to explain to someone who didn't know.

"I see. Well...here." Cale reached into his bag and handed Link a brown woolen hat. "It may be a little warm for this time of year, but it's better than getting dragged away into the Empress' inner keep. Your dress isn't that impressive either, but this time of year in Ersatz anything goes."

Link threw the cap on over his head, tucking his ears into the itchy fabric.

"Good!" Cale said, trying not to laugh at the silliness of how Link appeared in his green tunic. "Let's hurry then, we want to get into the city before nightfall!"

The two walked at a fast pace for the final leg of the journey, reaching the high gates of Ersatz just before the sun began to set over the now-distant Creydo woodlands. Looking to the north, Link finally saw a truly familiar sight that hadn't changed at all: Death Mountain. He wondered what ever became of Darunia and Link, Darunia's son who carried the same name as him.

Taking note of Link's pause, Cale stood next to him and also gazed up at the bare peak. "That's the Cursed Mountain, Link. Gaze upon it, but do not ever venture there. They say it is full of monsters, ones who breath fire and eat stone while they wait for human prey. Best let it alone.

"Come, before they close the gate on us. No one is allowed to enter or leave once nightfall comes."

Following the man, Link passed through the massive archways that led into the city within its walls. Tucking the hilt of the Master Sword into his belt, he draped his tunic over it to keep it hidden from prying eyes.

It was a wild city, full of merchants, entertainers, soldiers, and adventurers alike. Link thought to himself that if Hyrule had this many fighting men in wait when Ganondorf attacked, perhaps things may have been different. Perhaps none of this would have ever happened.

"Hey there!" Cale said to the boy with the wandering mind. "You here or you off battling a dragon?"

Link gave him a smile. If only he knew.

"Good! Come, let's get you set up before the festival starts. Don't want to miss the party, now, do we?"

Coursing through the mob of people like rocks in a stream, the two travelers came upon a shop. Motioning to the boy to follow, Cale walked on in and began perusing clothing.

"Here!" The man said with a hint of excitement. "Take these."

Link looked at the man blankly.

“Oh, no don’t worry about it.” Cale said with a wink. “I’ve got all money in the world!”

Link thought the getup a bit too colorful and baggy for his taste, but agreed so he could blend in more with the rest this new world.

“Fantastic....” Cale also wasn’t sure of how it looked on him, but knew no one would ever guess that he was an outsider. “Well then, what are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

Taking Link to a large square in the city, Link was amazed to see things like acrobats, fire-breathers, jugglers, and contortionists in the crowds of people. Passing through, the two engaged in mild-mannered frivolity such as races, lawn bowling, and drinking contests until they came to an archery competition.

“Can you shoot?” Cale asked of the boy.

Link nodded halfheartedly, not wishing to draw attention to himself.

“Oh, come on now. Don’t be shy!” The man working the archery range said. “Any fool can shoot a bow, let alone a pistol.”

“Here, let’s see what you got.” Cale grabbed a bow from the counter and strung an arrow for the boy. “Try for the center.”

Link tested the bow’s string. It was loose, probably needed to be replaced, but he knew all about the tricks these festival-folk would try to make you lose. Taking aim at the nearest target, he let loose the arrow which struck on the far outside of the target.

“Oh, too bad.” Cale said. “Guess I’ll have to show you up.”

Cale reached behind him and pulled out a beautiful ash bow, ornately decorated and obviously a sign of the man’s trade. With one of his own arrows, he launched a bolt that flew like the wind, striking the nearest target dead-center.

“Here.” Cale handed the bow with a strung arrow to Link. “Try it with mine.”

Taking aim at the same target, Link’s first thought was to only do slightly better, but his pride got the best of him and he let an arrow fly into the distance, striking the farthest target on the range with perfect accuracy.

“Well....done....” The man behind the counter said. “Wow! That target never’s been hit before with a bow! Pistols, yes, but never a bow!”

“Lucky shot.” Cale undermined the boy’s skill. “Bet you can’t do it again.”

Link looked Cale in the eye, noticing the man’s tone was slightly off from normal. Just then, he knew he did something he shouldn’t have. Taking another arrow, he launched it in the same direction, but struck it in the ground.

“There, you see?” Cale said with a grin. “Lucky shot.”

“Too bad.” The operator said. “I thought you where really that good.”

“Yes, too bad.” Cale gripped Link on the shoulder. “Come, let’s try something we can actually win.”

Walking off into the crowd, Cale kept his eyes forward but whispered to Link in a harsh tone. “Never do that again in the city. Unless you want to be taken by the armored guard and forced into the army, you need to be average. Understand?”

Link silently nodded, having heard stories back at home about Gerudos taking Hylian children to raise them as their own soldiers.

“Good!” Cale returned to his cheerful self.

Cale was about to take Link into a mead hall when the booming sound of one of the massive city bells rang out into the city. The crowd grew quiet and started to rush towards the northern end of the fortress, near the base of one of the towers.

“Well, never mind that then. Come, Link. It’s time for the Empress to join the party.”

#### Chapter Four: “Heroes of Songs Unsung”

“They say we Hylians have big ears in order to hear the voices of the gods...but I've never heard them!”

- Hyrulean Villager

Moving towards that massive obelisk that was the inner keep of the Empress and her government, Link and Cale grab a couple of flagons of mead and stand in the crowd. Gazing up, there was an outcropping about ten stories from the ground, a balcony from which any official could address the people of Ersatz. It was as if you were listening to the very Goddesses themselves.

Then she came to the cheers of the mob below. So high even Link’s Hyrulean eyes could barely see her, but he could swear he knew her. At least, he thought he did.

“Ah....there she is.” Cale said with a whimsical sigh to Link. “The Empress of all Ersatz and the surrounding badlands. She’s quite a beauty, from what I hear, but unfortunately from this distance we may never know.

“More mead?” He asked of the Highlander.

Link didn’t respond. Staring upwards at the prominent figure in the sky, he was entranced. He felt so uncertain about her, a monarch of such a country, but felt that he had to see her.

“Don’t even think.” Cale said sternly. “I feel as if I know you, Link, and I can read your thoughts better than that sham of a fortune teller back there. Breaking into the tower is punishable by death, on the spot! Madness, friend!”

Link smiled.

“Fine, be that way. But don’t go getting blood on that nice new shirt I bought for you.”

The crowd grew silent, the Empress’ hands in the air.

“Well, here we go.” Cale said, the mead making his fingertips feel a little fuzzy.

“People of Ersatz.” The Empress’ voice was clean and crisp, like an autumn leaf flowing down a stream. “We are here this day to celebrate great deeds and heroes of legend. From the curses of The Mountain, to the secrets of the eastern woodlands, fallen men and women of honor ask us for this day. From the great lakes to the south and the vast seas of the west, those taken by the water Gods also ask us for this day.

“But, more importantly, the *Great Hero* asks us for this day. A day to remember, a day to celebrate, and a day to honor his sacrifice to rid the world of evil. Though centuries have passed since this great deed, we are here this day in due part to his valiant triumph over the darkness that plagued this land.”

Link looked away, taking glances at those in the crowd, people enthralled by the story told by their Breathtaking Empress. Could it really be that what he had done had passed on for so long through the generations?

“And so, let us take up a cup.” The Empress took a golden chalice from a servant and raised it to the heavens. “All hail Ganondorf.”

The crowd all yelled hail in unison and drank, toasting their great hero of old. Link’s face turned placid and he froze, flagon of mead still in hand.

“And to the defeated foe!” The Empress continued. “That the Highlander may never again roam this world, lest we fall into darkness and despair under their villainy!”

The mass drank again to the demise of Link’s people. The boy checked his hat to ensure his ears were still in tight.

“Your not drinking?” A stranger noticed that Link wasn’t raising his glass.

Link looked the man square in the eyes, the boy’s demeanor showing his nervousness amongst a crowd of possible enemies.

“Who are you?” The stranger asked of Link, others starting to take notice.

“He’s a friend of mine.” Cale jumped in, trying to draw the attention away. “My brother. Just came in from the woodlands.”

“Your brother doesn’t toast to Ganondorf, the Hero!” A large, burly man stepped in. “Blasphemy, to ignore his sacrifice!”

“He did too drink, didn’t you Link?” Cale was at the end of his being able to protect the outlander. “They just didn’t see, right?”

Link was grabbed by the collar before he could respond. “Lies! I know what I saw!”

“Order!” The loud, thunderous voice of a gold-armored knight rang out from the Empresses side. “What is this disturbance on the Day of Heroes?”

“This one won’t drink!!” The large man holding on to Link’s shirt bellowed. “A spy!!”

“Bring him forward.” The Empress said calmly. “Let him answer for himself.”

Roughly moving the boy through the crowd, some men with daggers drawn, Link was thrown up onto a platform in the center of the crowd. Entering into the square, a platoon of dark-armored guards surrounded the platform, shielding the boy from possible acts of violence. One of the guards, his armor golden like the one on the balcony, stepped up onto the platform and put a

firm grip on Link's shoulder.

"Are you of Ersatz, stranger?" The gold-armored one asked of the boy. "Where is your country?"

Link didn't know what to say. Where *was* his country?

Taking the boy's silence as an act of treason, the knight swiftly swung an armored fist, striking Link across the face and causing the boy's hat to fly off into the crowd.

Seeing the hat no longer disguising the boy, Cale quickly mingled into the crowd and disappeared.

The crowd grew silent as Link rose to his knees, his ears protruding plainly for everyone to see. Even the golden knights were taken aback, as no Highlander had been seen for well over a hundred years. They were supposed to be extinct.

"A Highlander?" The knight whispered. "A Highlander?!?"

"Death to the heretic!" A voice cried from the crowd, soon followed by others.

"Silence!" The knight in the tower commanded.

The Empress stayed motionless, unsure of what to do. The law was clear in regards to those of High Rule. They were prophesied to bring about the end of the world, as they had done in the past, and must be eliminated.

"What do we know of this Highlander, Sir Ironside?" The Empress asked of the golden knight. "Has he been followed since entering the city?"

"We thought him just a woodsman." The gold-encased knight answered. "He showed skill in the archery range, but tried to mask it. Other than that, he's never been seen in Ersatz before."

"Hmm..." The Empress pondered this strange newcomer. "What do you recommend, good Sir knight?"

"Beheading." Ironside said without thought or conscience. "Now. For all to see. We were going to bring him in and do it quietly, but now the people are involved. It must be done."

The knight raised his hand, the one below responding by drawing out his sword and placing it against the back of Link's neck.

"On your order, Empress."

She mulled over the point for a few moments, the crowd in utter despair over the lack of swift judgement. This was the Day of Heroes; bloodlust was running rampant, but she just didn't think she could bear it. There was something about him, strange and familiar, but in the end her position won out.

"On my order." She whispered to herself. "The sentence is death, by the heading. Carry on, Sir knight."

A wicked smile on his face, the knight baring the blade at Link's neck pulled back the knife and prepared to swing.

"Let this be an example for all the people of Ersatz to follow." Ironside said with a hint of pride to the mob below. "The only good Highlander...is a dead Highlander."

Flexing his muscles for the kill, the golden executioner stepped in to swing, but was met full force with an arrow, striking through the weak decorative plates and lodging deep within his chest.

Chaos erupted in the crowded square. The knights all stormed the center platform to aid their captain, only to be met with a hail of barbed shafts from all unseen directions. It was as if they were everywhere, veiled shadow archers striking out at their unknowing masters.

"Seal the city!" Ironside belted out as he rushed the Empress back into the tower. "Call in the outer rings, sweep through the streets, and pull those cowards out from their holes."

Shutting themselves in the tower, Ironside left the Empress and headed towards the armory with a disgusted gait, a stride fit for a warrior. Of all days to have a fight within the fortress, the renegades had to pick this one. He should have known better. He should have recognized the threat when he first saw that Highlander enter through his gates.

Coming to the end of a large hall, Ironside brushed the heavy oak doors aside and entered into the armory. His temper fuming with self-doubt, he felt like he needed to crush someone.

“Esclados!” He belted into the vast weapons storehouse.

“Aye?” A quiet man replied from behind some crates, unseen to Ironside’s eyes.

“Ready the city for war! High Rule’s stain has returned!”

## Chapter Five: “The Shadows Amongst Us”

“Restless souls wander where they don't belong. Bring them calm with the Sun's Song.”

- Anonymous

Diving off the platform, Link’s initial reaction to the anarchy building in the streets was to disappear. Ersatz had become a dangerous place for him and without weapons or armor he was a good as dead. Then the thought came to him.

Dashing through the square, the people around him pushing and shoving to get away from the Highlander, Link made his way back to the archery range. Seeing the man behind the counter was gone, the unabashed Link snatched up the flimsy bow and a case of arrows, slinging the cheaply built quiver over his shoulder.

“There he is!” A boisterous voice said from the crowd.

A squad of knights entered the square, all of them baring teeth of serrated steel in their grips. Link quickly set an arrow on the bow, his fingers delicately holding on to the dirtied fletching at the butt of the shaft.

“Gonna shoot me, boy?” One of the knights said with a chuckle. “You couldn’t even hit a twenty-foot target with that piece of junk!”

Then the Shadows came. Coming out of the darkness like wraiths from their tombs, men drenched in ashen dusk and smoke mingled into the small contingent of knights, their bodies passing through wood and stone as if mere water and air. Taking the armored men one by one back into their dark nests, the Shadows quickly silenced their cries, leaving the boy alone in this jungle of madness and dark magics.

“Come!” One of the masked Shadows said to Link in a darkly female voice, reaching out

to him with an ethereal hand. “While you still can!”

Link saw no lie in the strangers gray eyes and took her arm, the other pulling him into a near wall.

Feeling as if the very life was draining from him, the Link glanced around as the landscape began to shift and change. Walls, once thick and impenetrable, were but transparent barricades of hazy light. He could see everything, even into the farthest reaches of Ersatz and the surrounding countryside. Soldiers coming and going, Shadow people taking them at will, and the terror building within the chaos.

“Here!” That masked woman said, calling to the boy. “This way! Hurry!”

Link did as he was told, following the Shadow through a maze of walls, underground tunnels, and hidden cisterns buried within the city’s heart. Reaching a large staircase, the two Spiraled downward for what seemed an age of damp stone and mossy steps.

Silently, Link and his guide went deeper and deeper into the bottomless abyss until they came to a set of heavy oak doors. Large and foreboding with intricately detailed knots in the woodwork, Link could see an inscription on the bulky slats but the meaning eluded him. It was something akin to Hylian, but with more curves and circles. Curious still, Link couldn’t see through this door, as he could all the others in the upper world after the woman touched him.

“It’s the language of the old world,” The veiled woman said. “The inscription here. In the common tongue it means: *If I cannot bend evil, then I shall move heaven.*”

“Don’t worry, you will be safe here....for now. I suppose you have questions. Who wouldn’t, given circumstance.”

Link nodded.

“Fair enough.” The woman removed her mask and hood, revealing her colorless hair and gossamer skin. “My name is Mara, and this is my city, Veritas.”

Mara lifted up her hands and pulled back her hair, revealing a set of Hylian ears. Link’s eyes widened and a smile came across his face.

“Yes, we are like you: Highlanders. Though I find you to be strange. I’ve never seen an old-one with blue eyes before.”

“Lady Mara!” A voice called from behind the two, back in the dark tunnels.

“Here, Jarilo.” Mara answered.

A man jogged up to the two at the doors. Having the same look of a ghost, he stopped at their feet, panting for breath and leaning on his knees.

“My Lady....the soldiers....are....” The man looked as if he was about to pass out.

“Take your time, Jarilo.” Mara’s demeanor was cool and calm. “When your ready.”

The man took a few seconds to catch his breath, then stood upright. “Ersatz is in total disorder. If we strike now at the keep....we have a good chance we can overrun them.”

“No.” Mara said plainly. “Conquest is not our goal.”

“But we may not get another chance!” Jarilo’s face turned cross. “We’ve exposed ourselves! They’d be ready for us next time!”

“And for good reason.” Mara reached out and put a hand on Link’s shoulder.

“No offense, my Lady, but what good does a scrap kid do for our kind? Why have we risked all these years of concealment for him?”

Mara smiled and pointed at Link’s ears. “But he is of our kind, is he not?”

“But look at him! He’s got color to him. It’s unnatural.”

“Yes,” Mara said to the other with a weak smile. “But no more than you or I. Call the rest home. We’ve done enough Shadow-work for today.”

Jarilo didn't argue. Giving Mara a nod, he picked up his feet and ran off back into the tunnels.

"Such a blood-hound." Mara said, watching the man go. "If he were lord of Veritas, we'd be at war every day of our lives.

"But never mind our problems, let's look at yours." Mara turned back to the boy. "What's your name? ...Link? Interesting, if not foreign. I welcome you to my city, Link, and may it serve you well."

Mara reached out and placed her right palm flat against the doors. Leaving from the woman's fingertips, small traces of light wound through the knots on the lumber, its face slowly opening for the two on the outside.

"Enter, Link, with my invitation." Mara said with a sense of tradition.

Link walked through the archway and found himself within a enormous expanse, hidden deep under the soil of Ersatz. A city made of earth and stone, it at once spoke of humility and temperance, yet showed the pride and craftsmanship of its people. The symbol of the knot and the sun were heavily prevalent amongst the archways and doors, signs of life and kinship. Link at first thought the people lived in absolute darkness when he traveled down those winding steps, but here he could see a sliver of light coming from the center of the expanse's roof.

"That is our source of life." Mara said, taking note of the boy's observations. "That light is reflected off of mirrors that pass through long chains of tunnels, catching the sun's rays from the peak of the mountain where it is purest."

Link looked at the woman, feeling slight pity and a willingness to help.

"I know what you are thinking, but it's impossible." Mara said, despair hidden well within her words. "After all these generations of living underground, we've become sensitive to direct sunlight. Only by the light of the moon are we able to venture out into the upper world. Even then we have to be extremely cautious to not be too exposed."

Link looked at his hand, him still being able to gaze through it to the ground below.

"Yes, you must forgive me for that. The only way I could save you from those brutes above was to bring you into our world. What you are experiencing is what we call *The Eventide*. Most children here can control it at will, but in your case it will take some time to harness it, as you are not born into its way. In that you must be careful. Don't want you getting stuck inside a rock, now do we?

"Eventide is our form of battle. Stealth, secrecy, and fear are our weapons. Learn to use them, couple them with an arrow and bow, and our trade will become your greatest asset the dark times to come. To the upper-folk, we are known as Shadow people, rightfully so, and till now we were just of myth and legend.

"Your coming marks a new age for Veritas. I sense greatness in you, Link, and I think you can help us."

Link gave the Lady of the underworld a nod.

"Then I suppose I should tell you why I brought you here. It wasn't just idle curiosity. Our survival is too delicate for such petty undertakings.

"To put it plainly, sunlight, the giver of life, is turning into our greatest enemy. The forces of Ersatz are becoming more and more brazen on the slopes of the Cursed Mountain, pushing further and further with each passing year. Our spreading of superstition and ghost stories worked well for ages, but now there are those who no longer believe in such things. In short, they will soon find our mirrors, and undoubtedly smash them all to pieces. Our people cannot survive in darkness, despite what you might think. These mirrors must be protected!

“Which is where you come in. You are Highlander, one of our own, but you can also travel by day. I want you to go to the Cursed Mountain and protect the mirrors until we can come up with a plan to make them safe again.”

Mara Leaned in close, putting a hand on Link’s shoulder. Her silvery eyes were cold, dead-like even, but in them Link could see immense strength and tenderness, reminding Link of someone he used to know.

“Will you help us?” Mara entreated.

Without any thought for himself, Link nodded with that stern face of heart and determination.

Mara breathed a sigh of relief. “I thank you, Link, for the quest you are about to undertake. Do you have weapons?”

Link produced the rigged bow and crooked arrows he took from the archery range, but kept the Master Sword’s hilt concealed beneath his shirt.

Mara giggled at the sight. “Well, we can’t have you going out on an adventure in not but your skin, now can we? Follow me, we’ll set you off right.”

## Chapter Six: “Tools of the Trade”

“Oh well...It's tough to be a working man.”

- Ingo

Mara took the young boy in the colorful shirt to the heart of Veritas, a center of instruction and conflict laying in wait. Unable to hide her elation and relief coupled with Link’s destined coming, the Lady of the underworld couldn’t help but show a smile on her chalky face as they passed by the common folk, curiosity in their eyes.

“Here we are.” Mara said, stopping just short of a darkened archway that seemed to stretch into improbable nothingness. “And this is where we part ways....for now. There, in the tunnels of woe, you must prove yourself worthy of our art.

“I won’t lie to you, Link. This is a dangerous place, even for us shadows, and you must be ever careful that you don’t fall victim to it’s treachery.”

Lady Mara stepped just inside the arch. Her presence seeming to drive the very darkness away from it’s feral haunt, the gloom opened up to a large descending staircase of stone and iron, beckoning unwise souls to dare enter.

“It is an evil place, the tunnels of woe. Keep your feet in front of you, and I will see you on the other side. But do not trust a dream while within it’s grasp. It would only destroy you from within.”

Link pulled out an arrow and strung it on his bow’s loose string, not one to blindly enter such a place without constant readiness.

“No.” Mara interjected. “Only a fool would enter here with anything more than strength of heart and spirit. Arms such as this would but lead you to your death.”

Unsure of it, Link relented and passed the bow and quiver to the shadowy Lady. Taking a deep breath, Link steeled his nerves and pushed his feet on.

Mara stood by as Link passed through the archway, her eyes never leaving him. “Farewell, Link....and....good luck.”

Link turned to face her, but saw only a solid wall of rock cutting off his return to the light. Sealed within the tunnels, the shaft slowly lapsed back into that stifling darkness that Link knew all too well. His Hylian eyes adjusting, he could see a hazy flicker of a torch at the base of the stairs, beckoning him to enter this maw of duress.

Unshaken, Link boldly made his way down the stairs. He didn't know what to expect. He had explored countless dungeons, underground temples, and lofty peaks of molten rock, but this place was different. It was cold. The kind that settled deep within your bones and chilled you to your very soul.

His breath was steady and even, creating clouds of hazy mist in the crisp air. The smell of old memory was prevalent, even more so the deeper he went. Like traveling back through time, places meant to be forgotten once again broached into the world of the living.

Reaching the base of the stairs, Link found himself at a rotting door of oak and antiquity. It's patina hinges creaking like a ghoulish lament, the boy swung the gate aside with all the strength he could muster and entered into the tunnels of woe, taking the faint torch with him.

Sprawling before him were three archways, each inscribed with crudely chiseled symbols above their lofty arcs. Unsure of their meaning, Link chose to take the left path first, as he always did, and slowly passed under the damp stone.

The corridor underneath was long, straight, and unadorned. The scene was quiet, save the gentle rushing of air that passed through Links' ears and the soft plodding of his boots. Taking each step cautiously, as who knows what could be lying under his feet, Link followed the endless tunnel for a time until he came upon a dead end.

Looking back behind him, a black hole from whence he came, Link placed a hand on the rough surface of the tunnel. Confused with the direct path to nowhere, the boy was about to turn around and return to the triple archways when he heard a modest scuttling noise, coming from deep in the black.

Holding the delicate torch high, Link squinted his eyes and desperately scanned the empty for the source of the sound. Nothing ever came.

Shrugging it off as an invention of the mind, Link started to walk back to the entrance when the ground started to rumble.

Far in the distance, the boy could see a shape drawing dangerously near. He couldn't quite make out what it was, but it was traveling fast, faster than anything he had ever faced before, a red-glowing lantern bobbing in the air.

Backing up near the wall, Link was trapped with no exits other than the way he came in. Hurriedly glancing about the tunnel for hidden doors or hatches, he found himself boxed without recourse.

Entering into the offensive glimmer of the torch, Link could now see the fiend in full light. A skeletal warrior, covered in rusty chains and barbed plates of cancerous steel, charged at the boy with a bloodied iron club that looked as if it had bludgeoned an entire army. The vermilion light of the creature's lantern created an eerie haze all around as it danced, causing Link to feel disoriented.

With no weapons to speak of, Link kept his mind focused but braced himself for the worst.

The creature swinging that barbarous cudgel with a gruesome screech, Link instinctively jumped backwards to avoid the blow and found himself falling into shadow, the torch blowing out as he fell. Passing through the solid wall that once held him prisoner, Link could see the brute howling its enmity towards the boy and then rushing off into the tunnel.

Falling for what seemed an age, the boy's mind dizzy with the aftereffects of the shadow people's Eventide, Link finally hit the bottom as he splashed into a chilling pool of dirtied water. Luckily conscious enough to return to the surface, Link pulled himself out of the basin and rolled over onto the grainy rock floor.

Finding himself in an immense underground chasm, Link stood to his feet and shook the water from his ears. He was curious of where the light was coming from, this deep in the underworld, but couldn't identify any given source. It was as if the rocks themselves were emitting slight traces of radiance into this normally blinding darkness.

Glancing about, Link noticed his situation hadn't improved much; no exits anywhere in sight. His vision sliding back into focus, he could see an ornate wooden chest fortuitously lying but a few feet from him. Moving towards the chest, Link reached down and lifted up its lid, the dust of an era crumbling and billowing across the soft conical shapes of the underground formations that were strewn about the chamber.

Looking into the chest, Link was both astounded and confused at what he saw. It was empty. Nothing but a couple of cobwebs and a boxful of air.

His mind wracked, he looked around the room for clues, anything that would give him a sign he was on the right track. Getting down on the floor, he saw what looked like hoofprints, faintly etched into the glassy floor.

Following the tracks, Link traced them to the far end of the room, one of the stalagmites rising up from the floor at the end of the trail. Inspecting the formation, he could see plainly a slot near the tip - a scar within the rock. Then he saw a slight glimmer, coming from behind.

Reaching back, Link gripped the item and pulled it from its derelict tomb. Brushing off the dust and earth, he had found a small curved dagger. Intricately inscribed with knots on the blade, it was a superb piece of craftsmanship. Still sharp after being buried in this dark place for who knows how long, Link stood back to his feet and eyed the blemish on the formation.

Accustomed to simple riddles as such, Link carelessly dropped the blade into the slot.

For a moment, nothing happened. But then, erupting from the pool of water like a fountain of crimson mortality, a thrashing beast exploded into the chasm. Gargantuan in comparison to the small boy, Link crouched down to get a steady look at the monster, as its heaving footsteps were churning the floor.

Decrepit and mutilated, it was a horror within itself. With sickly long arms and legs, it was a cadaverous-looking giant with the face resembling that of an Octorok, squid-like and choleric. Deep-red its muscular skin, the beast flexed and bellowed out its intentions at the boy, saliva dripping from its tentacle-laced mouth.

The particularly interesting feature of it was its eyes. Bandaged with a rotting strip of cloth, the monster was either unseeing or sensitive to the faint light of the chasm. A possible weakness Link knew he would need to exploit if he were to survive.

Retrieving the dagger from the slot in the formation, Link brandished it towards the monstrosity, its blinded face reacting with a huffing cackle. Somehow able to sense Link's motions, the beast tracked his every movement as if it were perfectly tuned for such subtle instinct.

The boy with his meager edge standing firm, the beast charged with its clawed hands flailing wildly, talons capable of shredding even the darkest of steels. Link dodged the best he

could and looked for a way into it's defenses, but the fiend's speed was astounding. Rolling around, Link backed away towards the pool of water to make some distance between him and his foe, his stance cautious and determined.

Spinning, the beast howled at it's missed target and readied to assail the intruder again. Seeing no opening in the monster's strategy, Link desperately looked around the room for possibilities. And there one was.

Dangling ever so precariously above the center of the room was a downward-pointing spire of rock, signs of previous attempts to bring it down ever-apparent on it's chipped face. Taking dagger in hand, knowing he might only have one chance, Link waited for the beast to charge.

Doing as anticipated, the monster spurred forward with carnal rage.

Reacting with perfect timing, Link threw the dagger, which seemed to take on a life of it's own once in the air, flying into that deadly-looking column. The thin blade slicing clean through the rock with arcing sparks of blue and green, the spire came crashing down. The blade's path seemed to slightly curve as it flew through the air, sticking into the floor but a few feet away from the hero.

Seeing the boy's intent and it's own demise at hand, the horror sidestepped and flung itself into the near wall, narrowly avoiding an assured death as the rock buried into the ground.

Link's eyes grew wide. His one chance, and he missed.

The beast cackled again, knowing his victory was but moments away.

Diving for the dagger, Link quickly snatched it up and hurdled the collapsing rubble. Taking a flying leap, the base of the spire his platform, Link swung the dagger with all his might at the chimera. A deep slicing cut was made across it's blindfolded eyes, drawing out a vile and rancid substance that seemed to eat through the stone floor.

The beast screeched in anguish, falling backwards onto the pile of rock. It writhed unnaturally for a few moments, but soon fell still, the piece of dirtied cloth falling to the ground. Link was taken aback at the sight: a small imp laying inside of a hollow void within the creatures face.

The boy stepped forward, eyeing the bizarre symbiotic creature with a neat slash across it's throat. Getting closer, the beast suddenly twitched, giving Link's heart a jump and causing him to nearly fall off his feet. But there, draped around the monster's neck, was a square piece of smooth stone. Cutting the cord around it's neck, Link took the stone in hand and again eyed the slotted formation at the back of the room.

This time a little more cautious, Link carefully dropped the small chink of stone into the breach. As if coming alive, the entire room eclipsed from it's twilight state into a bright haven of whiteness and tangible ecstasy, small fairy-like creatures emerging from the stones.

"Well done, Link." Mara's weightless voice could be heard from some nether realm.  
"Well done."

## Chapter Seven: “Wisps-o’-will”

“Without a fairy, you’re not even a real man!”

- Mido

Link stood alone in the midst of the fairy creatures, their wispy wings breathing fresh air into his face. Holding up his hands, the fairies dove and swam around him like moths to a flame. Angelic and playful, they never spoke any words but Link could tell they were overjoyed.

The boy’s thoughts drew to Navi in that moment.

“Link!” Mara’s voice interrupted the boy’s reverie.

The boy blinked, returned to the present, and looked behind him. Mara’s shadowy form was standing near the water’s edge, her dark cloak wrapping tightly around her.

“You’ve done a great thing here.” She couldn’t deny her excitement. “I must say, you have done better than I expected. You must have done this sort of thing before, yes?”

Link’s modesty won out.

“Oh, never mind.” The Lady was beaming. “This is a sacred place that you have restored, *the fountain of essence.*”

“It is from here that we Highlanders could once see the future and drive it as such. In the old days, well before the falling of High Rule, the wise ones would come here to commune with the spirits of the fountain, learning all their secrets so they may better serve the world.

Mara reached up and felt the cool touch of a fairy that flew close to her face. “These little ones, a long time sleeping here in obscurity, are the oracles. *Those who can tell one’s fate*, if they but learn how to listen.

“But then, when peace had finally settled in the hearts of men, a dark one came. No one knew his name, save he was a Highlander, and most thought nothing of him. That is, until he entered here.

“The dark one muffled the oracles’ guidance, returning them to the heart of the earth from which they had come, driving the world into darkness and despair. For without the all-knowing oracles at our side, the fate of High Rule was uncertain and in doubt. For the first time, we were afraid.

“Don’t you see?” Mara gave Link a stern look. “It was this frailty, this dependence on the oracles, that destroyed our people. We couldn’t make laws without knowing what would happen. We couldn’t ensure peace without seeing the consequences. And we couldn’t make war without spying the outcome. We had become reapers of the harvest instead of the keepers of the seed. And

then, when the fountain had died, we were left with nothing.

“But enough of bad memories. This should be a joyous occasion! You are the first, Link of the overworld, to purge the evil from the cradle of foresight, and you deserve a just reward.”

Lady Mara gestured towards the curved dagger in Link’s left hand. “That blade you carry is no ordinary edge, as I am sure you know. Please, take it. Take it respectfully!

“It belonged to the dark one, who used it’s mystic power to carve out a piece of the fountain. He thought he could use it to empower himself with the gifts of wisdom and providence. I’ll never understand why such a person would leave a blade like that behind, as if it meant nothing to him after his plan failed.”

Link’s face drew a smile as one of the fairy-creatures buzzed around his head.

“That one seems to like you.” Mara said with a giggle. “Can you hear it’s voice?”

Link shook his head. All he could hear was a slight high-pitched noise, like the gentle ting of a small bell.

“She says....” Mara was squinting her eyes, straining to read the fairy. “She say’s her name is....Whisper, I think. It’s difficult to understand fairy-speak, as they don’t use words. You almost have to *feel* what they are saying, and it has been quite a while since I have seen one.”

Link gave the fairy a nod. He remembered being able to hear Navi’s voice as clear as the wind in the sky, but these ones were different. One distinct difference was Navi had a blue tint to her, these fairies were pure white.

“Hmm....” Mara said, a quizzical look on her. “That’s strange....”

Link glanced over to the Lady, him being unable to understand the fairies at all.

“I think she wants to go with you.” Mara folded her arms. “No. It can’t be done.”

Whisper the fairy flew over to Mara and fervently bounced up and down, her body seeming to grow brighter as her dainty wings frantically beat against the air.

“None of you have ever left the fountain before.” Mara protested. “What would become of it if one of you left?”

Whisper darted back over to Link and rested down on his shoulder, showing she had no intention of leaving his side.

“Hmpf! Bullheaded fairies!” Mara rolled her eyes and looked away. “Fine! Do as you wish. Just don’t come crawling back here if you can’t stomach it!”

Whisper was jubilant at the response, cruising in circles around Link’s face.

The boy was uncertain of this, having a fairy companion after being so long without one, but welcomed the company. That and having a light in the next dark crevice would be more than appreciated.

“I guess that’s all we need from here, isn’t it?” Mara asked.

Link looked up towards the ceiling, knowing there was two other tunnels he was yet to explore, not to mention that emaciated soldier roaming the underground unchallenged and unchecked.

“Oh, don’t worry about those other places just yet.” Mara walked over to the fallen beast. “You have proven yourself worthy to learn our arts, and one you have learned. Eventide is a difficult ability to master, you need time to develop it. The other tests must wait for another day.”

The Lady crouched down, looking over the dispatched imp and it’s outer frame. “Such a wretched creature, living all these years in the tunnels of woe....”

Reaching out with a tenuous hand, Mara waived over the monster’s body, it’s form slowly melting into the rock and disappearing altogether.

“Ready to go back to Veritas?”

Link glanced about the brilliant room once more, taking in all the memory he could gather, and then gave the Lady a nod.

“Good.” Mara responded. “Now that play is over, there is work to be done.”

## Chapter Eight: “A Ruinous Road”

“You will encounter many hardships ahead... That is your fate.”

- Kaepora Gaebora

Three days passed. Mara had things to take care of, leaving the hero to roam the hazy byways of Veritas alone with Whisper. After a while, there wasn't much left of the city to be explored, but, strangely enough, Link still found the place to be a complete mystery.

How had his people come to such a place? What madness drove them into this life of dust and shadow? They were like ghosts, ever content to brood over days long since spent. None of the villagers wanted to say much to the boy, let alone to each other, spending their time in constant solitude and gloom.

The nights were even worse. It seemed the people never slept, roaming their city by day, haunting others by moonlight, leaving the boy all to himself amongst the dry-earth caverns.

On that third day, his restlessness near it's peak, Link was relieved to see the Lady Mara once again, though her stride was short and plodding. The woman came to him, her head hanging low and dejected, and with a shaky hand she gripped him on the shoulder.

“Link...” She started, trying to find a soft way to tell him something of importance. “I have communed with the oracles, and I saw....I saw....”

She couldn't bring herself to tell him, the truth too raw to place into common words.

Link wasn't sure how to react but to return a supportive hand to the Lady's arm.

“Thank you, Link....thank you.” Something was troubling her deeply, but she didn't have the strength to let it out. “It's time for you to leave, if you would still have the heart to help us.”

Link nodded without question or thought.

Mara stood upright, her pride and position taking the front. “Then let me show you the way.”

Link followed Lady Mara back to the heavy gate from which he entered, the inside of the door smooth and plain in contrast to the front's complex weaving of knots in the wood. Mara stopped and faced the boy, sorrow hidden well within her cold eyes.

“This is the egress, our portal into the outer world. From here we can go anywhere, as long as the power of the sun shines into Veritas. If the sun were to die, we too would die and be entombed in this place.”

Mara reached up to the door, a curious black stone medallion strapped to her palm with some leather cords.

“Shield the mirrors on the Cursed Mountain from harm with my blessing. We don't have much to give you in terms of reward, but if you succeed all I have would be yours, if it be only the

thanks of a people in need.”

Touching the door with that strange medallion, the heavy planks creaked forward and opened into the dark burrow that once brought the two to the city.

“Here, take this.” Mara handed Link the medallion, her fingers surprisingly warm to the touch. “And just remember: *whenever you wear this darkened stone, never again will you stray far from home.*”

Link was baffled by the poem, trying to decipher it as he walked through the door. Whisper too was interested in it, flying close to the rock and looking all around it’s glossy face.

“Farewell, Link.” Lady Mara said bowing away. “May your travels bring you fortune.”

The door slid shut, sealing Veritas from unwanted eyes. Link turned to the ascending staircase that led back to the overworld, draping the medallion around his neck and tucking it into his shirt.

Climbing the mossy steps back to the surface, Link wondered how he was going to accomplish the task he was given. It was Hyrule, or High Rule, as they called it now, the boy’s home country. But it had changed so much, nothing aside from the mountain was the same. He longed for a familiar face, though he knew none would come. Whisper was a welcomed companion, but he found it awkward as he couldn’t hear her voice.

Reaching the top, Link wound his way back through that maze of walls, underground tunnels, and hidden cisterns. Familiar, but seeming so strange after the past three days of events, they flashed to life under the light of Whispers radiance and then slid back into the nothingness that draped their forgotten lives.

Then Link came to the wall, the one he first passed through on the beginning of this journey. Finding himself a little more comfortable with the eventide in his control, Link squinted his eyes and reached out with his soul, the wall before him turning transparent.

Gazing through, he could see soldiers. Hundreds of soldiers, preparing for war within the very heart of the city. Link knew he had to get back out into the woodlands of Credo before nightfall, else he would have to cross over a no-doubt-alligator-infested moat. Looking up at the setting sun, his time was short. Knowing her own weaknesses in this environment, Whisper jumped into Link’s hair, keeping her bright luminescence hidden.

Waiting for a squad of armored soldier to pass, Link gracefully leapt through the wall and made his way through the square and into the side streets. Dodging the sight of the fully-equipped soldiers, Link hid within walls, buildings, under shadowy overhangs, and inside crates to make it to his goal. But there, at the massive gate to the outside world, a massive portcullis was blocking the way out. The city was sealed, the boy trapped within it. He’d have to find another way out.

Nearly spotted more than once, Link was at the end of his wits. He didn’t know this city well enough, it’s secrets eluding him. He was about to give up and return to Veritas for perhaps a map or some help when he heard the sound of tapping on a near wall down an alleyway.

Coming close, Link put his ear to the sound. It was sporadic and seemingly random, but soon turned silent. Passing it off as nothing, Link turned to move on when a hand reached through the wall and grappled him around the neck, pulling him into the room.

Link whipped out his dagger and spun to attack, but stopped just short of planting the blade in the other’s neck. It was Cale.

“That’s the second time you’ve skinned a blade on me this week, boy!” The man said, anxiety in his voice. “And what have I ever done to you? Hmm? Nothing! That’s right, nothing, so relax.”

Link did so, replacing the knife in his belt.

“Well, I must say that’s a much better weapon than you had before, that rusty piece of scrap metal.” Cale moved over to a desk that was in the room. “I thought you were dead, taken by those shadow monsters.”

Cale took in a deep breath and turned back to face Link. “But, you’re here now, aren’t you? How’d you escape?”

Link related the story to the woodsman, the man’s eyes wide and attentive all along.

“Highlanders....” Cale almost couldn’t believe it. “Gone for so long, and all the while just beneath us....amazing.”

Cale was suddenly startled by the pounding of armored feet and shod horses racing through the street nearby. Voices could be heard. They were talking about Link and they somehow knew he was back in the city.

“They know you’re near.” Cale said, his face worried. “You have to get out. Get out now!”

Link didn’t know where to go.

“Take this back passage, go east until you reach a potion shop at the end and exit through his back door. He has his own loading platform at the back of the city, a boat should be there. You can take it through the moat and down-river. It will take you away from the Cursed Mountain, but at least you can get out of the city.”

Link gave the man a nod and poked his head out of the wall, looking for guards.

“Link!” Cale said, drawing him back into the room. “Be careful out there. Those guards will put you down on sight.”

Link nodded and escaped back into the city, not once thinking of what just happened.

Following the woodsman’s directions, Link flew through the walls of the shop, the man behind the counter looking at him as if he were a ghost, and jumped into the small canoe gently rocking in the water of the moat.

Casting off, Link paddled his way towards the mouth of the river, hearing the shouts and bellowed orders of men behind him. Looking back as the sun lapsed into night, Link could see soldiers up on the high walls of the castle. Lighting arrows, they launched the fiery darts into the air at the boy, causing Link to paddle as fast as his arms could manage until he hit the current of the river. The shafts splashing into the water all around, Link’s heart was racing as he desperately tried to elude the barrage.

Sir Ironside was up on the wall watching the boy go, his eyes devoid of emotion as his quarry yet again escaped.

“Should we pursue, Sir?” One of the soldiers asked of his commanding officer.

Ironside mulled over the thought for a moment, grinding his teeth. “No, it is too late. He no doubt wishes to draw us out, leaving the city vulnerable to more shadow attacks. We will wait till first light. And then, with the powers of darkness at it’s weakest, we will strike.”

Ironside left the view of the wall, beckoning for a runner to come.

“Here.” He said, handing a rolled parchment to the boy-messenger. “Take this note directly to Esclados. It’s time for him to earn his place here amongst the Gods.”

## Chapter Nine: "Downstream"

"This is the melody that will draw you into the infinite darkness that absorbs even time."

- Sheik

Link paddled until his heart felt as if it would burst. His lungs were burning, corroded from the strain of the flight. He felt light headed and found himself near collapse when he decided to take the canoe ashore and find a safe place to camp out for the night.

Exhausted, Link was barely able to drag the heavy canoe up the silvery-white rocks of the lonesome shore. He wasn't sure exactly where he was, as before there was no river that ran down the center of Hyrule Field, but his guess was that he was very near lake Hylia. The size of Death Mountain in the distance was the key factor, a sight he couldn't mistake for anything but southern Hyrule.

Under cover of moonlight, Link stashed the canoe in some nearby trees, hiding it away with some loose shrubs and fallen sticks. He was wary of attacking Peahats and Stalchildren that roamed the fields at night, but to his surprise none came.

He pondered the thought for a moment, reflecting back on those days that seemed so far gone. The Peahats and Stalchildren were heavily prevalent in Hyrule Field when he was younger, but seemed to become less and less common during the reign of Ganondorf. Strange, that such creatures of brutality and darkness would disappear in times where you would think they would flourish. Where did they go?

Link was weighing on these memories for a time, ignoring the task at hand as he slumped down against a tall Ash tree. His eyes slowly closed, though he fought desperately to stay awake and alert, and he soon slipped into a brittle reverie of flashing lights and phantoms.

He could see them, all those he had loved in those younger days. Nabooru, Darunia, Ruto, all those he knew were present save Zelda and Saria, their places mysteriously vacant. Calling his name, they beckoned him to draw near and join them in their loneliness. They missed him. They needed him. But, as Link reached out to take their hands, he felt a gust of cold come over him, and the kind, amicable faces of his friends deviated into dark creatures of unimaginable nightmare.

Their eyes turned to crimson rubies, their teeth to fangs of steel, and their voices, once gentle and caring, became harbingers of deathly shrieks. They grew wings of dusk and circled the boy standing alone, snapping at him with their feral snouts. And then, just when Link thought they would strike, a lone, solitary figure approached from the distance.

Bathed in clouds of ashen dust, the body was hooded and cloaked, advancing slowly through the barbed monsters that circled overhead. His pace was steady and deliberate. His face was hidden, but Link had this sense of dread wash over him, as if he didn't want to know who this pall creature might be.

Coming near, the other stopped and stood firm, his head hanging low. Link reached to his side, but found his dagger and the Master Sword's hilt was missing. He was defenseless, surrounded by evil, but he hid his fear well behind the Triforce of Courage, even though it's power

seemed dim.

The stranger lifted his head slightly, just enough so Link could see his mouth.

“Link.” The other said with a chilling prominence. “I’ve been waiting. Oh, for *ages*, I have been waiting.”

The winged demons spun into death-dives, swooping down towards the exposed boy, but just before they could attack the stranger unsheathed a black-bladed curved sword and dispatched them, saving the boy’s life.

The creatures each fell, one by one crashing down to the unforgiving earth. Link’s elation turned to horror when they shifted back to their original forms, all the Sages and people he had known, lying dead in their own blood. The bodies seemed to be everywhere, a mass grave that followed Link wherever he went.

The shadowy man laughed with a guttural wheeze. “Remember this day, boy. The day where I took everything and everyone away from you!”

It was Ganondorf. It had to be.

Link snapped. Flying through the air at his adversary, the boy overpowered the other with pure speed and agility, dropping him to the ground and taking his dark weapon from him. Pointing the serrated edge at his throat, Link thought himself victorious.

“And what have you won?” The other asked, removing his mask. “Nothing.”

Link’s eyes widened. It was not the dark-eyed Ganondorf that he thought was concealed behind the veil. Link, having defeated this master of villainy, had actually just defeated himself.

Link’s double lay there, eyes closed, no emotion showing through. The two stayed motionless for a time, Link staring his twin in the face. He thought he had killed his shadow long ago in the Water Temple with the Master Sword, it was impossible that he could be here now, after all these centuries had passed.

A slight grin came across the doppelgänger’s face as he slowly opened his eyes, his pupils a hazy red. “Surprised? I know I am.”

Link jerked awake, finding himself in the same quiet nestle of Ash trees that he was in before. His breathing heavy, sweat upon his brow, he relaxed against the tree and tried to fall back asleep; a fool’s hope that such peaceful repose would come this night.

## Chapter Ten: "Going Under"

"Have you seen anything strange in the lake?"

- Zora at Lake Hylia

Link awoke early, the eastern sun barely etching its prominence over the distant mountainside. He was still exhausted, having barely gotten any sleep in, but he knew it best not to linger. Patrols from Ersatz were no doubt leaving the city into the fields, searching for the one who got away.

Stretching his tired limbs as he lay there against the Ash tree, Link gazed southwards towards the lake, and then back to the north. Death Mountain and the mirrors of Veritas was his main goal, but blocking his only passage was a dark tower, armies at its command. He couldn't fight them all, not in this state. He'd have to find another way around.

Then, the idea popped in his head: what of the underwater passage that linked Lake Hylia with Zora's domain? Would it still be there after all this time?

After a few seconds of internal debate, Link made up his mind. After all, what other choice was there?

The boy pushed himself up to his feet, a swooping yawn escaping his lips. Rubbing the stardust out of his eyes, he began that southern descent along the riverbank. After a short while, he came upon the old Hylia gate, though massively upgraded. Link thought it amazing that it was still standing while everything else that he knew had disappeared.

Coming close, Link could tell there was one distinct difference in this gate from the one that was in his own time. While the old one was an easy hop for Epona, this was near impassible. A permanent twenty-foot high grate secured by heavy bolts of reinforced iron blocked the way, but, curiously enough, there was a small unlocked door within the gate on the right-hand side, standing right above the river that flowed underneath.

Coming up to the door, Link could tell it hadn't been used in a very long time, rust blanketing the metal like dew on morning grass. He wondered, was the gate bolstered to keep people out, or to keep people in?

Link shoved on the barred door, its hinges grinding and creaking with the unprecedented strain.

Like walking through a portal into another world, the soft, low-laying grasses of Hyrule Field shifted into tall, unkept shrubs, some as tall as chest-height, with bulrush stems spotted about. This place must have been without movement for a very long time indeed for such undergrowth to overwhelm in such a manner.

Link reached behind him and pulled out his dagger, for who knows what could be lurking beneath his feet. The place would seem to be a haven for Deku Babas, just waiting for the passing unaware, but to his surprise nothing came. The place was desolate. Save for the weeds, no animated life was to be seen.

Link pressed on through the amber grass until he reached the edge of a clearing. His first thought was he had reached the lake, but that soon faded into astonishment - it was gone.

Winding south like the curvy line of a snake's body, Lake Hylia had been reduced to a mere trickle of a waterfall, its deep basin now composing the footnotes of a long, narrow canyon. Far

in the distance, Link could see a shiny line that was reflecting the glassy luminescence of the morning sun. Seeming to beckon him to the horizon, Link didn't know what it was and was enticed to find out, but knew this wasn't the time for such ventures.

Bringing his gaze back to the near surroundings, Link could see an ancient-looking staircase to the east. Carved straight from the rock, it wound up the side of the old lake wall up to a small plateau. Link immediately knew where it led to; an old habit of his - the bald man's fishing pond.

There was a lot to be seen here, but Link's determination and focus won out and he proceeded to where the underwater tunnel should have been. Leaping down into the beginning of the ravine, Link could see remnants of those old stone obelisks that once stood there in the water. Now fallen and corroded from the exposure to the sun and wind, they were pale vestiges of what majesty they used to carry.

Link felt a cold chill come over him as he stood before the opening to the tunnel. He was somewhat startled that it was still there, not to mention it just lying open for anyone to enter. He did notice a few differences, however, most prominently being the symbol on the crest above.

It was a lidless eye, cleanly chiseled into the rock, with a single teardrop clinging to its perfectly cut form. Link knew the symbol, but he also knew without a doubt that Impa was the last Sheikah to walk the lands of Hyrule, their kind vanishing into the threads of memory. There couldn't be others....could there?

Link brushed aside his misgivings and boldly stepped into the tunnel, this time the darkened channel filled with currents of air, rather than water.

The light in the underground pass going dim, Whisper jumped out of Link's hair, now unafraid as they ventured underground. This brought a warm smile to Link's face, as now not only did he have a light, but also a friend to steady his nerves.

Continuing on, Link reached the point at which he would normally get whisked away to the upper waters of Zora's Domain. On the floor, a smudged inscription that was once part of a cryptic circle lay in pieces. Link never saw the carving before, as it was always pure darkness in the cool water, and thought it strange that someone would deface a magical portal such as this.

Looking beyond, Link thought it would be a straight shot that lead directly to the north, but was baffled to see a faint light in the distance. Moving towards it, he soon found the small tunnel opening up into a large underground chamber, much like those found in Veritas. Lit by torchlight, it reminded the boy of the Fire Temple on Death Mountain in appearance, though this place was cold and damp, much like the Water Temple that succeeded it.

All around were paintings of battle, carvings of unimaginable landscapes, and woven tapestries of the brightest of colors. Whomever built this place had a strong sense of balance and culture, though the place seemed all but abandoned.

Whisper fluttered all about the enclosure, having never seen such relics of wonder and heritage before. It was all she could do to contain her excitement and to stay calm.

Link, too, was amazed, but felt a slight pinch of sadness rush over him. Who were these people, living under the sign of the Sheikah, and where had they gone?

After a short period of exploring empty dugouts and parched wells, Link came to a small room on a raised ground. A point of interest, it sat much higher than the rest of the compound and could be spied from almost anywhere in the underground village. Link thought it perhaps where the borough's leader would speak or preach from.

Lying on top of a simple table in the rear of the room was an ornate wooden box, the Eye of Truth painted on the top in a forbidding crimson color. Link approached it, hesitant to learn of

it's arcane secrets.

Link looked back out to the village, ensuring no one was watching, and then took the box in hand. Slowly reaching over it, he slid off the thin cover with the eye, placing it delicately on the table. Inside the box was a tuft of straw, neatly packing in whatever the box was hiding.

Whisper sensed something coming. Trying to warn the boy, her silent pleas didn't even phase him, Link being too busy with this new find to notice her signals.

Removing the stuffing, Link's eyes lit up at what he saw. Made of the finest steel and leathers, it was a claw-like weapon that one would strap onto their fist. With four barbs of razor-sharp fury, in the hands of a master it would be a dreadful weapon indeed.

Link's admiration was interrupted by a sharp howl, emanating from somewhere deep in the tunnels. Hurriedly wrapping the claw in a piece of cloth, Link stuffed it into his belt and drew out his dagger. It had been a long time since he heard the cry of a Wolfos, but once you hear it you never forget it's sorrowful note.

Leaping off the raised platform, Link took a quick scan of the city as the beasts approached. One or two wouldn't have been much of a task, but Link could make out at least six pairs of yellow eyes galloping down towards him. They must have followed him in.

Link missed his old equipment. Oh, what he wouldn't give for a some Deku Nuts right now.

Whisper bounced against Link's head, her other attempts to get his attention coming up empty. Flying off towards the northern end of the city, she stopped at the entrance to another tunnel, one that would lead even deeper into the underground.

Taking her cue, Link bolted towards the entrance, the gentle padding of the Wolfos' paws and the visceral panting of their fangs becoming louder by the second. Flying into the darkness without caution, Link unwittingly slipped into a bottomless chasm, tumbling downwards as if into the very blistering heart of the world itself.

Whisper quickly followed as Link plummeted into the deep unknown, her heart frightened at what this new path might bring, and where it could possibly take them.

The Wolfos stopped just short of the abyss, howling and crying at their escaped prey. Then, at the audible snap of a finger, they pulled back into the city, their master staying hidden amongst the mossy stones.

“It is said that the clouds surrounding this peak reflect the condition of Death Mountain. When they look normal, it is at peace.”

- Kaepora Gaebora

Link descended into an eternal darkness, glancing only slight hints of light from Whisper as she hurried to catch up. Link closed his eyes and braced for the worst, an assured collision with a rocky floor quickly nearing. But then, just as the boy felt the air turn it's coldest, his body suddenly stopped and the escaping rock that surrounded him ceased to fly by.

Suspended in mid-air, Link's eyes slowly focused as a relieved Whisper came near his face. He found himself entranced in a kind of protective circle, encompassing his entire body outright. It was of a hazy white color, much like Whispers airy form, and didn't seem the least bit frightening. In fact, it was almost comforting.

Whisper started to flit about wildly. Something had excited her, though Link didn't know what it was, and she was in a state of absolute elation.

The circle began to swirl, gently brushing across the points of Link's ears. It was calming, like being in a hot spring, and the boy started to feel as if he could sleep forever. Faster and faster the wispy cloud enveloped the two within it's hollow sphere, until it flashed into a bright nothingness of magic and celestial prominence.

Link didn't know how long he was asleep, nor did he care to at the time. He was in a state of complete repose, devoid of any pain or harsh emotion. All his troubles seemed to melt away, and he thought he was going to drift forever until he suddenly snapped awake, the feeling of a root digging into his back.

The hero opened his eyes and gazed about him. He was outside, the air clean and fresh, and the scent of pine blanketing him entirely. Lying on the cool ground, his eyes slid into focus, the first thing to come to his vision an embracing Whisper. She was obviously glad to see that Link was alright.

Link noticed that it was becoming slightly easier to read her thoughts, though nothing direct had come to him yet; just feelings that he could deduce from her antics.

Sitting up, Link stretched his limbs. He felt unwound, rejuvenated, as if the very weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. He still had work to do, without a doubt, but the burden didn't seem so heavy now.

The boy jumped to his feet, and scanned the realm around him. It was the old Death Mountain Trail, he was sure of it. The winding switchbacks, the tall escarpment of the surrounding rock, the skeletal forms of the conifer trees - it all spoke of the sacred mountain. The smell hadn't changed any, neither had the face, but it was different. Somehow, the feeling had shifted, or maybe it was Link that had changed, a boy long since astray amongst cloudless skies.

Link's first thought was to travel down to Kakariko, if indeed it was still there, but then reneged. It was possible that the village had turned into an encampment of the Ersatz army. Better to check it out after his work up the mountain had been finished, rather than start a fight now.

Turning towards the peak, Link pushed up the steady incline of the trail. There weren't any Tektites or Gorons to be seen. Link's thoughts snagged on that for a moment. He hadn't seen any non-humans in his trip so far. No Gorons, no Zoras, and no Kokiri had been anywhere to be seen, only the people of Ersatz, who were obviously of Gerudo descent, were present. It was strange, as the others were so populous and scattered all over Hyrule in his time.

Link pushed aside the mystery for the time being and focused on his task: the Mirrors of Veritas. He wondered where he could find them. It's not like they'd be laying around for anyone to stumble upon. They'd have to be buried, deep within the land's crust, away from prying eyes.

Link wound his way up the mountainside until he came to the place where Dodongo's Cavern should have been. Link shook his head in disbelief. The entire side of the mountain was nothing but a cascading rock-pile, as if the very cavern had caved, sealing the Dodongo's and the Goron's main food source within.

Sullen over the thought, Link pressed on until he came around to the entrance to the Goron City, sitting halfway up the trail. The entrance was the same; loose stones in a giant pile of rubble, but before the crumbled entrance stood a lone piece of rock, purposefully sunken into the ground.

Link approached the stone, immediately recognizing its shape. It was the pedestal in which the Goron's Ruby used to sit, the symbol of the Goron people still clearly visible on its face. On the base of the pedestal lay a finely chiseled inscription, luckily in the old Hylian language that Link could understand.

*Dodongos sleep under rock, ensnared,  
darkness keeps the forever-sunken lair.  
Gorons weep, for time passes still,  
until that day when hope stands fulfilled.*

Judging by the look of the pedestal and the collapsed entrance to Goron City, Link knew it had been a long time since this occurred. Whatever it was, it no doubt forced the Gorons to leave their home to find another. Even if there was a chance to help them, even if he had known, it was obviously too late.

Link gritted his teeth and moved on upwards to the mountain's apex, the fate of the Goron's weighing heavily on his mind. Whisper tried her best to cheer the boy up by feigning mischief, but came up empty. Link appreciated the gesture, but at the moment was irreconcilable.

The sun was reaching its climax, the temperature slowly beginning to recede back into night's chill. Link pushed himself faster, not wishing to be out in the open after nightfall. Hopefully he would find shelter at the roof of the mountain. If not, at least it wasn't likely that anything would follow him up the steep ascent.

Link reached the foot of the vertical face, the footholds still prominent in the face. The boy sighed, wishing he had his longshot. Swallowing his regrets, Link stuck his hands on the wall and climbed to the top.

Half-expecting another collapsed entry, Link wasn't the least surprised when he saw the entrance to Death Mountain Crater was completely gone, but was pleasantly relieved to see that the entry to the Great Fairy Fountain was still open. Ready for a familiar face, link pressed on in without hesitation.

Again, Link found himself perplexed. The fountain was gone, the Great Fairy with it, but a narrow pathway at the rear of the cave led on past into the heart of the mountain; a secondary entrance to the crater within. Link's first notion was to find another way, his fire tunic missing, but found the air inside the crater to be only mildly warm. The spewing lava and flame of the mountain had subsided, leaving a solid, rocky core behind.

Link caught a glimpse of a shiny object at the far end of the crater. Moving towards it, Link could tell it was a mirror, catching the rapidly departing power of the sun on its glossy facade. Whisper jumped and shook at the sight, delighted to see the first stage of the journey

complete. Link, too, was relieved.

Approaching the mirror, Link was astounded at the size. It was twice as big as a man, flawless in its construction, and supported by a massive black-rock pedestal. The light coming from above was reflecting off and to the north - the tunnel that lead to the Fire Temple.

Link pursued the dimming light, making him think of his exploits in the Desert Colossus, following streams of flaxen sunshine. Another mirror was placed at the entry to the Fire Temple, this one beaming light straight down.

The boy leaned over the entry, seeing it descend forever. The ladder was gone, as well as the floor that it once connected to. All that remained was a bottomless chasm filled with light.

Whisper started acting up, Link now prone to listening to his companion. Turning around, a dark, shadowy figure was standing in the center of the crater. Shrouded in a black cowl, the figure stood motionless, his hidden eyes staring at the boy. Reaching for his dagger, Link took a readied stance.

“You don’t belong here, boy.” The shroud said, enmity overlaying his words. “But I thank you for leading me to the mirrors.”

## Chapter Twelve: “Mistaken Identity”

“Have you heard the legend of the ‘Shadow Folk’? They are the Sheikah...the shadows of the Hylians.”

- Old Man in Castle Town

“Step aside.” The secretive man said.

Link stood his ground, knowing full well the consequences if but one mirror was destroyed: the entombment of Veritas and it's people.

“I applaud your courage in dark times such as these, but I beg you, walk away.”

Link pulled out his dagger, holding it in his right hand, his left clasping over the steel claw that was hidden under his shirt.

“I warn you, boy.” The man's voice was stern and unforgiving. “I will not hesitate to put you down like a horse with a broken leg if you do not leave this place this instant.”

Link's face hardened.

“Very well.” The man pushed his draping robes aside, revealing a golden-armor-clad warrior, the symbols of Ersatz engraved into the leafy plates. “In the name of the Empress!”

The golden knight charged at the boy with nothing but his bare hands. As he neared, Link tried to spy the man's face, but underneath his hood seemed to be an infernal darkness, keeping him concealed from prying eyes.

The man swung a heavy fist, one that could topple stone towers, but it came off too high, Link's agile form ducking underneath and rolling away.

“You'll have to be faster than that if you wish to escape!” The man said, flying at the boy again.

The man threw another fist, Link ducking and rolling again, but this time the warrior adjusted and dropped his elbow to the floor, catching a surprised Link underneath him. Link tried to avoid the armored drop, but found himself helpless as the gilded metal dug into his spine.

Then Link remembered.

Using the Eventide, Link dropped into the floor and whirled around, popping back into the room some twenty feet away from his assailant.

“Notable, but foolish.” the man jeered.

Himself dropping into the floor, Link found himself all alone, whisper frantically roaming the room to find where the attacker had gone.

“Shadow work is but for fools and back-stabbers. So which are you? Fool, or back-stabber?”

Link's eyes circled the floor, only to be hit from behind. The knight caught the boy right across the backs of his knees, forcing him to the floor. Link caught a glimpse of him from the corner of his eye, only to see him disappear into a near wall.

Link rose to his feet, only to be hit again, but this time the attack came from below. Grabbing his ankles from underneath, the knight flipped the small boy into the air, sending him reeling with a solid kick to his chest.

Link sputtered as his body came to a stop, the taste of copper in his mouth.

“It's a fool's errand, boy.” The man's voice came from high in the crater. “Yield now, and I will make your end quick. Refuse, and....well....let's just say that this can go on for hours, if need be.”

Link pulled out the steel claw. Dropping the rag it was wrapped in, he quickly strapped it onto his left hand. He was unsure how to use such an unwieldy device, but at this point he was desperate.

The man appeared, slowly entering the crater from a spire. “You know the ways of shadow, which speaks many things to me, though none of them fit you. You are either cursed, or you are not of this world. You have the look of a Highlander, and yet you still carry blood in your

veins. You are followed by a fairy creature, insects that once were banished from these lands.

“You are a blight upon this world, boy, and you bring death with you. Here, in this sacred place, is where you fail. I will *not* allow you to harm these mirrors.”

The youth blinked.

“...you....” The man responded to the boy’s confused stare. “You’re not here to destroy the mirrors?”

Link shook his head.

“Then why are you here if not...to....” The man relaxed his heaving body, his intimidating brawn melting into an eclipsing gentleness. “You’ve been to Veritas.”

Link nodded, gripping his aching chest.

“Then....you’ve met Lady Mara, yes?” The man’s voice sounded desperate to know. “Have you seen her?”

Link nodded again.

The golden warrior fell to his knees, bowing down to the ground as if he were just rescued from a den of hungry lions.

“Praise the Goddesses!” The man exclaimed, jubilation in his voice. “I thought for sure they were....”

He had forgotten about the boy whom he had nearly bludgeoned to death. “Forgive me, boy. Oh, I beg of you to forgive me! I thought you an agent of Sir Ironside!”

The man rose to his feet and shed off his armor as fast as he could manage. It was akin to someone casting off a poisonous spider, as if the armor were contaminating him.

Link could now see the man for what he really was: a Sheikah!

He was tall and muscular with white hair and pale red eyes. The symbol of his people, the red eye with a single tear, was stitched into his white jerkin.

“My name is Esclados....well, at least that’s what the people of Ersatz call me.” The Sheikah offered a hand to the mangled boy. “Come. Take my hand as a token of my penance.”

Link did so, relieved to see that the Sheikah tribe had indeed survived the passing of time.

“And what is your name, brave adventurer? Link? I pray I have not injured you too badly? You must understand, I thought you an assassin. It’s my duty to protect the mirrors from intruders.”

Esclados’ eyes drew to the claw in the boy’s left hand. “May I ask, where did you get that?”

Link told him of the underground cave in the south, the claw laying in it’s dusty coffin.

“It was there?” Esclados was delighted to hear everything Link had to say, a big smile on his face; a rarity amongst Sheikah. “Astonishing! That city has been empty for decades. It’s amazing that claw was never found by pillagers.”

Esclados stepped back and took in a deep breath. “Forgive my rudeness, Link. There is so much I want to tell you and so much I want to ask.

“And you too!” The man turned to Whisper. “I am sorry for calling you an insect. I am, in fact, quite fond of fairy folk. Wear the armor of Ersatz for so long and you begin to act like one of them!”

“Come!” Esclados was beaming. “I will take you to my village. There, we will be able to talk more of matters at hand.”

Link followed the Sheikah back to the mouth of the mountain crater, taking in a deep look at the subtle colors of a sun laying to rest. It was the same, the sunset in this time, as it was in his own: fading pinks and oranges cascading into streaking lengths of wispy clouds. He could see

Ersatz in the distance, standing like a dead tree in the center of a clearing, and even the remains of Lake Hylia to the far south could be viewed. Again, he caught a glimpse of that silvery line on the horizon, glittering like diamonds in desert sand.

Esclados noticed the boy's attention. "You've never been there, have you?"

Link shook his head, unsure of what 'there' even was.

"Don't worry." Esclados put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "You will. Even if I have to carry you down the ravines myself, you'll reach the southern ends. But first, there's things that need doing, yes?"

Link gave the Sheikah a determined nod.

"Good." Esclados gave Link a rough pat on the back, causing the boy to wince. "Let's get you to my father. He'll fix you up in no time!"

### Chapter Thirteen: "Ascent"

"Dost thou sense it? The climate of evil descending upon this realm..."

- The Great Deku Tree

Sir Ironside was livid. It had been days since Esclados had left Ersatz in search of the escaped shadow, and no word had been sent. Even the other patrols that were sent into the forbidden southern canyon didn't return. Something was shrouding this boy, keeping him from him, denying him the pleasure of watching his inevitable death.

No one dared to deny a toast to the great hero, Ganondorf. No one. It was heresy to the nth degree. Punishable by death on the spot. And yet, he escaped. A entire legion of the city's best troops within it's walls, and he still escaped. The very notion of defeat at the hands of a boy made the battle-worn soldier sick to his stomach. Someone had to have been helping the usurper. There was no other explanation.

"Sir Ironside!" The voice of a runner said from a close distance, panting from his quick dispatch. "Message."

Ironside's face crumpled, taking his view off the southern fields. All he needed was more bad news, or lack thereof. "Proceed, boy. And make it quick!"

The runner came to a stop and put his hands on his knees. "The Empress....requests an....an audience with you....Sir Ironside."

"And how long has it taken you to get me this message?" Ironside's face turned callous. He felt the sudden urge to hurt someone come from deep within his gut.

"Just now. I came straight from the Empress' chambers."

"Get out of my sight! Worthless dog!" Ironside gave the messenger a solid kick to his behind. "If I see you again on this tower it'll be your head in place of the Highlander's!"

The boy scampered off, not one to offend the great knight. He knew Ironside's temper was the direct result of failure, or the visible possibility of failure. There were very few battles Ironside had ever retreated from, let alone lost. The man's pride was without end.

Ironside smashed an armored fist onto the near wall, placing a fine crack in the chiseled marble. Cursing the ineptitude of the men at his command, he shoved off from the wall and headed towards the Empress' chambers, an agitated gait preceding his cascading shadow.

Reaching the solid jade doors, Ironside gave himself a slap across his own face, calming his nerves so he didn't say anything in front of the Empress that he might regret. Only once had he questioned a decision that his Lady had made, an experience he would rather have lived without.

"Ironside?" The Empress' gentle voice came from the other side of the door. Somehow she was always able to sense who was drawing near without ever seeing their faces.

"Yes, Empress. You summoned me?"

"Enter." The way she said it was in no way threatening, but Ironside knew better. She may show favor to some, but to him it would come at a cost.

Steeling himself, the knight gritted his teeth and pushed the heavy doors open. Without glancing forward, his head hanging low, the man started to walk into the room.

"That's far enough." The Empress said, Ironside not even inside the room. "We have much to discuss."

Ironside was surprised at the coldness in the Empress' voice. She was a firm monarch, to be sure, but never before had she denied him entrance into her meeting chambers. Falling to a knee, Ironside thought it best to remain silent until spoken to.

"Sir Ironside." The empress said. "Rise."

The knight did as instructed and raised his view, only to see it obstructed by a hanging veil of semitransparent red silk; the Empress standing on the other side. He couldn't quite tell, but it almost seemed as if she weren't standing on the ground. It seemed to him as if she were levitating about a foot in the air, but not being able to see her, he wasn't sure.

"Where is the boy?" The Empress said, her voice cutting through the air like a knife. "You have had three days, entire armies at your disposal. Your time nears it's end."

"I...." Ironside was about to lay the blame on his commanders, but knew that could very well lead to his death, given the current state of things. "I have failed you, my Lady. Try as I may,

some evil gives sway to this Highlander. Some unseen darkness gives speed to his stride and turns his tracks into dust. I, myself, have not heard from my patrols in as many days. It was as if they have vanished into the southern ravines.”

“And what of Esclados?” The Empress was growing impatient.

“No word from the Sheikah either. Not even a track or a scent on the wind.”

The Empress’ arms curled and flexed, the feeling of power emanating from across the thin veil to the knight. “As I said, your time nears it’s end. The great hero, Ganondorf, is going to return to us. But this boy stands in the way of his triumphant rebirth.”

Ironside was taken aback. “The great hero? He’s to return? How?”

“I have seen it. A prophecy has come to me, Ironside! A vision of great days to come! Three days from now, at the setting of the last sun of summer, the hero will return! But he cannot do so with this boy in the land. The Highlander is perverse, unclean, and a blight upon us. Even now, he defiles the sanctuaries that hold the remains of our beloved hero! His body, his mind, and his heart all lay helpless to the corrupting blade that this boy carries!”

Ironside could scarcely believe what he was hearing. And from his Empress no less. Never before had he heard any such talk of reviving the great hero of old; he didn’t think it possible.

“Ironside!” The Empress could somehow sense that the knight was distracted. “You will focus, or you will be dispatched to the gallows!”

Ironside gave a penitent bow, staying silent.

“Good! Now, here is the task you are given. Are you up to the challenge, greatest of all knights, or do I need to find some stableboy to take your place?”

Ironside flinched at the insult, anger swelling in his heart.

“No, of course not.” The Empress said evilly, answering her own question. “Dwell on that thought while you are marching the army to the northern slopes.”

“North, Empress?” Ironside was confused at this whole matter. The cursed mountain lay in that direction; nothing but ghosts and corpses of ancient battles.

“North. The boy has taken refuge with a band of Highlander sympathizers. He already carries the blade that may murder our hero before his glorious return. If he is allowed to continue, Ganondorf will surely be destroyed and never again be free to walk this world anew. And we will be thrust into an age of total darkness and despair.

“It is the same, this time, as it was before. This is the same boy that the great hero defeated before the dawning of time, sealing him within that foul blade. The very evil of the ages has returned to us, Ironside. Have you not the courage to defeat it? Take your place in the Hall of Heroes, Sir knight. Have your name sung on the eve of veneration, as your forbears. Bring about the return of the great hero, and you, too, shall be immortal in song.”

Ironside knew the consequences if he were to refuse or to argue. “If by my life, my Empress’ will be done.”

“Good.” The Lady’s once pristine voice grated like sand on rock. “Now, get out of my sight. If I see you in the city before the setting sun of summer, without the boy’s head, it will be you that take his place.”

Ironside bowed out of the room, anxious to leave, and pulled the massive jade doors shut behind him. He was vexed. Something was wrong. Over the past few months, the Empress had started acting more and more barbaric, issuing death warrants and threats of invasion on a near daily basis. Something was wrong. But he couldn’t see any particular reason or cause.

Brushing aside his misgivings, the knight captain quickly made his way to a runner’s

station, giving a boy the message to call together the war council; all the knight captains in the kingdom to assemble in the great hall.

Ironside popped his knuckles and took in a deep breath, gazing northwards to the imposing peak of the cursed mountain. “Goddesses, protect us.”

#### Chapter Fourteen: “Undertow”

“All the people in this village are born to serve the Royal Family of Hyrule.”

- Sharp the Elder

Link slowly roused from his peaceful slumber, the first he had received in weeks. He still felt worn and tired, but his mind was refreshed. Taking in a deep breath of the clean mountain air, he rubbed the cobwebs from his eyes and rose to his feet. Whisper danced in the air around him, glad to see him awake after so long a time.

Stepping out of the battered shanty that was his shelter, Link gazed around the skeletal remains of Kakariko village. It wasn't the same as it was before. Not only had it been moved deeper into the mountains, but the very soul of it seemed to be missing. It came across as devoid of meaning or purpose, the once proud guardians of the royal family reduced to beggars and

thieves.

“Oy, Link!” The familiar voice of Esclados came from down one of the side streets. Link perked up his ears and looked in his direction. “Still alive, old man?”

Link gave a smile at the friendly jest, keeping the fact of the statement to himself.

“My father’s been looking for you. He didn’t believe me when I told him that a wanderer such as yourself would still be in bed at ten in the morning.”

Esclados walked up near to Link, handing him a liquid-filled skin. “Here, drink. You’ve been sleeping for nearly two days. You must be parched.”

Link took the skin and held the opening to his dry lips. He was at first surprised that it wasn’t water, but then found himself unable to stop drinking it. It was sweet, like the juice of a berry, but then turned bitter like a cheaply-mixed mead.

“Good, yes?” Esclados was trying not to laugh at the way Link was guzzling the pink liquid. “It’s a healing potion that my father makes. Two skins of that after a full night of fighting and you could jump right back in.”

The potion tasted nothing like the red stuff that Link was used to, but at the same time it seemed much more powerful. Already he was feeling strength flowing through him, the tips of his fingers somewhat tingly.

Link finished off the skin and handed it back to Esclados. Wiping the rosy fluid from the corners of his lips, he stretched his arms out, feeling rejuvenated and ready for anything.

Esclados handed Link a simple cup made of clay. “Take this with you, you’ll need it. My father is up near the spring; wanted me to tell you to meet him there as soon as you were up. Better get going.”

Link nodded to his friend and turned northwards, the sound of rushing water nearby. Passing by the crudely built huts and shacks, he thought it amazing that the people of the Sheikah has survived as long as they had. But what of the underground village that was to the south? What drove this strong and battle-tested people from such a place of protection?

Link mulled over the thoughts as he came to the river. It wasn’t very wide, only a few yards across, but it was one of the deepest rivers he had ever come across. Unable to see the bottom, he wished he could dive down to uncover its assuredly long-lost secrets, but was warned beforehand of the dangers of the undercurrent below. Esclados told him how very few who had tried to conquer the tow of the river lived to tell of it, as the current would sweep you away into the dark honeycomb of caves that lead into the belly of the cursed mountain.

Link looked up and down the river until he saw Esclados’ father, ankle deep in the river on the opposite shore. Esclabor was a powerful man, much bigger than most in the village, and could probably take on a Dodongo barehanded.

“Here, Link.” The Sheikah said, his eyes trapped on the surface of the water. “Step on in.”

Link did as he was told, wading into the river a couple of feet, standing just before the drop-off.

“I see Esclados sent you up prepared.” Esclabor said, looking at the clay cup in Link’s hand. “He’s a fine young man, canny and clever. Almost too clever for his own good, such as yourself.

“Go ahead, Link.” Esclabor motioned the other to dip the cup in the river. “Put the entire thing in the water, let no side of it stay above the surface.”

Link did as he was instructed, unsure of what the Sheikah was getting to.

“Now, very slowly, turn the cup upside down. Remember, keep the whole cup submerged!”

Link rotated the chalice until the base was facing him. Curious, Link noticed there was a small hole in the bottom of the cup.

“Now, Link, bend down and gaze into that little hole there. Close your other eye, and look straight in.”

He did so, his nose touching the cool water as it sped past. Gazing through, Link could see something swirling in the darkness below, the outside light blocked. It looked like a creature of some sort, wiry and coursing like a snake, moving incredibly fast against the current. It had to be rather large, swimming near the bottom of the river.

“Do you see anything?” Esclabor said, a hint of excitement in his voice. “Anything at all?”

Link nodded, keeping his eye fixed on the creature. Whisper also wanted to watch, but kept back so Link could see.

“A dragon, perhaps?”

Link looked up from the spyhole, seeing Esclabor sporting a grin.

“Want to see it up close?”

Link was unsure if he wanted to see another dragon. One too many had he already met.

“We call them water Drakes. Don’t worry, they’re perfectly harmless...as long as you do as I say. And don’t fret about it’s size. It may seem like a monstrous beast, down in the dark deep, but, in reality, it’s not but the size of your palm. It’s bite, however, can make your arm go numb for hours.”

Link nodded his understanding.

“Good. Here’s what you need to do: place both hands on the sides of the cup; careful not to wrap your fingers around the brim, lest you get bitten. I’ll tell you from experience, it stings like a swarm of Keese.”

Link did as told, taking care not to expose himself.

“Okay.” Esclabor continued. “Now listen carefully, as this is the difficult part. Not many Sheikah children can do this first try, so it may take a couple of flips before you get it down right.

“First, you need to wait for the Drake to swim close to the looking hole. Only then can you capture it. Next, you need to flip the cup as fast as you can and lift it out of the water. Precision is critical, for if the Drake leaves the water, even for but a moment, it will die. Water is it’s lifeblood. Take that away, and it becomes not but a pile of cerulean dust; which is still useful, but not as precious as a live Drake.

“Also, when you lift the cup out of the water, be sure to place one finger on the hole at the bottom of the cup. Don’t want the Drake to lose it’s pool, now, do we?”

Esclabor folded his arms. “Ready? Go ahead, give it a try.”

Link relaxed his muscles and bent over the spyhole again, seeing the creature surging through the water like a leaf on the wind. Effortlessly, it changed course, sped up and slowed down as if the water’s strong drift meant nothing to it. It neared once, Link ready to pounce and capture, but it quickly left as fast as it came. Link knew he would need more than speed to capture a thing such as this. A little luck would be in order.

It came again, this time nearly right into Link’s eye, but still the moment didn’t seem right. It was too fast, and he didn’t want to scare it off. Three times it did this, taunting him to the point of reckless spins, but he was tenacious in his task.

Then the moment came. With all the swiftness he could command, Link flipped the cup and heaved it out of the river, water splashing all over him as he raised the chalice up overhead.

“Good!” Esclabor was impressed. “Quickly now! Plug up the base!”

Link nearly forgot and hurriedly placed a finger over the small leak.

“Go ahead! Have a look!”

Link dropped the cup down to his face, getting a close view of the Drake. It didn't seem upset, as Link expected, but rather looked content, rubbing up against the sides of the cup as if it were its own home. Up close, he could see the Drake had silvery spines running across its back and long, white whiskers that rippled in the water as it swam.

“They like the clay; reminds them of home.” Esclabor said, using a long stick to vault himself back to Link's side of the river. “You never want to supplant a Water Drake in a metal cup. That is, unless you want it to jump out and bite you on the nose.”

Link grinned at the thought, though Esclabor didn't share in the amusement.

“The point here isn't just to show you how to catch a strange fish, Link. You must understand this if you are to continue down this path that has been chosen for you. Even the most noble of creatures can be tricked and captured, such as this. If you feel at home, if you feel safe, you'll be lulled into defeat without you even knowing it.

“This Drake will make a fine potion, just like the one you have been living off of the past few days. Its uses are profound and are the very bricks upon which my people are built. But, in the end, it still must lose its life for this to occur. Don't be like the Drake in the earthen cup, Link. You must be like the one caught in metal, always. You may look on it as the wrong decision, to sacrifice yourself if you are caught, but in reality it is the right thing to do.

“Choose your paths wisely, my young man. Do this, and you will avoid simple tricks such as these and not even have to make such decisions.”

Link understood what the Sheikah chieftain was trying to tell him. This is a strange land, even though it is the land of his birth. He needed to be wary of even the slightest warnings, the minute details, else he could become caught up in the storm.

Esclabor took the cup from Link, placing his own finger over the hole in its base. “Come. Let's go back to the village and show the rest of the Sheikah what you have accomplished this day.”

Link couldn't help but show a little pride with a closed-lipped smile.

Heading back to the center of the shanties, Esclabor handed the cup off to a Sheikah woman, who hurriedly ran off with it. “We have a small pool that we have built to hold the Drakes until we are ready to make potions with them. It's a rather difficult task that we only do once a month. Sorry to say that you will probably be gone by the time we do it again. Perhaps when you visit us again?”

Link nodded. Potion making wasn't the most appealing task to him, but he knew that the results of this potion were worth almost anything.

“Esclados!” The chieftain said loudly into the village, his son nowhere to be seen. “By the Goddesses, do I need to tie that boy down for when I need him?”

Another Sheikah came running from the southern pass, the sound of his flight mysteriously absent. It was as if he was gliding on air; he was a ghost, trained in speed and stealth.

“Esclabor!” The man said, coming near. He stopped just short of the chieftain, lowering himself to a knee to rest from the haste of his journey.

“What is it, Lanval? Do you know of Esclados' whereabouts?”

“Nay.” Lanval said, his chest heaving. “It took me all night to reach here. I was being followed, I had to lose them deep in the mountains. I saw fires burning to the south, thousands of torches amassed on the slopes of the mountain, near Old Kakariko. I think it's an army. An army of Ersatz.”

“An army?” Esclabor jested. “What army? The forces of Ersatz are terrified of this place. Even the Empress herself would never set foot on our door.”

Esclabor moved closer to the other, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. “You are sure of this? An army of Ersatz?”

“Without a doubt.” Lanval answered, no misgivings in his eyes.

Esclabor’s muscles tensed and tightened, his sturdy frame becoming even more imposing than before. “Then we will answer.” He said with a resolve that could topple a mountain. “Call out every able-bodied man, woman, and child. Gather every last drop of Drake potion that we can carry. We make for the summit come dusk.”

Lanval gave Esclabor a quick nod and jumped to his feet, going door to door in the village to sound the calling of war.

“I am sorry, Link, that I cannot continue protecting you here. We are leaving this place, and we may not return. You are welcome to stay as long as you like, but, come morning, you best be far away from here.”

Link fully understood what the chieftain was asking of him, but felt the time he needed was cut too short. He had many questions left unanswered. What was this Sheikah claw that he carried? How did the Sheikah know of the Hyruleans living underground in Veritas?

Link’s thoughts were sundered by the pounding of war drums, echoing from somewhere deep in the canyons and ravines of Death Mountain’s roots.

“Go, Link.” Esclabor said keeping his vision to the south. “Head west to the Creydo forests, back to the sacred places. I will meet with you there as soon as I can.”

Before Link could even take a step, something black and ominous appeared on the skyline. Hovering just above the rocky cliffs that surrounded the village, soon, many others raised up into the sky, blacking out the midday sun with their shadowy wings. Even though he had never spied these renditions before in his life, Link could tell exactly what they were, his Hylian eyes betraying him not.

Dinolfos with wings.

The larger one in the lead spewing fire into the sky, Esclabor quickly reached behind him and pulled out a claw, much like the one Link had found in the south. Strapping it to his right fist, he let the metal glint in the sun, showing the Dinolfos exactly where he was.

“Run, Link.” The Sheikah breathed wistfully to himself, as if the hero wasn’t even there. “Run.”

## Chapter Fifteen: “Best Served Cold”

“A terrible thing has happened! The evil shadow spirit has been released!”

- Sheik

Link watched in horror as the Dinolfos hovered over the cusp of the village, the sound of pounding drums and clanking metal in the background. An army was at New Kakariko’s door, the handful of Sheikah powerless to stop it.

“Did you not hear what I said?!?” Esclabor gave Link a powerful shove, almost toppling the boy to the ground. “Get out, Link! Get out!”

Link turned to the mountain pass and bolted, Whisper close behind.

Seeing movement on the ground, the lead Dinolfos spun and plummeted into a dive, wrapping its wings around its body to gain tremendous speed. Breathing out fire as it plunged, it became a flying spear of flame, threatening to consume all in its beeline path towards the dashing Link.

The hero didn’t stop to look, but he knew he was the intended target. That, and the war drums coming from down the trail, made him push that much harder towards the pass that led back up to Death Mountain Summit.

His lungs heaving, Link dodged the metal and clay shanties, passing by other Sheikah who

were preparing for war. In all haste, they were strapping on claws, swords, shields, Drake potions; an array of weapons that Link had never seen before in one place, let alone on one person.

Link saw a familiar face standing at the edge of the mountain pass, staring at the boy as he approached. It was Esclados, his face white with terror as he stared up into the sky.

Link turned to look, only to see the singeing body of the Dinolfos not but a few yards away and coming fast.

“Link!” Esclados yelled to the hero to roll away, but stood still and did nothing as the monster approached.

Link pulled out his dagger, but felt helpless at the sight of such an onslaught as this.

Just then, right before the Dinolfos struck, Esclabor flew into the scene, stepping in front of Link with a shield of hardened steel, the eye of the Sheikah painted on its ashen face. Grabbing Link by the collar, he pulled him close and dropped to the ground in a defensive stance, shielding the two of them from the scalding fires of the Dinolfos’ corrupted breath. Terrified, Whisper jumped under Link’s hair, clinging to him for protection.

The monster breathed a stream of liquid fire onto the shield and spun off to the side, leaving a trail of charring embers as it spun away. Unfolding its wings, it dropped to the ground, the talons of its hands and feet clawing at the rough dirt and rock until it came to a stop. Standing up to its full height, it was much taller, and bulkier, than the Dinolfos that Link had encountered before in his adventures. Pulling out two short swords that were glowing with unearthly heat, it slowly approached Link and Esclabor who stayed huddled behind their fireproof defense.

“Stay true, Link.” Esclabor said to him. “Take this shield and defend yourself until we can get you out. Your task is to defend the mirrors. At all costs, even to the taking of our lives, and yours, the mirrors must not be destroyed! Lady Mara and all of Veritas depends upon us to do this, else they will fall.”

Esclabor gave Link a weak smile. “Ready?”

Link nodded, stern determination in his eyes.

“Follow close behind, and watch my back.”

Esclabor handed Link the shield and leapt out of the safeness of the enclosure with an agility that was beyond belief. His lone claw slicing through the air with lightning speed and precision, he delicately wove himself inside the defenses of the Dinolfos, dodging sword, fire, and flailing tail whips with such grace, Link could not help but to watch. So entranced by the display of artistry, Link nearly failed to notice the snarls and trumpeting of the other Dinolfos, dropping into the village.

Link turned his back to Esclabor and the fire-breather, eyeing the scene. There were dozens of Dinolfos filling the streets and byways of New Kakariko, setting ablaze the simple buildings and trees, trampling nearby crops, and knocking over the gravestones and memorials of soldier Sheikah long since passed. The entire village was in ruin and flame, Link and the Sheikah with no other recourse than to let it happen.

Seeing the befoulment taking place in his village, a rage so blistering and pure ignited within Esclabor, and with one swift and decided swing of his claw, the giant Dinolfos fell over onto its back, the perverse green blood flowing unhindered from its belly staining the ground.

Esclabor quickly forgot his triumph and turned to the village. Bellowing a call of war more bone-chilling than the shriek of a wraith, Esclabor’s eyes seemed to lose their color and shift into a pure white, his body tensing and shaking with power and fury.

Answering the call, the handful of Sheikah that inhabited the village charged into battle, employing nearly every weapon imaginable against the invaders. The power of the Sheikah had

been unleashed.

As the battle waged, the howls and screams filling the air cut into Link's heart and mind. He had battled many monsters and demons before, but never before had he witnessed full blown war. It was sinister, to say the least; harrowing to the soul.

Link turned and looked to the mountain pass, just as Esclados took off and ran out of the village. He must be running off to protect the mirrors, Link thought to himself.

"Link!" Esclabor yelled. "Go!"

Shield in hand, Link dashed for the outlet into the mountains, following Esclados' trail. Rounding a couple of bends, he skidded to a stop, his eyes growing wide.

Marching up the ramparts of New Kakariko was the true army of Ersatz. Armors of black, red, and prominent gold glinted in the afternoon sun as they steadily marched, the ground quaking under their unison steps. Filling all the gaps in the southern passage, it was an impossible sea of bodies, armed to the teeth, ready to conquer.

Link reeled and broke into a sprint back to the village. He maybe could have escaped into the northern mountains, but Esclabor and the rest of the Sheikah needed to be warned.

Flying back into the village, Link spotted Esclabor dispatching Dinolfos as if they were paper dolls. He was drenched in green blood and sweat; dark streaks of emerald and his own red on his face.

"Link?!?" Esclabor was in disbelief at the stupidity. "What, in the name of the Goddesses, are you doing?!?"

Link ran up close to the Sheikah, pointing backwards at the pass just as the soldiers of Ersatz rounded the corner and began pouring into the village like ants from a hill.

"Powers protect us." Esclabor said, trying to count the soldiers. "Sheikah! To the west pass!"

Like a wild ocean tide, the Sheikah all shifted towards the pass, cutting down Dinolfos as effortlessly as breathing. They were growing tired, some bloodied and cleaved, but their resolve as warriors held stronger than the pain.

"Link!" Esclabor beckoned for the hero to follow. "To the river!"

The pair ran as fast as their legs would carry them, Lin having to push much harder to keep up with Esclabor's massive strides. Reaching the riverbank, the Sheikah placed a firm hand on Link's shoulder.

"Do you have a Keystone?"

Link didn't know what the man was talking about.

"Did Lady Mara give you a black stone with some etchings on it? Quickly, we haven't much time!"

Link reached into his pocket and retrieved the small amulet, it's glimmering facade flashing in the light of day.

"Wrap it tightly around your right hand, the smooth face against your palm." Esclabor helped strap the shield to Link's back, keeping an eye on the battle ensuing in the village below. "With haste, Link! They come!"

As fast as he could manage, Link pulled the cords tightly around his hand and wrist.

"Good. Now all you need to do is..." Esclabor stopped short, his ears perking up to the sky. "Move!"

The Sheikah gave Link a solid push out of the way just as a hail of steel bolts came flying through the air, peppering the ground and the river. Following the volley, a small group of soldiers came charging up the steady incline towards the waterfront, swords drawn. A bolt lodged firmly in

his left shoulder, Esclabor yelled in defiance at the encroachers.

Surrounding Link and the Sheikah, the soldiers pointed their steel menacingly, poisonous looks hidden underneath their plated enclosures.

Not one to wait for destiny, Esclabor lunged into the fray, cutting down two of the soldiers with his claw. With only a dagger and a sword hilt, Link could do next to nothing but defend himself best he could from the long reach of the men.

Taking another soldier down, Esclabor wrested the man's blade from him and tossed it to the Highlander.

Clasping the sword with his left hand, it's grip still warm with it's previous owners heat, Link spun the blade, testing the weight and the balance. Satisfied, he lunged at the near soldiers, the familiar feeling of sword-to-sword combat instantly coming back to him. Strange, he thought, how this fight reminded him of that final battle with Ganondorf in his tower. Such a long time ago it seemed, distant and ethereal. He knew then, without a doubt, that something else was lingering in the village of New Kakariko. Neither of Sheikah nor of Ersatz, something vile and villainous was drawing near.

The pain and loss of blood getting to him, Esclabor was beginning to falter. Glancing off a mortal blow with his claw, the steel barbs shattered, the Sheikah now left with nothing but his fists. Gripping the soldier with his bear-claw-hands, he pummeled the warrior through his helmet, dropping the man to the ground.

Another soldier jumped in, catching Esclabor across the jaw with an armored knuckle. The Sheikah spun and fell to the ground. Stepping over him, the soldier lifted his blade high, intent on staining his sword with the blood from Esclabor's heart.

"Sword!" Esclabor yelled to Link, who quickly snatched up another and tossed it to the Sheikah.

Catching the hilt in his off hand, Esclabor rolled to his side and put all the energy he could muster into the swing, the razor's edge passing clean through the plating around the soldiers throat; blood spattering all over the eye on Esclabor's tunic.

Pushing the corpse over, the last of the soldiers in the area dead, Esclabor motioned for Link to help him to his feet. Doing so without hesitation, Link pulled the man up, his body seeming weary and lax.

"Time to go, Link." The Sheikah Chieftain said, his voice shaky. "That medallion will lead you to where you need to be. They always do."

Esclabor reached into his tunic and pulled out a similar stone that was draped around his neck. Snapping the cords, he handed it to Link. "When again you see Lady Mara, be sure to return this to her. I no longer have need of it."

Link looked into the Sheikah's eyes, knowing all too well what he was planning.

"Never let that stone get into the hands of Ersatz. Never. It could lead them to Veritas and they could destroy them all. Lady Mara grows weak, as now I grow weak. A full on assault on the underground would be a massacre.

"Run now, Link. Take a deep breath."

Link didn't understand at first, but then squeezed in a quick breath as the Sheikah pushed him into the river, the undertow seemingly gripping him by the ankles and sucking him down into the deep chasm of water.

"Speed on, Link." Esclabor said, hunching over to his knees, his power leaving him.

Sitting still for a moment, Esclabor's senses were again snapped awake at the sound of heavy, armored boots approaching, the gentle padding of another Sheikah close behind.

## Chapter Sixteen: "Sleepless Waterfall"

"The flow of this waterfall serves the King of Hyrule. When the King slumbers, so too do these falls."

- Zoran Inscription

Link tumbled and tossed through the underground labyrinth of a river, flowing deep into the heart of the cursed mountain. Desperately trying to keep himself away from the craggy rocks, he found it near impossible to swim in a current such as this.

Gripping the Keystones tightly in his right hand, the pirated sword in his left, Link spun through the hazy dark, the only light to be seen coming from Whisper's glimmering wings. The fairy herself was also caught in the immense tow, though she was able to use her wings to somewhat navigate the river. Link wasn't so lucky.

Link's chest was starting to shudder, the breath in him giving it's last. His mind blurred and swam, much like the water around him. He was running out of time; no end of the river in sight.

With great effort, Link pulled the Keystones close to his chest, clinching his fingers around their smooth surfaces as if they were his lifeline. Little did he know, they were.

Flaring to life in the stark, cavernous abyss, the Keystones began to pulse through the water, causing gentle ripples within the enclosure. Link could feel the palpitations deep within him, making his body careen in the already pounding river.

Caressing and enveloping, the ripples joined to form a barrier around his body, sealing him within. The water left the cocoon, Link and Whisper both slumping to the floor. His lungs exploded for air. He expected none to find, but was relieved when he felt the cool, crisp wind fill his body. He could feel a gentle breeze within the shell, as if the protective barrier was drawing air

from the water itself, giving him life and hope.

Whisper rose into the air, fluttering the moisture off her wings, little sprinkles dancing off Link's face. He gave a weak laugh, holding up his hands from the delicate shower.

Whisper hovered close. "Thank the Goddesses for that!"

Link's jaw dropped. He heard the fairy's voice as clear as the midday sun.

"You...you can understand me?"

Link nodded, a smile of amazement slowly creeping over.

"Finally!" The fairy exclaimed, elated that her role of silence had been lifted. "I thought you were never going to come around!"

Link reached up with his hand, letting Whisper land on his finger. She felt cool to the touch.

"Most can find the way quite easily. You, boy, are full of straw! The Goddesses could have created another world in the time it took you to align!

"But, no matter. All that matters is that you can listen now!"

Link released his grip on the sword, letting it rest on the side of the cocoon as they sped through the dark underworld with an incredible speed.

"Do you know where we are going?" Whisper asked of her companion.

Link shook his head. He didn't even know where they were at the moment, let alone where they would end up.

Whisper turned away, looking at the passing rock. "Me neither. But we're sure to end up where we need to be!" She spun back around, her spirits lifted. "I guess we were never properly introduced. Lady Mara called me Whisper, as that is how she sees me. If she would have looked a little deeper, she would have seen much, much more. But, for now, Whisper will do. Nice to finally meet your acquaintance, Link!"

The hero nodded and smiled to his companion. He, too, was relieved to finally have someone he could talk to.

"Now, down to business." Whisper floated up to the roof of the cocoon, watching the juts and crags of rock as they flew by. "There's so many things I have to tell you, but I fear we don't have the time. Alright then! Just the important stuff!

Whisper floated back down and hovered in Link's direct view. "Veritas is in more danger than you, or it's inhabitants, know. The mirrors are important, yes, but there is a greater threat. I have sensed it building for some time now, but, until you freed me from the tunnels of woe, I was powerless to do anything about it. But no longer!

"The dark stranger, the one who trapped me and my sisters in the rock, he has returned! I could sense him in the air back in New Kakariko. This man has dark power. Power that not even I can defend against. It's as if he has the very strength of the Goddesses at his command!

"He follows us. Even now, he follows us. You caught wind of him back in the underground city to the south. Those were his Wolfos that attacked us. I didn't see him, but I wouldn't forget the feeling of his presence if I were trapped in rock for all eternity!"

Whisper drooped down a little lower, making sure she had Link's undivided attention. "Do you know what it is that he wanted from me and my sisters in the fountain of essence?"

Link hadn't the slightest idea.

"He was looking for...*him*."

The boy didn't need to ask. He knew exactly who she was referring to.

"Your eyes betray you, Link. You know of whom I speak. You have met this man before. ...good. It will save you; and hopefully me and the rest of the world!

“The stranger is gathering all the pieces of the dark lord. At the end of this night, all will be decided. There is an alignment of stars in the heavens that will begin as soon as dusk settles. Time is short. If only you hadn’t been asleep for so long...”

Link’s thought immediately drew to Esclados.

“By the Goddesses.” Whisper came to the realization at the same time as Link. “The Sheikah...I thought...I thought he was our friend...” The fairy’s wings went flat. “He kept you asleep for those two days. He wanted you to stay out until the alignment!”

Link gritted his teeth. The bitter cut of betrayal had etched its mark on his heart.

“Oh, I am sorry, Link! I didn’t see it! But there’s still time! Time enough to stop the dark stranger from bringing Ganondorf back!”

Link’s spirit wilted. He told Whisper of his coming into this world, and of seeing Ganondorf, and of the Master Sword’s fate. Producing the shattered hilt, he held it up for the fairy to see.

“I...I don’t know what to say, other than to say that Ganondorf is *not* here. He couldn’t be. I can see into the other side, you know. I’m of the fountain of essence! I can see the dark lord, even now, awaiting his return in the other realm. The veil is thick, but the shadow remains. What you saw...it must have been a dream.”

Link wanted to believe her. With all his heart, he wished it were true.

“Even if he were here in body, his spirit is not. That’s for certain. Something else is out there, be it the dark stranger or some other force, but not Ganondorf Dragmire. Ersatz may want it differently, but, if it were to happen, they’d regret it for sure.

“Help me, Link! Help me ensure that never happens!”

He desperately wanted to walk away. To him, it seemed only moments since his last confrontation with Ganon in his tower. His very life was taken from him that fateful day. Everything; friends, family; everything. He had given and lost so much. He didn’t want to do it again. And besides, without the Master Sword, what was he to do?

“Come on, Link!” Whisper could see he was in doubt. “I can’t do this without you! You are the only one that can carry this burden! I can’t do it. If I could, I would take up that sword and show that pig-faced Gerudo a thing or two, but I can’t. I’m just a fairy.

“But you...you’re Link. The Hero of Time. Evil’s Bane. Master of the Winds. You are the One. I can see all you have done through the centuries, though not many others have. You’re destined to conquer evil, just as you were destined to come here to save us from that same evil resurrected.

Link knew he would try, though his heart felt weary.

“If not for me,” Whisper said, turning to last resort. “Do it for Zelda.”

Link’s eyes and ears perked up.

“I didn’t want to tell you. You have too much to worry about already.”

Whisper floated to the other side of the cocoon, cold, dark water rushing by. She could see a faint sliver of light in the far distance, gradually growing as they approached. She knew the time for talk was going to be cut short within moments.

“Link, there isn’t time! All I can tell you now is that Zelda is alive and in Ersatz, for now. You can’t help her. Don’t even think to try. Not in the state you are in, anyway. Look at your hand.”

Link gazed down at his left hand, the outline of the Triforce of Courage having grown even fainter than before.

“You see? Even now the power of the Triforce begins to waver under this dark shadow. I

don't know where we are going to get it, but we need help! Esclados may have betrayed us, but not to the end! He failed, Link! You are fated to overcome! There are others. Others that would give their lives to help you. I don't know how, but I think one of them is coming near."

Link looked passed Whisper's dainty body at the nearing light in the tunnel just as the cocoon began to unwind. Water quickly began to fill the empty space, Whisper rushing to her companion and clinging to his tunic. Link took a large gulp of air, the biggest one he could muster, and was again submerged in the wild waters of the mountain.

## Chapter Seventeen: "Ghosts"

"The passion of friendship will soon blossom into a righteous power and through it, you will know which way to go..."

- Sheik

Chilled to the bone, Link gyrated and twisted in the flowing darkness underneath the cursed mountain, the light at the end growing closer and brighter. Whisper, tired and worn, found it hard to navigate the boisterous undertow and was clinging for her life to Link's tunic. Link himself was unable to control any of his motion, instead saving his energy in case he would need it once they reached the approaching shore.

Not thinking to grab his sword as the cocoon failed, link had to curl and bend to avoid it's razor edge as it moved about him in the water, dancing dangerously with the glint of evening flashing upon the steel. Like a River King intent on purging his waters, the sword seemed to have a mind of it's own, knowing exactly where to slice and jab at his defenseless opponent.

Totally absorbed by the feral blade, Link failed to notice that the current began to quicken as the light approached.

Then, like fire spewing from the mountain's belly, Link and Whisper exploded into the radiance of day, the cusp of a waterfall at their feet. Link clamored to find something to attach to, but came up empty, his hands gliding smoothly on the glassy rock. He thought to use the Eventide to escape into the mountainside but decided against it, lest he become trapped within the solid core or walk into a fiery conflagration of molten rock. Death Mountain may be quiet, but dead she was assuredly not.

Taking his chances with the waterfall, Link flew into the air, the pool of water some hundred feet below. Escaping the water, Whisper flew out into the open air, turning only to see Link plummet over the edge. With all the energy he had left, Link leaned forward into a dive, aligning into that form the Zora had taught him, oh so long ago. Hands in front of his face, holding his feet together, and making his body as straight as possible. Knifing the water below just as a

spear pierces armor, Link shot down to the bottom of the river with the speed of an arrow, the force of it nearly crushing all the air from his lungs.

Refocusing his mind, Link barrel rolled to the right to return to the surface just as his sword came shooting through the water. In all its lethality, by only a few feet did it miss the hero, driving itself into the cold, murky base of the river. Swimming over to the sword-embedded, Link gripped it and pulled it from the muck, holding it high; his ghostly adversary subdued. Shoving off with his feet, he broke for the surface and left the water like a newborn leaving the womb. Taking in the deepest breath he had ever, he felt like he was reborn; alive to fight another day.

The River King, in all his fury, would have to go without.

Link dragged himself ashore, thanking the Goddesses for solid ground at last. It seemed a lifetime that he was trapped in the underground waterway, as if the life he had led was taken away and erased from the tapestry. The world around seemed so different, smeared, altered. But he knew, without a doubt, that nothing had changed. There was a war to be fought, and he was the only one who could do it.

Rolling on to his back, Link's body glistened in the sun and his head went dizzy. He fought the urge to fall asleep, but didn't have the stamina to resist. Unwillingly, the hero drifted off into a twisted and shallow repose, his mind full of dark thoughts and the convoluted monsters in his dreams.

Link felt a gentle pressure over his entire body. He didn't know what it was, but it was inviting, warm, and benign. Floating away, he let the deep sleep take him.

Then, like the searing pain of a cattle brand against his chest, Link snapped awake and reached for his sword, only to find himself lying on a bed. Bewildered, Link glanced around the space, realizing he was inside a crude house. Small and sparse, it seemed neglected and rarely used, the long, reaching arms of woodland trees clawing through the walls. With only one window, Whisper resting peacefully upon it, the room had soft streaks of yellow light dancing upon the dusty surfaces.

"Good to see you awake." A familiar voice said. "Never thought I'd see you again, let alone in my wood."

Link turned to the sound of the voice, coming from the nearby entrance that was closed only by the aid of a ragged sheet. Leaning against the worn timber, draped in an emerald cloak, was Cale, a crooked grin on his face.

"I say welcome again to the forests of Creydo, Link of High Rule. I must say, it's been an interesting few days with you running around. Patrols of Ersatz around every nook and cranny, fires billowing from the depths of the cursed mountain, an army amassed at its slopes. What have you been up to anyway?"

Link kept his secrets to himself, ever wary of another possible betrayer in his midst. He didn't feel any apprehension with Cale, but he didn't think himself lucky enough to escape again if the event were to repeat.

"Well, I suppose that would be a silly question, because, you see..." The woodsman was hesitant, trying to find the easiest way to put it. "I'm not much a man for words, Link, so I think it best to just show you."

Reaching into the folds of his cloak, Cale pulled out a metal chain, a Keystone attached.

Link quickly shot his sight to his right hand. Both his stones were still there, his grip apparently never leaving them even while he slept.

"Yes, this one is mine. Whose, may I ask, is the other that you carry?"

Link's eyes averted, the painful memory of the Sheikah village still near.

“Link, you must tell me. There are precious few Keystones in this myriad of existence we call a country. Every single one is critical. If but one were to fall into the wrong hands, Veritas could very well be entombed, Lady Mara and the rest of the Highlanders doomed to an eternity of darkness.”

Link looked the woodsman straight in the eyes. How did he know of such things? How could a simple woodsman have discovered Veritas? Was he taken too?

“I know you have questions, Link. I will answer all if you but tell me the name of the one whose stone you carry.”

Link relented. No harm in telling the woodsman about something that was already passed.

“Esclabor?” Cale seemed surprised. “You are sure of this?”

Link nodded his head. Nothing, not even the pain of death, could make him forget the man’s name.

“By the Goddesses.” The man cursed. “The army at the mountain; they’ve found the Sheikah village?”

“By the voice of another.” Whisper’s voice came into the room, her luminous white body still sitting on the windowsill.

“Whose?” Cale asked.

Link was taken aback. Cale could understand the fairy?

“Esclados, the chieftain’s son. He pretended to help us, and in doing so kept Link asleep for two days. Even I thought he was a friend to us. But, in the end, he brought the armies of Ersatz down on us.”

“Trouble.” Cale said. These are dark times, little fairy. Brother against brother has become our way, and, I fear, it is but beginning.”

“No.” Whisper said strongly, lifting off the windowsill and floating towards the center of the room. “It is ending. Tonight, come the stroke of midnight, everything will end unless we find a way to stop it!”

“What are you babbling about, fairy?” Cale obviously hadn’t any tolerance for Whisper and her kind. “‘Come the stroke of midnight’ indeed! The army of Ersatz is out in the mountains hacking through brush and rock, Link is here. What possible harm could come to him while we are in Creydo? That’s at least a three day march for an army that size.”

Whisper’s color turned dark, her body’s shade fading to a glossy black. “Did you not hear what I said?!? *He* is coming back!”

Cale lost all color from his face. Unable to process it, he brushed it off and put on a sarcastic smile. “Hah! You almost had me there, fairy. I think you’ve eaten too much of your fairy dust, fairy.”

Link, for the first time in his life, felt truly afraid. Whisper’s body again began to change color, this time exploding into a fiery red. Her size seemed to double and the air around the room became dry and warm.

Whisper neared Cale’s cadaverous face, his cynical grin long gone. “I...am...not...a fairy!”

The room ignited in a blazing inferno of light, heat, and static. Cale was blown out the doorway into the forest and Link was thrown out of the bed and onto the floor on the other side. Gripping a nearby root, Link cinched his eyes shut as the maelstrom of power erupted. Cale had unleashed something terrible into the world.

The sky seemed to turn dark and the wood of the cabin began to melt. A soft hissing noise could be heard, slowly building higher and higher. Whisper’s body was lost within the storm, the intensity of the light consuming her and ravaging the surrounding space. Link thought to run, but

found himself trapped in a corner, the door and the window too far away.

Then, the space growing deathly quiet for a moment, Whisper's form detonated in a whirlwind of fire, wood, and earth, Cale and Link tumbling like leaves in the wind as the wake flowed over the countryside.

A root sticking painfully into his back, Link rolled over onto his stomach, charred wood and earth sifting off his body. Cale, too, was covered in the remains of his cottage, lying a few feet away. The entire area was covered in choking smoke, the smell of sulfur and dirt heavily prevalent.

"Now look what you've done!" Whisper's voice came through the smoke. "Couldn't just let it alone, could you?"

Link sat up, popping a crick in his neck. Squinting his eyes to the clearing mist, he could see a lone figure walking towards them. Tall and sultry, it was a feminine shape that swept through the smoke like a ghost wandering the afterlife. Curiously, the smell of lavender filled the hills, making Link's mind settle and relax.

"I didn't want you to see me like this just yet." Whisper said as she approached. Her voice sounded different, lighter. Almost like that of another. "But, I suppose, it was bound to happen."

## Chapter Eighteen: "Destiny"

"This is Hyrule's final hope...."

- The Great Deku Tree

As slowly as wind erodes rock, the mist cleared around Whisper's feet and her body entered into sight. Wearing a long-flowing dress of white and purple, accented with ornately fashioned gold, Link saw someone he had forgotten. It was a dream. It had to be. Distrusting his own eyes, he blankly stared. Cale, on the other hand, broke out into a rolling laughter.

"Link?" The illusion said, unsure of the hero's thoughts.

Her voice was the same as he remembered. His distrust ebbing away as darkness flees from light, Link was unable to hide his elation any longer. Standing to his feet, he couldn't take his eyes away from hers. They were as blue as Zora's Sapphire; as caring as the morning sun; holding the kind of strength that kings could only dream of. Her skin was flawless, light and smooth. She was the same as she was before; unchanged by the seasons of time. Link thought that in that very moment, among the mist and trees, that he was dead.

"I am sorry, Link." Zelda said, her eyes glistening with regret. "I wanted to tell you so badly...but...."

The two stood there face to face and just looked into each others eyes. Neither felt words could frame the emotion of the moment. There they were, two friends forged by fate and divided by destiny. One, the way of the warrior; the other, the way of the martyr.

Seeing the lack of progress, Cale feigned a cough. "You're the biggest fairy I ever saw."

"And you the strangest Hylian I ever saw." Zelda answered, her sight staying on her friend.

"Ah, so you know?" Cale answered, pulling his hair back. "My father couldn't believe it when he saw it, but there they were. Cut 'em off, he did. Said I wouldn't look normal with them. Said I'd be 'thrown into the wild'. Ironic, how I did that to myself anyway."

Link glanced over and saw the deep scar tissue at the tops of Cale's ears. They were indeed Hylian, the tips lopped off and crudely rounded out at the top.

Zelda turned her attention back to Link. "Thrice now I've deceived you, Link. But I was not expecting this meeting. I never thought I'd see you again. After...that day...you were dead. At least, we all thought you dead. It wasn't until years later that I realized the truth of it, when your shadow came."

Link's attention was grabbed.

“When you and Ganondorf were taken into the Master Sword, the evil within you both was left behind. The Master Sword is of purity. A cleanliness that no evil can touch. This may sound strange, but in fact you were trapped in the sword with all the goodness that was left in Ganondorf.”

“But now, the evil of him that remained in the world has taken its toll. It may just be his shadow, a phantom of the dark lord, but evil absolute is its mantra. You know this, as you fought your own shadow once. He, too, is still loose in the land. I was hoping time would slow him down, but, in the end, he only grew stronger.”

Cale was perplexed. “Are you saying that my own shadow that trails me by day can jump out at will and stab me in the foot?”

“No, it is not so simple.” Zelda said, her eyes unwavering from Link’s. “When Link first touched the Master Sword, the evil within him was banished out into the world, making the man that is what Link could not be. He isn’t so much Link’s shadow, as the name would imply. He is the darkness that dwelled within him. That piece that is within all of us. Link had to be pure to wield the blade.

“It was this dark stranger that sealed me within the fountain of essence. For ages I waited for someone to free me. I just didn’t think that it would be...” Zelda took a step towards the hero. “You...again.”

Link’s heart was thundering like a wild horse’s gallop through the forest.

“But why a...fairy?” Cale asked, his strange disdain for the fairy folk never-ending.

“I had Venus, the last of the Great Fairies, make me as such soon after Hyrule fell.” Zelda responded, her voice masterfully hiding the sting. “The only way I could think to hide was to surround myself with others that looked just like me; in a place where few would tread. It worked, but only too well. I became so used to being a fairy, I nearly forgot everything. I was choosing to forget everything. It wasn’t until the shadow came again to the fountain that I remembered, but by then it was too late.

“You don’t know how frightening it was. Link’s shadow looks nearly identical to him. I thought Link had returned when I first saw him. I opened the kingdom gates...and then...he...” The princess trailed off before cutting away from the memory. “I thought Link mad before I realized it wasn’t truly him. The things he did to the kingdom...after that, I ran away. There was nothing left for me in Hyrule. I wanted it all to disappear.”

Link fabricated a closed-lipped smile. He could see the pain in Zelda’s eyes. It was hidden deep within. Her very core was infected with it. To a stranger, they wouldn’t have the slightest inkling, but to Link, who knew the Princess as he knew himself, the anguish was so strong he could almost feel it radiating from her. He hadn’t the stomach nor the heart to ask about it. He knew that if Zelda wanted him to know, she’d tell him.

“And so here we are, in the old land that was Hyrule.” Zelda glanced around the woods, looking for some resemblance of her old home. “So much has changed...yet the darkness remains.” She turned to Cale, breaking the link with her friend. “How close are we to the Temple of Time?”

Cale frowned. “Where?”

Link reached out and put a hand on the Princess’ shoulder. He at once felt he should remove it, as he could physically sense the dark memories within her, but held firm and pointed to the north. He was close to where he entered this strange world. He wouldn’t forget it even if it was ripped from existence.

“There?” Zelda asked, gazing through the trees to the setting sun. “And Ganondorf?”

Link nodded, his gaze also to the diminishing sun of dusk.

“Wait a minute!” Cale stood up, brushing the debris of his clothes. “I thought you said he was coming back, not that he was already here!”

“And I also said that his shadow was in the land, didn’t I?” Zelda was in no mood for dancing around with the woodsman.

“Oh...um...I suppose you did.” Cale scratched the back of his neck, feeling quite the fool in the presence of the two teenagers. “So? What’s the plan then?”

“We don’t do well with plans, do we Link?” The Princess finally came around with that warm smile of hers, breaking her vexing melancholy.

Link gave a weak laugh, knowing all too well the failures that led to the victories.

The Princess took in a deep breath and folded her arms, the temperature in the wood slowly starting to drop. “I think we need to visit Mara.”

“Agreed.” Cale said, not wishing to spend another night in a forest which he now deemed dangerous. “By midnight, you said?”

“Give or take. Time is not important here. What is important is that we make the right choice now, for we will not receive another.”

Without another word, Cale walked back to the ruin that was his shack and began sifting through the debris. Zelda and Link looked on, curious as to what the man was up to.

“Aha!” The man exclaimed, finding what he was after.

“What is it?” Zelda asked of the woodsman.

Cale stood up with a wrapped parcel. Dusting off the charred wood and shredded leaves, he walked over to Link and handed it to him.

“I believe these belong to you. I tried my best to make you fit in with the rest of Ersatz, but I fear that those clothes never truly fitted.”

Link pulled the string that was holding the package closed tight, the flaps falling away and revealing his green tunic.

Zelda smiled.

“A hero’s garb.” The woodsman said, hinting to his own emerald cloak. “We forest people must stick to our roots, yes?”

Link nodded. There were trying times ahead, but now, with the help of his friends, it didn’t seem so bad.

The trio walked off to the north with Zelda taking the lead, all the while none of them noticing that the Triforce of Courage on Link’s hand began to shine a just little bit brighter.

## Chapter Nineteen: "Schism"

"So, you think you can protect them from me...you've got guts, kid."

- Ganondorf Dragmire

After the hero donned his familiar tunic, Link, Zelda, and Cale all made their way through the forgotten forest of Creydo; a land long since bereft of citizens, save the woodsman. It was a quiet, solemn hike for the three. Albeit enjoying each other's company, each of the Hylians held to their own, words unable to come to form. Link was focusing on the terrain, ensuring Zelda was heading in the right direction; Cale was constantly watching in front of and behind the group, keeping an eye out for spies and hidden attackers; Zelda was lost deep in her thoughts, hardly even noticing the landscape pass her by.

Reaching an arcing crest of rock and earth, Link stepped in front of the Princess, silently motioning to her to stay behind. Just over this next ledge was where Link awoke in this place: the ruins of the Temple of Time and Hyrule Castle. He didn't want Zelda walking into a trap that surely lay in wait. For what bait could be more tempting than the shattered blade of Evil's Bane?

Inching his sight over the hill, Link spied the skeletal remains of the gate to the Sacred Realm, its sallow granite clawing into the sky like the hand of a corpse. Resting dangerously in the middle was the Pedestal of Time, its patron blade extruding from the carved rock. The rusted steel lay deadened, scarred, and cancerous, leaving little hope to be had.

Zelda came up behind Link, gently peeking over the hill to the ruins below, Cale close behind.

"Any sign of 'em?" Cale whispered.

Link shook his head. The feeling of saturating darkness that he felt before wasn't present in the grove this time. But even without the proximity of evil, the temple imposed a sacred notion upon the hero, begging him to stay clear of its borders. Nothing would dare enter here, save under the threat of absolute peril. Link thought it time to test that theory.

Vaulting over the hill without hesitation or fear, Link drew out his sword and flew into the grove. Defiantly taking position within the inner circle of the fallen temple, he gave a stern look of grit and determination, sweeping his sight around for any sign of intruders. This was his turf, and no shadow of a dead man was going to take it from him again.

Zelda and Cale watched intently from the ridge, waiting for something to attack. Seeing nothing was to come, the two glanced at each other, rose to their feet, and walked down the embankment to join their friend.

Link was disconcerted. This was the place where all things were to end, time and time again, and yet there was no person or thing in sight. Gripping the hilt of his sword tightly, he found the lack of an enemy more unsettling than having one present.

Zelda neared the shattered blade and placed a gloved hand on its surface, running it upwards against the aged steel. A gentle sigh escaped her lips and she closed her eyes.

“This is it?” Cale asked, squinting his eyes. “This is the blade that defeated Ganondorf?”

Zelda nodded, not wishing to speak of it.

Cale looked to Link, sizing him up. “And it was you that wielded it?”

Link didn’t respond. He just kept his guard at the upmost readiness.

Biting his lip, Cale shook his head and folded his arms. “So, what are we to do then? I thought we were going to Veritas to see Mara. There isn’t anything here to be had, save ghosts and gravel.”

Link’s ears pricked up and he spun to the east, blade at the ready. Following suit, Cale reached into the folds of his cloak and drew out a short sword, stepping in front of Zelda to protect her from whatever beast would dare enter the grove.

“Link of High Rule.” A darkly female voice said, her location unknown. “You’ve come far on your journey, only to come full-circle to the beginning.”

“Come on out, witch!” Cale bellowed at the voice, intolerant of spooks and spirits. “And I’ll give you a new beginning!”

“Cale?” The voice said, surprise hidden within the tones.

The woodsman lowered his guard and looked to the sun, its warming rays just about to disappear underneath the horizon of trees. “Do you wait for darkness, or does darkness find you?”

“If I cannot bend evil, then I shall move heaven.” The voice replied just as the last glint of sunlight faded into nightfall.

“Mara.” Cale said, his face sporting an animated grin.

Stepping into the hazy grove, the Lady of Veritas came through one of the fallen spires, a handful of other shadow-people following close behind. Link relaxed his grip on his sword, but kept his senses sharp and searching. There were even more tempting targets to be had now.

“It’s been a long time, woodsman.” Mara said, her face betraying a closed-lip smile. “I pray your time in Ersatz hasn’t been too...unpleasant.”

“Not at all, not at all.” Cale sheathed his blade, his anxiety relieved.

“And you, Link.” The shade said, turning to the hero. “You’ve done well in your journey so far. May I ask, how did Whisper fair? Where is she?”

Link glanced over to Zelda, her small frame hiding behind Cale’s billowing cloak.

Mara looked concerned. “What has happened? Is the oracle alright?”

Cale stepped aside, letting Mara see the Princess in their midst.

Link’s jaw dropped. He didn’t notice it before, as Mara was colorless and ghostly, but her and Zelda had such an uncanny resemblance they could be sisters; opposite sides of the same coin. Mara looked a little older, a woman in her prime, but Zelda still had that guise of youth wrapped deceitfully around her.

“Whisper?” Mara caught her breath and held her hands up to her face. “Is that...are you....”

Link couldn’t tell, but it was as if Mara were weeping without tears. Looking over to Zelda, he could see that she was fighting with all her strength to keep from doing the same, the emotion threatening to shatter that shield of fortitude that she bore.

Zelda walked up to Mara and placed a gentle hand on her cheek, the feel of the Lady’s cold skin flowing through her. Zelda couldn’t remember the last she saw of Mara, but knew it had been quite some time; ages, perhaps.

“I take it you two know each other?” Cale asked nervously, having never seen Lady Mara

in such a state before.

“We’ve only met once...long ago.” Zelda said, her eyes welling up. “I have dreamed of you, Mara.”

Mara reached out and placed her own hand on Zelda’s warm cheek. “And I you...mother.”

Link’s stomach churned and he lost all focus. His attention and his gaze was drawn to the teary reunion between mother and daughter in the grove, and he was powerless to stop it. He couldn’t believe it. He wouldn’t believe it.

The moment was shattered by a long, roaring laugh that filled the sky and the feeling of peace and serenity quickly absconded. Dark and heinous, the sting of evil blanketed the Hylians, dread and fear taking root.

“Poor little Zelda.” An unfamiliar voice said, grating like bones under rock. “Alas, the years have not been kind to my Queen.”

Zelda put a hand to her heart. “It’s him.”

Thunder rolled across the sky and the burgeoning stars darkened. Frothy clouds of billowing ash enveloped the roof of the world, and terror began running rampant. Link wanted to kick himself for bringing Zelda here. It was inevitable that villainy would follow, and he had let it happen. He had chosen their burial plots, as well as those of Veritas. Perhaps even the fate of the entire world rested on his decision to bring fate to it’s end.

“I’ve been waiting a long time...Link.” The unseen voice said the hero’s name with such hatred that the boy’s hair began to stand on end. “And here, you have even brought me a gift: my Queen and daughter. Such splendidness to be had.”

The wind picking up into a violent gale, lightning shot down from the sky and struck the blade of the Master Sword, completely shattering the remains and cracking the Pedestal of Time. Link and the others fell back, shielding their eyes from the shards that sung through the air like the tips of barbed arrows.

Reacting to the blistering wind, the once mighty towers and arcs of the temple’s roof began to crumble and falter, the people below at the mercy of cascading rock, glass, and mortar. Link started to run to the hills, but turned back and saw Zelda laying on the ground, her body motionless in the building maelstrom. Doubling back for her, he passed the fleeing Cale and the other shadow-people, some of them disappearing into the rock and earth.

Mara, too, ran to Zelda’s side. The two picking her up by her arms, they dragged her limp body away from the center of the temple and into the relative safety of the trees, shielding the Princess’ body from flying debris with their own skin.

“Why leave, pets?” The voice centered in the temple around a swirling vortex of darkness and smoke, right above the broken pedestal. “This night has not yet ended.”

A very violation of the laws of existence, Link’s dark double culminated and breathed life as he entered the sacred grove. His eyes burning red with malice and the lust of revenge, he again echoed that caustic snigger and flexed his power into the realm.

“As you can see, little pet.” Dark Link said with a condescending tone. “I’ve come a long way since our last meeting in the Water Temple.”

The shade stepped forward and motioned to Link to come forward with the lacerating curl of a dark-gloved finger. “Now, with that pathetic little knife of yours broken, we shall see who the victor will be!”

## Chapter Twenty: "Ride the Lightning"

"Here is gathered Hyrule's bloody history of greed and hatred...."

- Voices in the Shadow Temple

Standing in the eclipse of his own, Link's rage flared. No injustice, no retribution, no befoulment had ever bled so bitter as this. His pall shadow had pushed the boundaries of reasonable sanity to the nth degree, and the hero was powerless to take it back. Rushing over him like the death of a species, the destroying of Zelda's honor was almost too much for him to bear.

Link stood to his feet, leaving the comatose princess in the arms of her daughter. So many things made sense now; the people of the underworld and their strange ways, the crumbling of the Hylian kingdom, the eradication of the other peoples; but all in all it still was too much to accept. Dark Link had taken the very soul of Hyrule and scattered it to the wind, using the real Link's own voice as the key.

"Surprised?" The doppelgänger said, bringing a fell wind of icy strands from the south as his tongue danced behind his teeth. "I know I am."

Link readied his sword and pulled the Sheikah shield off his back, aiming the red eye towards his opponent. Crouching slightly, he held his blade horizontally to the side and steeled his resolve.

"You cannot hope to comprehend my longing for this moment." Violent rapture in his voice, dark Link reached behind him and gripped a pitch-black hilt. His fingers seemed to shake at the touch of the steel; a twisted affection. "Everything I have done, and everything I will do, has been planned according to this meeting. You think Zelda was the pinnacle of my vengeance? I spit at the thought!"

Link's shadow removed his sword, an irregular edge leaving its dark haunt as slowly as the moon rises. It was similar to the Master Sword, though it had long, thin gaps in the steel instead of a blood groove, and the edge was as jagged as the teeth of a Dodongo.

Link swallowed his fear at the sight of the weapon, and kept his demeanor stern. He knew that even the slightest hint of despair would drive this chimera into a crazed bloodlust of unspeakable horror. This was way beyond the Water Temple. The hero's heart began to fester with doubt, its reaching tentacles threatening to destroy his mind.

Gritting his teeth, Link stood his ground. It was normally his prerogative to strike first, but this was an unknown enemy. He didn't know what to expect. He sensed a certain darkness surrounding the shadow, one not readily prevalent in other opponents. Something was feeding him, giving him strength and power. That something was driving him mad.

Dark Link gave his adversary an evil leer and began walking forward, blade pointed straight at the other. Drawing near, the tip of his blade stopped a hair short of the front of Link's shield, the piercing needlepoint at the center of the painted red eye.

"The power of the Sheikah cannot save you. Nor can it save the royal bloodline, as it has been forever tainted by my seed. Even now those gypsies fight to reach here, though I fear that a scant few heathens don't stand much of a chance against the might of Ersatz."

Link's shadow motioned his head to the left, beckoning his enemy to glance over. Unable

to abstain falling further into the snare, Link shifted his gaze beyond and saw the shape of a man, beaten and crumpled on the forest floor. Link's breath caught in mid-stride.

It was Esclabor.

"Do you see?" The shade moved to the left, bringing Link's attention back to him. "Even now, without their great leader, they send themselves to the slaughter at the hands of my power. And the more they fight, the more they die. You would do well to learn from that lesson, but I hope you don't. Fight me. Fight me with all you have. Grant unto me all the fury of the Goddesses you carry within you, so my just deserts may grow legion in spite of it."

Link's heart wilted at the sight of Esclabor, lying bloodied and cleaved in the dirt. He wasn't sure if he was alive or not, but even if he was, given his state, he assuredly wouldn't survive the night.

Dark Link gave his other half a heinous wink and swung his blade, striking the shield with a blow that nearly knocked Link off his feet. The speed and strength of it was unparalleled. Not even Ganondorf had hit with such ferocity.

Regaining his balance, Link glanced at the front of the shield, its painted eye marred and lacerated. Keeping the hardened steel in a protective arc in front, he slowly inched forward, giving his sword a quick spin in his grip.

"So it begins." Dark Link whispered to the rising full moon as its white face broke through the torrent of cloud.

The specter lunged first, driving the point of his blade through the air at Link's face, the near-miss catching the outer point of the hero's right ear. Twisting the blade as he pulled back, a small piece of soft flesh hit the ground, Link grimacing at the pain.

"The first of many." Dark Link's red eyes went into a frenzy at the sight of the hero's blood.

Blocking the wound from his mind, Link struck back, deflecting his adversary's edge and getting close inside his circle. Without a shield to speak of, the shade was defenseless at such close range. Or so Link thought.

Releasing the tumultuous chaos that was his essence, shadow Link sent forth a wave of dark energy so powerful and so withering it tossed Link through the air, his body at the mercy of the passing tree branches and fallen stone towers. Hitting the ground with a bone-crushing impact, he rolled and pitched in the dirt and leaves, slamming against a large boulder.

Wordless, the shadow wasted no breath in chasing after his slung foe, his blade spearheading the air as he ran.

Coughing up a slurry of blood and vomit, Link tightened his grip on his shield and sword, pushing himself to his feet as the shadow approached. Standing as still as he could manage, he waited for the creature to come closer in order to deflect the slice and maybe sneak in a counter-attack. A mistake he would only make once.

His body shooting forward instantaneously as if time and space held no bearing upon him, Dark Link backhanded the hero with a hammer of a fist, sending him reeling to the ground. Taking no pause, he swung and jabbed with his sword, Link barely able to keep up with the lightning celerity.

Lying on the ground, Link took to the defensive position of his life. Pushing away with the soles of his boots, he desperately clamored for a space in which he could get back to his feet, but the onslaught of the shade was indomitable and flawless.

"Link!" Mara yelled from the sideline, Zelda lying in her arms.

Upon hearing the Lady's voice, Link focused his thoughts and entered into the Eventide,

dropping into the ground and coming to his feet some twenty yards away from his shadow. Taking in a deep breath and basking in the relief, his aching muscles remained taut and unified. His body was beginning to break, but his will was as strong as a mountain.

“Clever, but unwise.” Dark Link said, his back to the hero. “The Eventide is *my* realm, little one. That was a line you should not have crossed.”

The shadow’s body turned to smoke; cloudy wisps carrying on the wind into the sky. Merging with the very thunderheads that blackened out the light, Dark Link had vanished.

Link kept his feet moving. He knew that standing still was an invitation to a quick death, or worse. Moving towards the center of the clearing near the cracked Pedestal of Time, he channeled his senses into the surroundings, waiting for villainy to reveal itself.

Then, charging out of the sky on a chariot drawn by horses made of harnessed lightning, shadow Link flew into the temple ruin swinging his sword with reckless abandon. Rolling out of the way, the hero narrowly missed being trampled by the beasts but was struck by the chaotic energy that their hooves released into the ground. Etching through the dirt like spreading cracks in glass, the electric power of the sky flowed into Link’s body, crumbling his strength and dropping him to the ground in an instant.

Dark Link emitted a bone-chilling laugh that filled the surrounding hillside, making all in his wake shudder with fear and hopelessness. Satisfied with the effect, he leaped off his chariot back to the ground, the lightning horses charging back into the dark heavens from whence they came.

“Do you not see? There is...nothing...you can do. You are powerless against me. Even here, in this *sacred grove*, you are not but dead.”

Link’s shadow walked up to the hero’s immobilized, smoking body, the smell of burnt hair and flesh heavily prevalent. Picking him up by the back of his neck, he proudly displayed him for Mara and the others in hiding to see.

“This is what happens to those who fight back” He yelled to the world. “The fate of the Gorons and the Zoras! And now, this is what will happen to all Hylians!”

Zelda’s eyes slowly opened. At first she thought it was a nightmare, but then realized the truth and lost control of her emotion; her face emaciated in horror.

“Just in time, my Queen. You shall be awake for this vexation’s inevitable demise.”

Then, without warning, there was the quick sound of slicing metal and cleaving flesh in the grove. Dark Link shrieked in agony, dropping the hero’s limp body and falling to his knees.

Standing to his full height behind the fallen specter, Esclados’ firm eyes glanced at his claw, dark blood dripping off the razor barbs.

“Esclados?!?” Zelda couldn’t believe her eyes. “But you...”

Dark Link didn’t wait for Esclados to explain himself. Spinning around and catching the Sheikah off guard, he blasted him with the dark energy of hatred, tearing away the outer layer of skin from the unprotected parts of his body. The Sheikah fought through the pain and lunged with his claw, the barbs pushing through Dark Link’s chest and protruding out his back.

The wraith stuttered and spat out blood, the pain of the wound immense, but soon found a way to focus it into a guttural laughter as he stared the attacker in the eye. Even though a mortal wound had been inflicted on one, so had another been dealt.

Esclados fell back, ripping his claw out from Dark Link’s chest and flinging bits of gore to the side. Looking down, he saw the gnawing teeth of the shadow’s blade, lodged firmly in his gut.

Both Zelda and Mara gasped at the sight as the Esclados fell to the ground, his lifeblood leaving him and spreading through the mossy cracks of the temple floor. With all the energy he

could muster, he lifted his head and looked towards his father's disfigured body, lying close to the east.

His own spirit leaving him, Esclabor gave his son the slightest of nods with the last bit of his energy. Returning the gesture, Esclados closed his eyes and released his hold. He felt he had earned his place among the gods, and no shadow or curse of evil could take that from him.

With great effort, dark Link rose to his feet, the wound in his chest drizzling.

"Not but Sheikah." He said to the two fallen warriors, his malice knowing no bounds. "If only you aimed for the heart. Now, where was I? Ah, yes." He turned to Link's comatose body. "You."

Link's shadow placed a muddy boot on Esclados' body and, with a quick tug, extracted his blade, the Sheikah's blood flowing over the teeth and the inner edges.

Mara stood to her feet and approached her father, burning enmity in her gray eyes. "You will not touch him."

The monster laughed at the display. "And what are you to do about it, little girl?" He turned to face his daughter. "I made you. And as such, I can *unmake* you."

Dark Link approached Mara and smeared his blood on her face. "Be silent."

Just as the words escaped his chapped lips, Mara's body froze as still as a statue. She fought the ethereal prison with all her will, but found herself incapable of escaping the chains of her father.

"I'll give you the privilege to watch as well. The privilege to watch the unmaking of this world!"

Link snapped back awake, but kept still on the ground. He could see Zelda laying helplessly to the side, her face having lost most of its color. Looking over her, he could see a deep crimson soaking through her dress near her abdomen. The fear in his eyes growing, he gave in to despair. He didn't care what happened next. The rest of the world no longer mattered. He had to help her.

The Princess smiled at the hero, her lips never parting. Weak and failing it was, but with it Link knew he could topple a mountain. Glancing at the top of his left hand, he could see the Triforce of Courage shining brightly, brighter than it ever had before. He was about to get to his feet, but Zelda shook her head. She couldn't find the energy to talk to him telepathically, but Link could read the intent in her eyes.

The shade moved towards Link, who was still playing possum on the ground. Reaching into the boy's tunic, he retrieved the broken hilt of the Master Sword, holding it into the air. "Behold! The last step to rid the world of all the things you cherish!"

Culminating a ball of dark energy in the fist holding the hilt, dark Link threw the relic into the ground, a violet and black vortex soon erupting into the temple ruin. Escaping into the whirlpool, the hilt soon disappeared and vanished in a flash of light, the vortex closing behind and the grove turning silent.

"The last piece. Esclados was right to try and keep the Master Sword hidden until after the alignment. But not even the Sheikah could withstand our power of darkness. The body of our great lord, Ganondorf, is all that we needed to bring him back to his full omnipotent power. And now, thanks to you, we have it and he can return!"

## Chapter Twenty-One: "Reap the Whirlwind"

“Those who have sacred feet should let the wind guide them. Then, they will be led to the hidden path”

- Navi

Zelda would have gasped, had she the energy. She felt weak, fallible; her mind felt dizzy. Were it not for the shearing pain in her abdomen, she would certainly have fallen asleep from the loss of blood. Looking down, she gently parted the small tear in her dress, betraying the rusty shard of the Master Sword to the open air.

The Princess winced, looking at the wound as if it weren't truly a part of her. She could feel it, clawing against her insides as she struggled to draw breath, but at the same time she had a numbness beginning to wash over her. The world was closing in, becoming smaller as her sight lessened, and she feared she would leave too much behind; too much unsaid.

Zelda's eyes slowly left the puncture in memory and trailed over to her friend, Link, lying still in the dirt and crumbled leaves. His sight was firm, relentless, the will to survive and protect burned onto his soul like a tattoo of immortal benevolence. She gave the hero an invisible smile; the kind that only true friendship can show.

Moving past, she spied her daughter, Mara, standing frozen in the binding control of the Triforce of Power. This was Ganondorf's kind of way. The same had been used on her once, back in the tower, back in her own time, and the effects of it were maddening. She wished with all her heart that she could help her daughter escape, but knew her longing to be in vain. Dark Link had some connection with the dark lord and was using it to fuel his ability.

She wondered where the other shadow-Hylians had gone. There had to be a dozen of them in the grove when Mara first entered, as well as Cale, but it seemed they all had fled the scene, either unwilling or incapable of helping.

Letting out a despairing sigh, Zelda moved her blue eyes to the other in the grove. All the kindness in her eyes ebbed into hollow thoughts as she gazed upon the imposter-Link. His wicked glare was imposing, maniacal. All the riches in the world couldn't deter his frenzied thirst for Link's blood and of those he ever came to know. The shadow's only task, his only purpose in life, was to destroy all that Link held dear. It was wretched, in the least, that Dark Link needed this lust for revenge so deeply. Zelda pitied him, though no tone of forgiveness could ever escape her lips for what he had done to Hyrule and its denizens.

“Had enough, My Queen?” The shade spoke quietly, the wound in his chest refusing to abdicate.

Zelda left his menacing glare, turning back to Link.

“Oh, is that what you wanted? You want this to be over too, don't you?” Link's shadow limped over to his halcyon foil. “Have you not forgotten all the kindness I showed you and your family? Let me remind you.”

Reaching out with his right hand, dark Link made another burning ball of violet plasma in his fist. Holding on to it for a moment, as if he were releasing his own children into the wild, he threw it at Link's still body, a trail of deep purple and black following in its wake.

Sensing the impending dark energy, Link quickly rolled to the side and dodged, bringing himself to a readied balance on his hands and knees.

“Not so fast, boy!” Dark Link lunged at the hero, his speed and agility still uncanny, even with the wounds on his chest and back.

Grappling Link from behind, the shade wrapped his right arm around his neck, putting firm pressure and choking the air from his lungs. No more chilling laughter left in him, dark Link held his tongue and his face went blank.

The grove went deathly silent for a few moments, the only sound to be heard being Link struggling to escape from the vice of darkness. It was visceral, brutality and hatred intertwined in an elegy of malevolence, and all were helpless against its haunting choir.

Just when Link was about to lose cognizance, his oppressor released him, letting his weakened body crumble to the ground. He coughed and wheezed, holding his hands over his bruised throat.

“I can't do it....” Dark Link stood over his prey with emotionless eyes. “I just can't bring myself to let this come to an end so quickly. I have thought of many dark pleasures with you, *Hero of Time*. Don't think to die just yet. At least not before you get to watch this little pet go first.”

Something in Link snapped. He wasn't sure if it was the notion of Zelda's death or the insinuation that there was something worse that could be done to him. Link had felt that he had lost everything in this quest for the common good; the taking of Zelda would have to carry a greater price than this.

Pushing to his feet, Link spun and lunged at his enemy, indomitable courage spewing out of him like the fires of old Death Mountain. Catching the shade off-guard, he hit him right across the jaw with a left hook, dropping him to the ground. Not stopping or thinking, Link let his rage take over him and he started beating the other with his bare fists and feet like a ravenous madman. He lost all control of himself as the darkened blood began to fly, no thought of death or life crossing his mind.

Zelda had never seen Link in such a state. It scared her. Even with her own mind and body sliding into mortality, the Princess had never seen such a display of savage barbarity, let alone from Link.

“Link.” Zelda whispered, trying to bring the friend she knew back from his descent.

Link heard her failing voice, but found himself unable to respond. It was as if he was watching the violence unfold instead of professing it. His bewilderment jaded into horror as he witnessed himself loosing the contained fury of the Goddesses upon his shadow, his fists hitting harder, faster, and with such ferocity that his knuckles began to crack and bleed, his own blood mixing with that of his nemesis.

“Link!” Zelda yelled, giving the last of her energy that she could muster.

The hero's mind blanked and his hammer-hands stopped, blood and tears streaming down his face. He looked down at the disfigured young man below him, laying beaten to within an inch of his life. Stepping away from the sight of what he had done, he relaxed his muscles and started breathing heavily.

Dark Link rolled onto his back, his face hardly recognizable from the brutal cudgeling. “Thank you, Link.” He said with a strange affection. “You have given me the greatest gift of all. The gift of the Goddesses.”

Forcefully lifting his right hand into the air, his palm facing the hero, the shade released the strongest wave of dark energy he could summon, blowing the shaken boy across the Temple of Time's haunt. Link went limp, letting the force of the turbulent power do with him as it pleased. His left shoulder slamming into the cracked pedestal of time, chunks of rock and debris flew all over the grove, dust gently settling over him.

Dark Link pushed to his feet. His will to dominate was sovereign, his injuries

notwithstanding. Reaching to the ground, he gingerly picked up his sword, the blade becoming almost too heavy for him to manage.

“...so my just deserts may grow legion.” He approached, echoing what he said to the hero earlier.

Link shook the stars from his eyes, his vision slowly coming back into focus. Laying there with his shoulder against the remains of the Pedestal of Time, he caught a glimpse of something shiny lodged within the broken pedestal, glinting in the scant moonlight. Adjusting his eyes, he squinted and reached for it, his fingers barely able to grip its glassy surface. Pulling it forward, he saw something he hadn't seen in a long time; a familiar friend in times of need.

Shadow Link stepped over his adversary and crouched down, hooking his sword around and placing the razor teeth near Link's throat. Gripping Link's hair tightly, he started moving the sword back and forth with a horizontal sawing motion, teasing to what he intended to do.

Unexpectedly flicking his head backwards, Link hit the other square in the nose, causing him to fall back. Rolling over, shoving the grievous blade out of the way, Link produced the little trinket he found in the Pedestal of Time: the unaffected tip of the Master Sword. Even though the exposed blade and hilt of the sword had decayed and fallen into ruin, the head of the blade had sat within the blessed pedestal throughout the passing eons, never once aging a day.

Shoving the tip into the shadow's chest with all his might, the three-inch long shred of steel went into the demon's heart and disappeared, his body taking it in like a poison to a wound.

Dark Link gasped for breath and fell onto the ground, writhing in uncontrollable pain and agony. It was a double-bladed pathos that wedged into his body, for it not only dealt a physical mortal blow, his hollow heart being his only true weakness, but the righteous properties of the metal itself was destroying him from the inside out.

The Master Sword, the blade of which no evil could touch, had purged its last.

Soon falling still, the shade's body darkened and turned to ash, crumbling into flecks and pieces of the evil that was once contained therein. His remnants slowly eroding into the wind, soon nothing was left of him, save a soft discoloration on the ground; a shadow's shadow.

Link wanted to breathe deep and lay still in the dark, but he knew there were more important things at hand than irrelevant vainglory. Crawling over to where the Princess lay, he dared to place his hand in hers, but didn't receive any motion in response.

Mara blinked. Her violet prison fading away, she fell to the ground, her very psyche drained from the cell. It was as if dark Link was drawing power from her veins to fuel his rancor. Feeling weak, the Lady of Veritas also crawled to the feet of her mother, frightened hope on her face.

“Is she...” Mara dared not say it.

Link didn't respond, his own attention unable to pull away from Zelda's distant face. There was still a hint of life within her dimming eyes, but it was dull and fading fast. Jumping to his feet, Link ran off to the other side of the grove, Mara stepping in and taking her mother by the hand.

Link's thoughts were racing. There was still a chance, in his mind, that Zelda could be saved. If there were the slimmest possibility, he wouldn't give up. He just hoped that the Sheikah were as prepared for anything as they were fabled to be.

## Chapter Twenty-Two - "Frailty"

"If you chase a mirage, the desert will swallow you. Only one path is true."

- Sign in the Haunted Wasteland

Link scrambled over to Esclados' body, gingerly placing his hands upon him. He rummaged through the folds in the Sheikah's blood-soaked clothes, but came up empty. It wasn't there.

Jumping back to his feet, he hustled over to Esclabor's limp form, rolling the man onto his back. There were lacerations and bruises all over his body: evidence of what happened to him in the short while they were separated. The bolt that struck him in the left shoulder was still present, snapped off near the wound. Esclabor gave his life to protect him, to buy him precious time. Link knew he should have more respect for the dead, especially one who deserved a better fate, but he didn't have the time to linger on such thoughts. The needs of the living were far more pressing.

Link was startled when the chieftain let out a weak cough. Making the boy jump back and reach for his dagger, he thought him a ReDead at first, but relented and knelt back down at his side.

"Link." Esclabor reached up and gently gripped him by the collar, his once immense strength diminished. "Closer."

Link did as he was asked, lending his ear close to the Sheikah's bruised lips.

"Forgive me." Esclabor had to strain to get the words out, his voice like gravel. "You...and my son...forgive me."

Link shook his head. There was nothing to forgive.

"Yes!" Esclabor grappled him with both his hands. "I did not see...did not see...him."

Link stared deep into the shadow-warrior's red eyes.

"I thought Esclados traitor. My son...innocent...brave and strong! No...it was another! Not my boy!"

Link knew in his heart, after what he had seen that night, that Esclados couldn't have been the one to betray New Kakariko and the Sheikah. Someone else had to have given the village's secret location to Ersatz. Someone closer, more malign with twisted honor.

Esclabor fell back to the ground, unable to hold his body upright any longer. "Your shadow...he sent the sword...to Ersatz. You must...hurry."

Link's eyes went into a panic. He didn't care about the sword right now. All that mattered was Zelda. Once she was safe, he could worry about other things.

The Sheikah read the pain in Link's eyes, having witnessed what had happened in the grove. Reaching into his shredded tunic, he produced a small vial. Glowing pink in the moonlight, Link's hope was again ignited.

Drake Potion.

Link snatched it from the warrior's hand and went to run for the princess, but was again halted by Esclabor's grip. "Travel by shadow...only until the bridge. From there...on foot you must fight. Before sunrise, regain...that which was taken...from you. Before sunrise!"

Esclabor let the hero go and wilted back to the ground. "Go."

Link gave the chieftain a nod and bolted off, neither hesitating nor contemplating what he was told.

"Link! Hurry!" Mara cried out from the side of the grove, icy tears rolling down her chin. "There isn't much time!"

Skidding on the mossy stone, Link dropped to his knees and popped the cork out of the vial, that familiar smell of berries and mead filling the air. He could have used some of the potion himself, having just taken the beating of his life, but his adrenaline was pumping so ardently that no pain could even begin to presume to think it could touch him.

Link held the tip of the vial to Zelda's blue-tinted lips and gently let the liquid flow into her, but no response came. He leaned over and tilted her head back, letting gravity drive the potion, but the Princess remained still, her eyes staring off into the sky, lifeless.

Mara gripped Zelda's wrist, holding tightly to her mother, praying to the Goddesses that they intervene. She held her breath, unable to bring herself to accept what was happening.

Link's hands began to tremble. He gently shook the Princess' body, taking her in his arms and cradling her like a child. His face turned expressionless as he started rocking back and forth, only stopping when Zelda's right hand rolled over, revealing that the mark of Nayru was gone.

Link's heart stopped. It was over. Everything; Veritas, Hyrule, the world; everything was gone. He was too late, too weak. He felt a twist in his stomach, sickening and grisly.

Princess Zelda, monarch of Hyrule and holder of the Triforce of Wisdom, was dead.

Neither Link nor Mara could bear to look at each other. Neither did they speak; words having such shallow meaning. The grove lay silent in the moon's grim light, a silvery twilight most frightening that carried on for what seemed a lifetime.

Leaning in, Mara took Zelda's body out of Link's arms and pulled her close, clinging to the mother she never knew. Link about lost all control of himself in that moment, his body feeling cold; succumbing and alone.

Link thought his shadow's true revenge to be complete, though the ramifications therein were too searing to consider. Staring up to the sky, he searched the cosmos for answers, but knew none would come. The Goddesses had abandoned Hyrule to their own choices, leaving way for the doom of all.

Mara looked to the hero. For once, she was unsure what to do.

Link didn't return the look. Standing to his feet, he glanced over to the crushed Pedestal of Time, a gruesome weapon laying nearby. Walking over to it, Link picked up the sword of his vanquished adversary and held it up, staring at its gnawing teeth and blood-stained grooves. His teeth clenched and his eyes hardened.

"What are you intending to do?" Mara asked, but knew full well the hero's dark forethought.

Link slid the sword into its dark sheath and slung it over his back. Finding his defaced Sheikah shield, he strapped it to his right forearm and turned to Mara, venom swelling within his heart.

The gray-eyed Mara laid Zelda down on the ground as gently as she could manage. Arranging the Princess' hands in a peaceful position, she softly moved her fingers over the Princess' eyes, pulling them closed. Hardening her will, she wiped the tears from her face and stood up. Determined to stay the course, she walked over to Link, stopping a few feet away.

"Whatever you decide, remember why things happened the way they did." It pained Mara to have to speak such things to the grieved, as her own heart was replete with the same pain, but she knew it had to be done. "Don't continue this cycle, Link. Do what you must, but be sure it is for the right reasons."

The Lady reached out to the boy, offering her hand. "If you wish to make it to Ersatz before sunrise, you'll need my help."

Link stared at her, unable to move beyond his growing need for restitution. He didn't want any help. He didn't need any help. He had slain dragons, exorcized phantoms, defeated witches, and sundered the very breadth of evil itself; all alone. He was the Hero of Time. It was the world that needed his help, not the other way around.

"You can use Eventide to travel swiftly, but you don't know the underworld as I do. It

would take you hours to get to Ersatz alone. I can get you there well before sunrise, if we move quickly.”

Link looked back at Zelda. He didn't want to leave her there, unprotected and alone.

“I'll take care of her.” There was no lie in Mara's eyes. “No harm will come of her, I promise.”

The hero let himself soften enough to give Mara a nod. Reaching out with his hand, he clasped hers.

“I'll need the Keystone I gave you, as well as Esclabor's and Cale's.”

Link reached into his tunic and retrieved the two stones he had and handed them over to Mara. Then the thought hit him: where was Cale?

Link frantically looked to the fringes of the grove, hoping for the woodsman to appear in the timely fashion for which he was lauded.

“Cale?” Mara probed into the dark recesses of the surrounding wood.

At the sign of nothing, Link's eyes turned cross. The entire world was failing around him, and he was powerless to control any of it.

“Cale?!?” Mara, too, was losing her sense of hope.

Link clenched his fists and ground his teeth. He was about to curse the woodsman when he heard a slight nuance of sound, carrying lightly on the air. Perking his Hylian ears to the heavens, Mara doing the same, they both heard the same thing and their eyes widened.

Haunting and visceral, it was the sound of bloody murder.

Link whipped out that dark blade, its teeth singing as it escaped into the open air. Mara wrapped her cloak tightly around her, ready to fight or flee at a moment's notice. Both listened to the clanging of steel and the shrieks of the doomed as the sound neared. Link moved over to Zelda's body, standing near to protect her from anyone, or anything, that would dare try to harm her further.

Who knows how long the battle was brewing in the distance. Link wasn't sure, as him and Mara were too despaired by the course of events to pay any heed to the surrounding world.

Coming into view, three shadowy figures were charging through the wood, heading straight for the grove. Link was about to attack, but was stayed by Mara's hand, as she recognized her men.

Backpedaling into the clearing, a weary form stumbled upon his own feet and fell to the ground, obvious blood smeared all over his face and hands. Following close behind were two ghostly Highlanders, also looking as if they just fought their way out of a lion's den.

Mara stepped forward, concerned at seeing only two of her personal escort present out of the near dozen. “What's happening?”

“Iron Knuckles!” Cale yelled, scrambling to his feet and clustering near the others. “And their coming up fast!”

### Chapter Twenty-Three - “Elusion”

“Things would sure be more interesting if there were more...troubles in the world.”

- Hylian Soldier

Bulldozing through the darkened wood, the sounds of the metal-encased giants sinisterly filled the clearing. Their armored feet crushing wood, earth, and rock alike, the ground shook with their impending sovereignty. The scant few defenders in the temple ruins wearily huddled close together, creating a shielding arc around Zelda’s serene body; all as one in the safeguarding of the

Princess.

“Cale.” Mara said turning to the woodsman as the onslaught of steel neared. “I know I told you never to relinquish it to anyone, not even me, but I need that Keystone.”

“What, now?” Cale’s blanched face couldn’t peel away from the shadowy giants closing in from the distance.

“Yes, Cale, now!” Mara moved closer to him and held out her hand. “There’s no time to argue!”

Doing as told, Cale pulled his Keystone out of his cloak and handed it to the Lady. “I sure hope it’s worth it.”

Mara took the stone, combining it with the other two in her grip, and took position behind the four others. “I need time...and protection. I won’t be able to defend myself while I make the needed preparations.”

Knowing her words would go without question, Mara knelt down on the ground and began making circles in the dirt with her finger: complex interweaves of searing lines and bending crescents.

Link, Cale, and the other two Highlanders steeled their nerves. The other three were sweating a downpour of toil, having just escaped battle moments before, but Link was surprisingly as cool as a river of ice. He hadn’t anything to lose anymore, and as such he had lost all his fear. Only his indomitable will to carry on and his stubborn hero’s vainglory remained.

The pounding thunder of the Iron Knuckles crashed through the protective veil of the trees, revealing the horrors now unleashed into the open. Nine of them, wielding bloodied axes and swords, charged into the Spartan Hylian’s weak line.

Link spearheaded the advance, assailing the nine with his shadow’s blade. The teeth of the edge glinted in the moonlight as it shredded the hardened steel of his targeted adversary, immediately dropping him to his knees and over onto his back. Surprised by the sudden culling of one of their own, the dark knights split into two groups, four on Link, four on Cale and the Highlanders.

Doing their best to hold the Iron Knuckles at the fringes of the grove, they slowly gave ground and collapsed towards the center, there just being too many of the slayers for them to conquer.

Mara was frantically creating the ancient runes in the soft earth, her fingers naturally gliding around her as if she were directing an orchestra. Beautifully her hands wove the tapestry of wandering souls, her mind oblivious to the clanging of steel and sundering of breath all around her. For years she had practiced the spell that would take her people home one day. The spell that would pave the way for a hero to topple the iron fist of Ersatz. The spell that would deliver them from the cursing anguish of the underworld.

It was a triangular shape with many circles, twists, and arcane lettering perfectly placed within and without the triangle. Specifically noted were three small circles, one at each of the triangles points.

Taking the Keystones one by one, she placed them in her palms, squeezed them together, and twisted her wrists in different directions. The concealing shells of the Keystones falling to the ground, she placed their hidden contents in specific places on her rune: a triangular red stone in the top circle, a circular blue one to the left, and a square green one to the right; shards of the Spiritual Stones of fire, water, and forest.

The rune and stone placement complete, Mara started reciting the incantations that she had learned from a mystic book she found in old Kakariko; a tomb of ancient Hylian magics. The

same magic that had for centuries shielded Veritas from the violent arms of Ersatz was, ironically, going to deliver the city right to them.

The surrounding battle was closing in on Mara's symbols, kicked up dirt and showering blood and steel threatening to mar her work. Mara knew that even the slightest smear in the lines could destroy everything, but didn't stop the incantations. It was too late to turn back.

Unleashing his inner fury, Link performed a devastating spin attack on the four Iron Knuckles around him, making two crash to the ground. Focusing power into his dark blade, he showered the other two with scalding bolts of Din's Fire, leaping into their midst and brewing chaos. Unable to react to the close proximity of the enraged hero, the other two Iron Knuckles were quick to succumb and were readily dispatched by Link's feral edge.

His wicked nostrum insatiable, Link turned to the four remaining knights and eyed them with a vengeful glare. Cale and the other two Highlanders were holding their own, but their strength was failing. Falling farther and farther back towards Mara, they were on the verge of collapse.

Letting his hatred take over, Link blindly leapt into the fight and swung his sword wildly, not even thinking about his own defense. Barely missing the harrowing axes that flew through the air with lightning speed, he was a dead-man walking, not even caring if he lived beyond this meeting.

Cale and the two shadow-Hylians tried their best to help, but were exhausted beyond ability. Cale withdrew from the fight, afraid he might also fall to Link's wild abandon. Taking position near Mara, he kept his shortsword at the ready in case the battle went sour.

Link lost all control of himself. Infected with wrath to his very core, he threw himself at the giants. He wanted them to suffer as he had suffered. He wanted them to feel the pain he had felt. He wanted to eternally punish them for what they had done. No one was safe from his lust for revenge, not even his closest friends. He had become death, his sword the instrument of the Goddesses.

The smaller of the Knuckles were quick to fall, unable to counter this ferocious opponent, leaving only the larger one still drawing breath. He took a step back and readied his axe, eyeing the small Hylians in his path to Lady Mara's inevitable demise. The bodies of his comrades strewn about the grove as if they were but sticks in the wind, his own nerve steeled and his want for justification flared.

Link attacked first, his sword pointed straight at the Knuckle's heart.

Tossing his blade aside, the Iron Knuckle drew out his longsword and parried Link's thrust, making the hero lose his balance and tumble off to the side. The two shadow-Hylians charged in to help protect their Lady, but were too weakened to do much good. Catching one of them off-guard, the Knuckle slashed him across the face and kicked him to the ground, driving his blade through his chest.

Coming back, Link launched his sword like a lance at the back of the Knuckle. Turning just in time, the giant was able to dodge the flying barbs of steel, but not the deft actions of its owner.

Throwing his body at the attacker, Link drew out his dagger and landed it cleanly through the gaps in the Knuckle's armor, the thin edge piercing through his chest and into his right lung. His strength immense, the giant gripped Link by the arms and began to crush him in his grip, but was felled by the stabbing blades of Cale and the other Highlander from behind.

Releasing the boy, the Knuckle fell to his knees, enmity showing through the slits in his helmet. Picking up his sword, Link placed a muddy boot to the armored-giant's chest and kicked

him onto his back. Standing over him, he used the tip of the blade to lift up his enemy's visor, revealing the face behind the mask.

"Sir Ironside?" Cale recognized the Knight Captain.

Wordless, the knight kept his stern eyes on the fire burning in Link's, his breath stuttered and heaving.

"Link..." Cale knew Link's intention, though he doubted the necessity.

The broken hero lowered his sword to Ironside's heart, dragging the edge on the scored metal.

"Don't do it, Link." Cale had seen enough bloodshed this night to last a lifetime. "He's not worth it."

Link's lips quivered. His hands tremored, the blade shaking in the breathing wind. His eyes exuded the pain within, saline cutting through the dirt, blood, and woe. Unable to exonerate any living thing of Ersatz, he lifted the sword high above his head, reciprocity seething like venom.

Just then, the ground shook and shifted. The triangle in the dirt that Mara had drawn began to glow and pulsate, the three stones connecting with beams of feathery light. Standing to her feet, Mara faced the impending doom of the Knight Captain at the hands of the fallen.

"Link of High Rule." Mara said compassionately. "Let it go. Let...her...go."

Completely losing his already fractured composure, Link dropped the sword and stepped back. Collapsing to his knees, he buried his face in his hands, letting the sorrow escape without bonds. Tensing his entire body, he screamed out to the cosmos, the pain of loss flowing freely from him like Zora's Waterfall.

Responding to the uncontrollable pain like a mother's protective embrace, gentle drops of water fell from the cloudless heavens, bathing Link and the others in a healing caress. Erasing the torture, the hatred, and the condemnation, Link fell onto his back and let the blessed waters wash over him. A wave of empathy filling his heart, he closed his eyes and let it all escape.

"What is this?" Cale asked, astounded by the sudden cloudburst.

"Tears of the Goddesses." Mara smiled, a warm wind picking up at their feet. "He is ready."

## Chapter Twenty-Four - "Breath Before the Plunge"

"This place will be very important for both of us someday. That's what I feel."

- Saria

Mara walked over to Link, towering over him like a beacon of unmovable strength. Link could see that same power of mind slumbering within Mara, the kind of power that could inspire a country. Link could see Zelda within those pale, gray eyes, and it gave him hope.

The Lady gave Link a smile. Though the pain of loss was within her as well, she harnessed it, controlled it, and made the conscious decision that she would not let grief rule her. Reaching down with her hand, she offered Link the way up; the power of friendship being stronger than death.

Wiping the rain from his face, Link took her hand, gripping it tightly and let her lift him up. “Gone, but never lost.” The Lady of Veritas said in encouragement. “Remember that.”

“What of this one?” Cale said, keeping his blade near Sir Ironside. “He’s still got some fight left in him, I wager.”

“Let him be.” Mara walked passed the fallen knight, hardly acknowledging his presence. “Ironside knows full well what is going on here. It is but his duty and honor that brought him, not his own personal choice. He’s no threat to us now. Staying here or returning to Ersatz, he’s as good as dead whatever path he decides to take.”

Mara stopped at the pulsating rune on the ground. “Coming, Link?”

Sheathing his fanged steel, the hero arisen moved to the Lady’s side, staring at the building whirlwind at his feet.

“Step onto the triangle, and you will find your way.” Mara placed a reaffirming hand on Link’s shoulder. “Do not worry. We won’t be far behind you. If what I fear is true, then the Empress is going to try and bring Ganondorf back into the world, the hilt of the Master Sword being the key. You have faced this evil before, I can see that in your eyes.”

Mara bowed away, Giving Link room to make his choice. “Goddesses protect you.”

Link started to place one foot on the rune when Ironside sat up, Cale placing his blade near his throat. “Wait!”

Link stopped and turned to face the Gerudo knight, the hatred that engulfed him moments earlier melted into absolution.

“The Empress is not herself. Do not trust her, lest she destroy you. Something has taken over her, poisoned her mind. I would plead for you to not kill her, though I know you will do what you must.”

“Why would you betray your own Empress?” Mara asked, folding her arms.

“That creature, that ghost, is not my Empress. I would have found out the truth sooner, but she constantly kept me out of the castle and in the wilds, blind to the happenings within my own country as I made war upon others. Only when it was too late did I realize, and by then I was already powerless to do anything to do about it.”

“They call you the butcher. The vanguard of death.” Cale didn’t remove the threatening shortsword. “I don’t have the stomach to kill you, but I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you!”

“I’m not asking for your trust.” Ironside was losing strength. He knew he would die if he remained there much longer. “I’m asking you to set things right where I could not.”

“If you truly wish to set things right,” Mara stooped down next to the knight. “You would help us with more than words.”

“Believe me, my words are more powerful than my steel. I was at the edge of the grove when the Sheikah told the boy to go on foot from the bridge; a death wish. If you drive at the forefront of the city, you won’t make it past the portcullis. My men are too strong for you, even with the power of the Goddesses at your command. You would need an army to do this.”

“An army we have.” Mara stared deep into the knight captain’s eyes, searching for deceptions.

“No. It would be a waste.” Ironside gingerly laid back down. “Even with your shadow-work, they are too prepared. You must strike where they don’t expect it. There is only one weak point within Ersatz, one not even known to the Home Guard nor the Empress herself. Only I know of it, and I have kept it with me for all these years in case of something happening, such as this.”

“In case you decided to take over?” Cale asked.

“In case we were conquered and had to retake the castle.” Ironside moved his sight to the woodsman. “I may be a killer, as all soldiers are, but I am not without purpose and honor. I have done things that I now regret, but I take solace knowing that I can help set things right here.”

“Then tell us of it.” Mara was watching the moon as it slowly drifted through the sky. “But do not waste our time with hollow gossip.”

“You know the underground of Ersatz well, yes?”

Mara nodded. “Better than you know your own streets.”

“Then you know of the cisterns that lay to the east? The ones that were build in the old times in case anyone sieged the castle?”

“We call them the Hallows.” Mara could see where Ironside was going with this. “That’s where Veritas gets most of it’s water.”

Ironside chuckled a little, his side hurting from the stab wounds. “Yes, I know.”

Mara wasn’t sure if she believed that last statement, so she took it with a grain of salt.

“At the roof of the cisterns, there is a vaulted ceiling made of arched rock and brick. It is impenetrable in it’s current form, but if you were to remove one of the stones....”

“The roof would collapse.” Mara finished Ironside’s statement. “The entire eastern lay of the city would fall into the underground!”

“Causing the guards to abandon their posts to help with the wounded and to assess the situation.” Ironside smiled at the simplicity. “I know my men, and they are trained to put the needs of the city first before everything else. They wouldn’t care if a couple of scraps strolled into the city while the other half of it was in a deluge of sludge and stone.”

“How would we do this?” Cale asked. “The weight on the arch must be tremendous.”

“That I do not know.” Ironside coughed. “All I know is that would be the only way to draw some of the guard away from the front gate. The other option is to fight, and believe me, they are ready and waiting for you.”

Cale smirked. “No. There has to be a better way.”

“Cale...” Mara started.

“No!” The woodsman interrupted. “I’m sorry, but there’s no way that would work. A: we don’t know if it would even work. And B: even if it did, whomever did it would most likely be trapped under there, the entire city coming down on top of them. It’s a suicide mission!”

Mara breathed deep and turned her attention to the hero. “What say you, Link? You are the pinnacle of the events here. You are tied to each and every one in ways that I couldn’t even begin to possibly imagine. I think you should decide.”

Without hesitation, Link stepped onto the glowing rune, placing his feet evenly within the triangle of light.

“Then it’s settled.” Mara stood up, motioning to Cale to put his blade away. “I saw no lie in Ironside’s eyes.”

She turned to Link. “We will return to Veritas with all haste, and with the power of our people we will bring the upper city down. And as for you, Link, you storm that keep just try and stay alive until we can do our part.”

Link nodded, feeling a strange tingling sensation growing at his feet.

“Be careful, Link.” Mara stepped close, giving the boy a tight-lipped smile. “Give us time, and we’ll give you what you need to stop the Empress from doing whatever she intends to do.”

Link returned the smile just as he was wrapped in a cocoon of light and wind, his body disappearing into the moonlit sky.

“Are you sure about this, Mara?” Cale asked as the grove settled. “If we do this, Veritas could be crushed under the weight as well. Even it survives that, then you are at least destroying your main source of water.”

“There’s no stopping that now.” Mara placed a hand on Ironside’s armored chest. “So, Sir knight, would you stay here and die with your fellow soldiers, or would you fight against them?”

Ironside had the answer to that question before it was asked. “I would bring honor back to my people.”

Mara motioned for Cale and the other Highlander to help get Ironside to his feet. “Then let’s go.”

One by one, the four stepped onto the triangle and were warped away out of the ruins to some unseen destination. Taking Zelda’s body with her, Mara cast one last spell onto the grove as she passed onto the rune, the entire domain beginning to glitter in perpetual twilight.

“Let this place become lost, so none without purity of heart may tread upon it again.”

Mara gazed out one last time at the Pedestal of Time and the surrounding ruins, knowing full well she would never see them again. Letting the power of the wandering souls take her, the rune collapsed and snuffed into darkness, the wind blowing over the shapes in the dirt until they disappeared.

## Chapter Twenty-Five - “Immortals”

“The Ocarina of Time opened the door. The Hero of Time, with the Master Sword, descended here.”

### - Inscription in the Temple of Time

His mind awash with the blinding color of a thousand supernovae, Link fought the urge to faint as he tumbled and tossed through the ethereal plane of the wandering souls. He couldn’t tell what was happening around him, as all he could see was flying stars and streaking rainbows, but he had the distinct notion that he was traveling at a great speed. Like a falling star caught grazing across the heavens, he cruised the wrinkles of eternity, oblivious to the passing of time and space in his wake.

He felt as if he could travel this way forever, a blessed immortality of fire and light, seeking out new worlds and charting the cosmos. Never before had he felt so small, so insignificant, as if his troubles were but flecks of paint on the grand canvas. He knew the importance of his task, but failed to grasp the greater meaning. Content to take things at face value, he continued his pilgrimage throughout the nebulae and expanses of darkness at his feet, the

power of the Goddesses propelling him across the void.

Then, as if snapping awake from a dream, Link found himself standing in the center of a great chamber, one made of shimmering fountains and columns of pure, unfiltered light. Surrounding him in a circular fashion were six colored pedestals, his own in the shape of the Triforce. He knew this place, almost as well as he knew the trees and the rocks of the Lost Woods.

It was the Chamber of Sages within the Temple of Light. He was in the Sacred Realm.

Link gazed in awe at the simple beauty of the chamber, noting the sleepless waterfall at his feet, pouring over the edges of the transcendental platforms as if the downward-rushing streams were holding him up. Nothing in the mortal realm of Hyrule even dared to contrast itself next to this hallow place, and yet, it seemed curiously deserted.

Gazing around at the pedestals of forest, fire, water, shadow, spirit, and light, his face bore concern over the fact that they were empty. Each and every one was without it's accompanying sage, the chosen ones that helped seal Ganondorf within the Master Sword and bring balance back to Hyrule.

Link's thoughts wandered to Saria. Where had she gone? Why had the six Sages left the Temple of Light? Why had Mara sent him to this place, only to leave him there without means of escape?

"Link?" The high-pitched voice of a long-lost friend rang out into the chamber.

The hero looked beyond Rauru's pedestal of light and saw a dainty little blur of blue rushing towards him. He squinted his eyes, not trusting what he was seeing.

"It is you!" The little fairy, Navi, said with a glee that only a child could command. "Link! I thought he was playing a trick on me!"

The boy couldn't help but smile and raise his arms. He couldn't believe it. He thought Navi was dead. The little fairy had taken the hit of a ball of dark energy back in Ganondorf's tower and disappeared into the night, saving Link's life in the process. It was a miracle that she was still alive, let alone in a place such as this.

"You lazy boy!" The fairy scolded in a reminiscing tone. "I thought you'd never come!"

Navi nuzzled close to Link's left shoulder, the hero giving the fairy a gentle hug in return.

"Let me have a look at you." Navi fluttered back a few feet and looked the boy over.

"Well, you're a little worse for wear, aren't you? Been up to your old tricks again?"

Link chuckled and nodded.

"Well, I know you wouldn't have it any other way!" Navi turned back to where she came from and started to leave. "Come on, let's go! There's someone I want you to meet!"

Link gave the fairy an awkward stare, seeing nothing but an immeasurable chasm at his feet and no way to cross.

"Oh, sorry!" Navi fluttered back. "I forgot you can't fly. Here, take my hand."

The Hylian blinked and his eyebrows arched. The fairy's previous statement was better.

"Oh, for the love of Deku Nuts." Navi flew in close. "Close your eyes...and no peeking!"

Giving the fairy a distrusting smile, Link relented and dropped his eyelids, dubious of what to expect. He thought for sure one of Navi's practical jokes was in the works, but figured he'd let her have an easy one for old time's sake.

"There, now do you see?"

Link's jaw dropped. Even though his eyes were shut, there were streaking lines and circles that filled his mind. He could see the temple around him, immense and extraordinary, but within itself it had changed. Dressed in pale blues, whites, and grays, the bottomless crevasse had turned into glistening marble floors, arching staircases that climbed into the very heavens, and

prodigious chandeliers of all colors of crystal. But the room wasn't the only change to be seen.

Standing before him was a young woman, frighteningly beautiful, with the most intense crystal-blue eyes he had ever seen. She had azure-tinted blonde hair, a sparse dabbling of freckles around her dainty nose, and long, pointy ears, just like a Hylian. The look of a great fairy wrapped in seraphic garb stood before him, playing with his mind.

"Hey, I said no peeking!" The voice was Navi's, but it came from this other form. "Now, take my hand."

Link opened his eyes, the chamber reverting back to the room, and the Navi, he knew before. Unsure if it was a dream, he closed his eyes again, that sultry shape coming back into his mind's view.

"Time may have no meaning here, but you haven't even that to waste, Link." Navi's eyes were warm, but stern. "Come! You must hurry!"

Not one to argue with a fairy, let alone one that was as big as he, Link clasped the other's wrist.

"Keep your eyes closed!" Navi's face grew wild with excitement. "And hold tight!"

Link felt a strong pull at his arm, his feet lifting off the ground. Holding on to the fairy's hand he felt the world rush him by as the two flew through the Chamber of Sages, rooms and chambers of indescribable beauty streaking by. Link wanted to see them all, but was helpless to stop Navi's invisible wings as they flew.

Coming to a crystalline tower of opaque glass, Navi started to climb, flying higher and higher. Passing through beam after beam of life-infused light, the tower below looked like a glittering web, beams of rapturous brilliance being the master's weave.

The Chamber of Sages left far behind, the roof of the tower slowly began to funnel until it reached its apex, a stair-less ledge and an archway awaiting Link and Navi's entry close by. Letting Link down with surprising grace and gentility, Navi drifted through the arch, giggling, and beckoned Link to follow.

"Remember!" The fairy warned as she zipped away. "Don't open your eyes!"

Breaking out into a sprint, Link pursued after Navi as she wound and bobbed through vaulted archways and around sky-scraping columns, barely missing white-hot torches and dangerous ledges. Leading him on a hearty chase, she finally brought him to a stop near the entrance to a grand hall, a slight wind picking up as they approached.

Link all the sudden was washed over by a feeling of dread, as if something sinister was lying beyond the threshold into the next room. He stopped just before the crack in the marble, not sure if he should cross or turn back. The lay may have been shut to his worldly eyes, but his instinct proved sharper than his perception.

"Link?" Navi came back and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Come on, we don't have any time to dilly-dally."

Link dourly gazed into Navi's eyes, but saw no deception reflecting back.

Arming himself with courage, he stepped through the arch and found himself in a spacious rotunda, one of the largest he had ever beheld. Encircling the outer wall were fourteen stained-glass windows, tall and powerful like solemn knights holding evil at bay, each with lettering and design he had never before seen. The encompassing light passively filtered through the glass, creating slashing streaks made colorful by the miscellany of crystal.

Looking at the floor, Link could see the beams of light were creating intricate patterns with their soft touches. Each window a piece to the puzzle, they all overlapped and twisted amongst each other, creating a tapestry of heroic warriors and fabled weapons, the mark of the united

Triforce clearly settled at it's eye.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Navi said quietly, not wishing to disturb the spirits in their slumber. "This is the Hall of the Heroes. A monument to those who have been chosen by the Goddesses throughout the mists of time to answer the call to defeat evil."

Standing in the back of the room, shrouding himself in the shadow of a column, the frame of a man shifted, causing Link's awe to revert back to that sense of foreboding he felt before entering the room.

"Welcome back to the Sacred Realm." A gruff, booming voice echoed around the exalted arcs of the rotunda's roof. "I've been waiting for some time."

Stepping out of the shadow and walking towards the center of the room, Link saw a cloaked man, tall, broad, and powerful looking. Dressed in white and gray robes, his outline glimmered as he stepped through the multitude of light beams, making the shapes on the floor shift and coalesce into one another. He couldn't quite make out the man's face, but the general shape seemed to be familiar in some way.

"As I was intended, you now know." The man said. "With your heart, you gaze upon me in blind truth, your eyes no longer skewing the reality."

Navi grabbed Link by the hand, as if to steady him for some blow. "Don't be afraid. Go ahead, open your eyes."

Doing as told, Link's eyelids peeled open. The room stayed the same, as well as the light on the floor, but the pious figure before him was gone.

Standing before him, enveloped in that dark desert garb, was Ganondorf Dragmire.

Link jumped back and reached for his sword, the dark blade's call ripping through the air as it was drawn. Breathing in the light of the Sacred Realm, it glinted and cast reflections all around the room, its ominous teeth ready to strike.

About to lunge, Link caught himself just as Navi flew in between him and the dark lord, barring him direct passage to his foe.

"Link." The fairy said, trying to calm the boy down. "It's all right. Just close your eyes."

Unwilling to let himself become victim to Ganondorf's dark scheming yet again, Link kept his eyes lidless and he moved to go around.

Herself just as stubborn, if not more so, Navi again placed herself in the middle of the two.

"Do you not trust me?" The fairy's countenance seemed to droop just slightly. "After all this time, has that, too, failed?"

Relenting, Link lowered his blade and stepped back, but kept himself at the ready. He had trusted Navi from the very beginning. He had trusted her ability to help him through even the starkest times. Even unto the very ends of the world, he had trusted her. If it were to put himself in jeopardy at this moment, he knew he would trust her still if she were to but ask for it.

"Go on, Ganondorf." Navi fluttered to the side. "Tell him what you told me."

Link closed his eyes, the brightly-burning man in white again taking the place of the infamous dark lord.

"First, Link, I must thank you." Ganondorf planted his feet on the bottom corners of the Triforce mark on the floor. "For giving me this one chance to see, unhindered, the choices I have made through my lifetime."

The boy blinked. Ganondorf seemed different. Even when he saw him with his waking eyes, something about him had changed. He didn't glean that sense of penetrating evil from him as he should. He seemed...noble.

Ganondorf clasped his hands behind his back. "Now, with clean eyes, I can spend what

little time we have to tell you what you need to know.”

“When you sacrificed yourself to imprison me within the Master Sword, both me and you were trapped within its sacred blade. This is true. You also know that your shadow could not withstand the sword’s power, and so he was left behind. And I am sure that you also were told that my shadow is also loose in the world, causing havoc and destruction in his wake.”

Link nodded. Zelda had told him all about the shadows. He considered it nothing, but then the thought hit him.

“And so you now see?” Ganondorf smiled. “I am what I was intended to be. I am Ganondorf Dragmire, King of the Gerudo, and my soul is pure, just as yours.”

Link couldn’t believe it. He looked to Navi, who nodded in return.

“The Master Sword cast out our evil, leaving it behind while you and I were sealed away to await this fateful coming. Unfortunately, our shadows were also left waiting, wanting. This spelled trouble for the entire world while they were loose, shifting the balance of power in their favor.”

“My phantom somehow found a way to break the seal on the sword, causing the blade to rust and decay. Only the hilt proved far too powerful for him to destroy. You were able to escape, by a flit of chance, but I had to stay behind, here, in the Sacred Realm.”

“And from here I was able to ensure you and I would meet. Zelda’s daughter knew those Keystones could give anyone instant transport to anywhere their hearts desired, but she didn’t know they were shards of the Spiritual Stones of legend. She intended for you to go to the gates of Ersatz, but I was able to bring you here when you entered into the hands of the wandering souls. The alignment of the stars made this possible, as Hyrule now holds a direct connection with the Sacred Realm until sunrise.”

“Which brings me to why you are here.” Ganondorf took a couple of steps forward. “My phantom, impaired as he is, is seeking to reacquire his other half; me. Just as your shadow has done, he longs for the domination of his own.”

One of Link’s eyebrows arched.

“You know it to be true. You can feel it in your heart. Your shadow didn’t die when you struck him. He couldn’t die. As long as you are alive, so shall he be. It is the way of things. He is within you, now, coursing through your veins. You are complete again, Link, the power of light and dark at your command.”

“You suffered greatly at his hand, all those you know and love becoming lost in his tide, but that was a mere nuance to his true revenge. Once he broke your spirit, he was able to rejoin with you and again make you one. Shoving the tip of the Master Sword into his heart only made the meld possible, him transferring back into you like a poison that is drawn into a wound.”

Navi’s true form stepped in and put a hand on Link’s shoulder. “I saw it happen, Link. It’s true. You completely lost control over yourself after the fight. You became entrapped within the hatred, the sorrow, the want for revenge. You even summoned Tears of the Goddesses: the sign of ultimate pain. No one, not even Ganny here, has seen that happen since the forming of the world.”

Ganondorf took another couple of steps forward. “For a short while, you became evil. But, with the Tears of the Goddesses and the Power of the Triforce of Courage, you were able to contain the hatred within yourself. Fate has always smiled upon you, Link, even when it didn’t seem as such. You now hold the power over your own destiny. If you were to take up Evil’s Bane once more, you would remain whole, as your inner darkness was vanquished from within you, not from without. With your entire essence complete, you have become more powerful than any hero could possibly imagine.”

Link relaxed his taut muscles and placed his sword back in its dark scabbard. He felt he hadn't the need for such a weapon anymore, now knowing that his shadow was forever gone.

"But, there still is the matter of my own phantom." Ganondorf folded his arms. "He holds the hilt to the Master Sword and an entire army lay within his control. I am vulnerable in this state, Link. If he were to open up a gate to this realm, he could take me for his own. He is much stronger, much more perverse, than your shadow could ever be. I wouldn't stand much of a chance against him in my current state."

"When I was taken into the blade, the Triforce of Power stayed behind. That power was so entrenched within my own darkness that the good in me had no chance of clinging to it. It was stripped away, and as such my phantom is even more dangerous than he was when you battled him in the Forest Temple. Existing without one shred of good within him, and with the power of Din, he is evil absolute."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Navi had heard this story already and was anxious to get to the point. "Link is here, your phantom is out there. There's already a bit of a disadvantage."

Ganondorf took in a deep breath. "You are going to have to kill me, Link."

Navi first looked at the Hylian, then back to the Gerudo. "What, here? Now?"

"No, that is not possible." Ganondorf unfolded his arms and took another couple of steps forward, now only a few feet away. "It will have to happen when the portal is open, when you can get us both at once. While we are apart, one will inevitably revive the other whether they choose to or not. We are tied to the same spirit, and as such we cannot be defeated separately. You will have to wait until just before we are joined. Only then is the weakness exposed."

"But...you'll die." Navi had spent a long time with what was left of Ganondorf's pure spirit, and feared she would never be able to speak to him again. "You are a good person. Link couldn't kill you. Sure, you may have had a bad streak, but that's over now, right? It isn't you out there, now, trying to destroy the world! You're past that!"

The Gerudo shook his head. "There is no other way."

Ganondorf stepped closer still and placed both his hands on Link's shoulders. Being so near, Link could see beyond the white glow into his face. He was the same man, only in balance. He wondered how the world might have been had the Gerudo King been able to control his lust for power. Maybe it was his surrogate mothers, the witches, that perverted him in such a way. He wanted to know, and all the questions he had were threatening to burst out, but knew that dreamy thoughts weren't important now.

"If I could take back all I have done to Hyrule and the world, I would see it happen." Ganondorf gave Link a warm smile. "But, the past cannot be changed. Only the future. See to it, Link. And, Goddesses willing, I will see you on the other side."

Before Link could respond, his inner and outer sight was filled with a blinding white, the room and the floor vanishing from beneath him. He could feel Navi's invisible hand gliding across his face as he left, but no words reached his ears as the tips of her fingers regretfully slipped away.

He wasn't sure, as it was very faint, but he felt as if a single tear had fallen onto his cheek, sinking into his skin like a memory. He passed it off as naught but a fleeting trick of the mind, but knew that even if it weren't true, he would treasure it always.

He felt relieved to know that even though so much had been lost, not all was forsaken. Perhaps there was a chance to save the good man that was locked away within Ganondorf's soul. Maybe in doing so the world would become a better place and things could be set back into the balance that had long since been shattered.

Momentarily standing in the blanket of white, Link suddenly entered back into that streaking river of stars, gliding through space and time to the mortal realm. He knew he was returning to the dark, gaping maw of Ersatz, enveloping shadow growing legion as sunrise neared.

His sight coming into focus, Link could make out the distinct shape of Ersatz's towers and walls, a hail of flaming arrows launching into the sky to halt his approach. Gripping the hilt of his sword, but leaving it in its scabbard, he readied his shield as his feet gently touched the ground.

Strength renewed, Link gazed up at the shower of glowing bolts coming his way, lighting up the night like the fireflies of summer. He knew that this would be the fight of his life. So much was at stake, and he was the only one that could save the people of this strange Hyrule from Ganondorf's fiendish double. And with that in mind, he knew that if there was to be a battle this night, and if light were to fall to the coming darkness, it would be a victory that would not be given lightly.

## Chapter Twenty-Six - "Backslide"

"You are a courageous boy...."

- Impa

Reacting by instinct, Link threw his shield over his back and ducked, running towards the castle's massive stone and iron gate as the barrage of fire arrows whistled to the ground. Some striking off his shield, some firmly planting near his feet, they scattered all across the field, catching some of the yellowed grass ablaze. Noting one laying flat, he saw its barbed tip glistening in the firelight; the shape of a scorpion cut in visceral twists and hooks.

The castle's massive drawbridge was raised to its end, barring all passage into the city. Seeing no other means of entry up front, let alone with the archers above letting loose all their defensive fervor, Link skirted the edge of the moat, looking for some weakness in the outer wall.

Seeing the river to be deep and murky, Link dove into the water and swam towards the bottom, arrows whizzing past and sticking in the muddy sediment some fifteen feet below. Lucky for him, the arrows were stirring up a flurry of mud and rock, clouding the water even more so Link could pass across unseen. Random arrows still dropped down from the narrow murder holes up above, but without a target most chose to conserve their munitions.

As Link neared the bottom, he could see little dragons writhing in the sludge: Water Drakes, burrowing holes and making nests. He thought it strange that Drakes would be here, down out of the mountains, as he thought they were only in New Kakariko. If only Ersatz knew of the treasure that lay at their feet, a veritable well of life and healing, they would be even more of a force to reckon with than they already were.

As Link started to drift downstream, no portholes or waterways present as he had hoped, the Drakes took notice of him and began swirling about. Long and sinewy, their blue bodies

glistened in the faint moonlight, and they all began moving in a single direction: back upstream.

Curious, Link made a unseen trip back to the surface to take in a subtle gulp of air, and then sank back down. Following the little dragons, they led him to a particular spot in the mud and swam around in little circles. As the hero neared, he saw what looked like undistinguished rotting tree limb, protruding from the soggy earth like a raising arm of a skeleton.

Reaching out for the stick, Link felt around in the mud and soon found it to be a marker, an iron ring and a grate under the sludge being it's target. Taking hold of the ring, he planted his feet and pulled with all his might, but the grate wouldn't budge. He tried again and again to make it free, but he just didn't have the strength needed. The gate looked as if it hadn't been opened for centuries, judging by the thick growth of rust on it's gritty iron surface.

Nearly giving up on the attempt, Link again quietly surfaced for a brief moment and took another large breath before sinking back to the grate. This time however, the top layer of silt removed, Link caught eye of a lynch pin at the base of the gate; he had been pulling on a locked door. Shaking his head at his own silliness, he removed the thin bar of iron and pulled up again, this time the grate slowly creaking upwards, allowing him passage.

It was a tight fit, Link's shield barely fitting through the narrow square at an angle, but he managed to squeeze through and dropped into what looked like an underground waterway that led beneath the city. About four feet in height, comprised of ancient stone and brick arches, Link wound his way about the branching aqueduct, searching for a way up into Ersatz.

It was a maze in the watery underground. Link barely able to see, every corner and arch looked exactly like the last. He didn't know if he was heading in the right direction, or if he was swimming in circles.

His breath was giving out. After a few minutes in this claustrophobic catacomb of water, even the largest of lungs wouldn't last long. Becoming desperate, he looked behind him for the way he came in, wishing to return to the surface, but couldn't see much past his own circle.

Swimming harder into the dark, the oxygen in his veins failing, Link began to feel light-headed. His mouth struggled to remain closed, as if his body were trying to force him to breath against his will. Rounding column after column of analogous rock, he was on the verge of collapse when he saw something in a near corner.

Moving to the huddled mass, Link saw the remains of a Hylian, lying in the water as if he had fallen asleep there. Presumably once a man, the entire body was starved, no flesh left to speak of, but a scorpion-tipped arrow protruding from the chest spoke of his ill-fated demise. Dressed in what remained of a gold and blue tunic, one that looked as if it could have been royal of some sort, the body held a sense of honor and duty, as if he had given his life to sneak into the castle. Or perhaps he was trying to escape? He didn't know, and at this moment he didn't think he would get the opportunity to find out.

Fate again shining upon him, Link looked at the man's face and saw exactly what he needed. Fortuitously waiving in the water like a flag, a bastion of hope, was a black Zora mask.

Link quickly pulled the fabric from around the man's skeletal jaw and held it up to his own, breathing sweet air into his strained lungs. Holding still there for a moment, letting his body return to a normal state, he took in a deep breath and then removed the mystic fabric so he could tie it around his face properly. Ensuring it was tight and secure, he looked back at the corpse that lay before him, searching him for clues about why he was there.

Fumbling through the man's shredded clothing, Link didn't find anything of value. There was a crumpled piece of parchment gripped in his bony fist, but it was long since destroyed by the rushing waves, it's ink faded and smudged. It almost looked like a layout of the underground

waterway, but it was too far smeared and fragile to be of any value.

Knowing himself short of time, Link let the body be and pushed away, heading back to his search for an exit. Frantically moving down wall after wall of the labyrinth, he was about to backtrack to the beginning when he felt the water push against him, a wave flowing through the current. He was unsettled by the wave, as that meant he wasn't alone.

Sticking close to the outer barriers of rock, Link moved in what he thought was the northern direction, keeping an eye out for any sign of movement in the dark waterway. Stopping in what seemed to be a central room, four possible directions at his feet, he spied something writhing in the distance. Squinting his eyes in the waving water, he saw the blue and silver scales of a Water Drake.

Link thought it close, like one of the small dragons he had caught in his cup back in New Kakariko, but when he realized that it was actually far away his eyes grew wide and he put an unsure hand on the hilt of his sword. This Drake had to be at least forty feet long.

The creature twisted and swooned in the murky liquid, seemingly content in its water-weaving dance, but came to a stop when it saw the intruder within its sacred lair. Its eyes flashed orange and its jaw came to a close, bubbles flowing from its nostrils like smoke from Death Mountain.

Serpentinely rippling through the water, the Drake darted towards Link faster than any dragon in air could have possibly imagined. Like the screaming shaft of an arrow, a piercing shriek and howl filled the waterway, causing Link's eyes to blur and his mind to soften. It was like a murderous song, enchanting in the shrill notes, bidding its target to surrender to its ravaging thirst.

Barely able to keep himself together, Link barrel rolled to the side just as the Drake coursed by, nearly missing its streaking claws as it gripped at him. Not waiting for the gargantuan beast to recoil, he pushed on towards where it had come from, a faint light cutting down through the water and illuminating the ground.

Enraged at the boy's presumptuous escape, the Drake wheeled and swam to its right to turn around, winding around columns like a thread through fabric. Its feral screech continued to flutter through the waterway, Link barely able to stay ahead of its numbing harmony.

Nearing the patch of blueish light on the aqueduct floor, Link turned his head behind him to look for the Drake, but it had disappeared. Not stopping to ponder the thought, Link pushed on, legs churning.

Moving into the faint moonlight, sky being visible up above, Link spied a long vertical shaft that was barred with another grate. Moving towards it, Link despaired when he saw that the strips of iron were set directly into the rock; no possible way of opening it.

Link sank back down to the bottom of the waterway, planting his feet on the slick rock floor. Keeping his sword readied, he looked about for the aquatic dragon.

And there it was. Dashing towards him, the Water Drake's jaw split wide, seeking to swallow the Hylian whole if it could. Waiting for the perfect moment, Link crouched and shoved upwards with his feet, shooting into the tunnel and towards the grate. Bracing himself in a corner, sword pointed downward and close to his body, Link awaited the beast to follow.

Follow it did. Shooting into the tunnel with furious expedience, the Drake barely missed Link and his barbed sword, slamming through the grate and into the upper level of the waterway, its shriek growing even more rancor.

The dragon slipping by, Link took hold of its tail and gripped it tightly, being drawn along faster than the owl flies.

Unwittingly shooting out of the water and onto a solid surface, Link and the Drake found themselves in the main square of Ersatz, near where Link was nearly killed those few nights ago. Rolling away from the Drake, Link crouched underneath a table and readied his shield, unsure of what was going to happen next.

Unlike its miniature counterparts, this Drake seemed to have no problem being out of water. Its gills ceased to flutter and what appeared to be lungs started to heave and bellow out smoke. Its howling shriek filling the streets and alleys, the shouts of men and the pounding of armored feet echoed in return.

Link backed away towards a near wall as knights and infantrymen flooded the square, pointing their hooked blades, spears, and axes towards the massive Drake. Staring down at the minuscule men in armor, the Drake's wiry body stood up and stretched out its neck, standing taller than some of the nearby buildings. Its paralyzing call rang out in the open air, the ear-splitting tone traveling louder and wider than it could in the waterway.

Most of the men cowered in fear, but one, a knight captain burnished in golden armor, stood firm and raised his sword in defiance. Calling out to the high tower wall, a volley of arrows were unleashed into the fray, their entangling barbs deflecting off the Drake's hardy scales as if they were but blunt splinters of wood.

The city guard distracted by the Drake, his own presence gone unnoticed, Link slipped into a near alleyway, clinging to the shadows as he went along. Stopping in a far corner, he gazed up at the impenetrable tower standing firm in the escaping moonlight. Jutting out from the tower was that balcony, the one that he saw the Empress on before, nearly ten stories up from the ground. Squinting his eyes, Link could see that she was there again, leaning over the railing to gaze upon the Drake at her feet.

Gazing around the city, it almost seemed deserted. All that was roaming the streets were soldiers, no civilians to be seen. Link wondered where everyone was as his eyes scaled the outside of the tower for some sort of way to surmount it. Biting his lip, the powerful stone surface granted nothing; it was solid, flawless. He would have to take it from the ground.

Moving around to the rear of the tower, his weary eyes locked on the distant figure of the Empress, Link was nearly struck by an arrow, its scorpion tail cutting across the bridge of his nose. Jumping back against the outside of the curved wall, a slight trickle of blood coming down his face like tears, he crouched in the shadow and held his shield in front of him, blade at his side. If it weren't for the archer's poor marksmanship, Link, in his stupor, would have certainly been hit.

Shaking the pain and his haughtiness away, Link slowly moved along the curvature of the stone, keeping his eyes lidless for the would-be-assassin. Seeing him on the outer wall, another arrow strung and ready, Link's eyes dropped to the ground level, the archer now being the least of his problems.

Shoulder to shoulder, shield to shield, was an entire platoon of swordsmen barricading the entire street, ready to charge. Melodramatically chuckling at the absurdity of his disadvantage, Link scrambled and ran back towards the square he had come from, the soldiers breaking ranks and giving chase close behind.

Flying back into the commons with reckless abandon, arrows and javelins following at his feet, Link charged into the fray. The Drake having already dispatched some twenty men, their bodies horribly mangled and strewn about the square, he threw himself at the unsuspecting soldiers, knowing that this was going to be the place in which he had to hold his ground. He hoped that Mara and the Highlanders were going to be able to do their end, else the battle in the streets would outlast the night.

Dragon's teeth and men with steel; time's edge bleeds deeper still.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven - "Charlatan"

"I don't know what it is...I have this feeling of dread."

- Saria

Ironside, Cale, Mara, and her one remaining inarticulate bodyguard made their way through Ersatz's rat-infested underbelly, traveling silently in the frugal light. The air stale and clammy, Cale and Ironside found it difficult to breath, coughing up wet dust and mold from their lungs along the way. In contrast, the Highlanders were accustomed to such facets of their clandestine life, but found breathing to be difficult when topside.

They had entered the underground by way of the western catacombs, warping in very near the concealed entrance that was a few hundred yards away from the city. Mara wanted to get in closer, as time was short, but decided it too much a risk. A risk, it seemed, that might have been a better choice. Somehow, Link hadn't warped in with them. He went first, and as such he should have been right at the entrance to the caves, but he wasn't. The Lady thought that maybe he had went on ahead, charging the keep without hesitation, but doubted it. Something had taken him out of the stream, or redirected him elsewhere. There was someone else playing the strings that night, and Mara didn't like it.

Moving as fast as sure feet would take them, the four went in a single file line, Mara in front and the other Highlander in the rear, winding through the indirect passageways and random changes in elevation. Mara's kind knew these passages by heart and could move through them at breakneck speed, but the two others in tow wouldn't be able to keep up, let alone find their way if they got lost. The old underground was layer upon layer of past joining present, and not even the most clearly written of maps would be of any help in such a place.

Passing through the crypts, the resting place of the kings of old, the group came to a stop at the entrance to the cisterns, the smell of standing water filling their nostrils. Cale walked in first and put his hands on the railing, looking over into the nearest basin and gazing in awe.

Four in all, clustered in a massive square formation, the cisterns were a marvel of ingenuity and foresight, giving Ersatz enough water to easily outlast a siege for months, if not years.

Encased by domed ceilings of hand-set brick and stone, it was nearly a four story climb to reach the dank arches, and one not done easily. Now lost to the memory of time, the city having no real enemies to speak of for so long, the basins sat unused for centuries until they were discovered by the Highlanders. By redirecting a small aqueduct, Veritas had secured it's own ability to sustain life in such stark circumstances.

Mara bit her lip. This plan they were following was to be the rubicon of this chain of events. If the cisterns were buried, and if the city did fall, Veritas, in time, would also succumb. This one choice, this one doom, was to be for all, not just for a scant few. It was either going to be victory and the emergence of the Highlanders back into the upper world, or Ersatz simply adding another layer to the twisted caverns of rock and earth.

Ironside moved passed the others, spying something drawn on the nearby wall. It seemed to be a picture drawn with chalk, three persons being the subject. They seemed like happy people, warm smiles on their faces as if they were captured in the time when they were most content. It was two men with moustaches; one tall and thin, the other short and bulky; and a young woman standing between them. Behind their faces was an etching of the sun, filled in with a faded yellow tint.

"Who're they?" Cale turned and faced the mural, leaning back on the railing, elbows up on the iron bars.

"Nobody knows." Mara answered. "No tale, no writing, no song ever speaks of them; their story is lost to time. But here, within this drawing, we think of them as immortals."

Cale softly smiled. "They look...happy."

"I'm sure they were." Ironside had been in dark situations before and knew exactly what was going on. "We're stalling, and time isn't something that is readily available. If we're going to do this, we should do it fast."

"Quite right, captain." Mara turned and faced the others. "So...how *should* we do this?"

Ironside gazed up at the dripping vault of the first cistern, seeing how all the supporting columns wound up to their peaks and back into a central pillar of solid rock that lay at the rooms eye. As thick as the largest of trees, it looked as if it wouldn't give way easily.

"Dropping one wouldn't do. The others would just hold the weight and make it even more difficult to accomplish the goal. We need to destroy that center column."

"How?" Cale was quick to protest. "That thing is thicker than a castle wall. There's nothing that could cut through that."

"Maybe not cut..." Mara signaled to her guard to come forward. "But we have something that might be able to do the job."

Both Ironside and Cale were entrenched in their skepticism.

Reaching into the folds of his cloak, the imperceptible Highlander produced a cloth bag, something bulky and odd-shaped inside, and handed it to Mara.

"We found this some years ago, deep within one of the western tunnels. There were three of them at one point in time, but the others were used to help with the city when we needed to...*increase* usable space."

Unwrapping the parcel, Mara produced something that neither Ironside nor Cale had ever seen before. It was triangular shaped, boxy with sharp edges, and had the general look of a mouse to it.

Thinking the device almost comical, it was all Cale could do to keep from laughing at it.

"What is it?" Ironside was still doubtful.

"This, my friends..." Mara had a proud smile on her face. "Is the solution. We didn't

know what they were for the longest time, until one was accidentally set off. It ran off on its own, as if it were possessed by some spirit, and when it came to a stop it destroyed an entire chamber of solid rock. Turned the very ground to glass.”

“It’s a bomb?” Hope came to Cale’s eyes. “You mean, all we got to do is plant that thing, run like fear, and boom! Down it comes?”

“Well, that’s the problem.” Mara didn’t want to have to be the bearer of bad news. “This one doesn’t sit still once you awaken it. You have to have the timing just right and aim it towards your target from a distance. If you let loose too early, it will go off before it reaches its mark. Too late, and it’ll climb right up the wall and along the ceiling. Frighteningly random it seems, and none of us were ever really able to figure them out.”

Ironside reached up and rubbed his hand across the stubble on his chin. “You say you found them in the west?”

Mara nodded. “Deep. Almost to the desert.”

The knight captain rapped his knuckles on the wall and started pacing. “When I was a boy, I remember an old man telling me the story of the Bombchu: a race of fire deities that resided within the bodies of desert mice. He said that when someone would make it mad, it would scurry along the floor, winding back and forth like a snake with legs, and explode, completely destroying anything and anyone in its path.”

“Bombchu, eh?” Cale folded his arms. “Well, I guess there’s no time to argue, if we are set on doing this.”

Mara walked to one of the crossing pathways, one that gave a straight shot to the imposing column. “So, here’s the plan. We drop the Bombchu and let it run to the column. We run for safety through the way we came, and pray that the rest of the caverns and tunnels don’t collapse with this one.”

Mara looked to the other three, wanting a collective agreement for what was to be done. No quarrel was given, and so the Lady gently set the apparatus on the ground, aiming the nose towards the pillar and opening a small hatch on its back. Removing a bit of stuffing, cotton strips to keep the item from setting off randomly, a simple switch became visible.

“Just one thing, before we let it go.” Mara looked to Ironside. “If you knew we were siphoning water, why didn’t you stop us?”

“You’re not the only ones with problems.” Ironside started to back away towards the tunnel, ready to bolt for his life. “I don’t kill without reason. And until that night, those few days ago, you hadn’t done anything to us. I figured let it be until it became a concern.”

Mara gave a warm, tight-lipped smile. “Then I guess we owe you our lives, Sir Ironside. Let us hope it wasn’t a mistake.”

Ironside returned the kind gesture with a simple nod.

“Okay. Everyone ready?”

Mara was about to throw the switch and bolt when a familiar voice filled the cavern, making her freeze in her tracks.

“I wouldn’t do that, Mara.” Loud and arrogant, the voice reflected off the water’s surface and around the arching domes. “That would cause quite a mess.”

Mara would know that voice if it were drowned in sand. “Jarilo.”

“You guessed it.” Stepping out of the pillar, wisps of smoke at his feet, the second in command of Veritas entered the room with three other shadow-Hylians in tow. “I can’t let you do this, Mara. You’ll destroy everything.”

“Only everything worth destroying.” Cale said. “Ersatz has been moonlighting for long

enough.”

“Silence, day-spawn!” Jarilo seemed on edge, as if some great weight was upon him. “Any more talk from you and I’ll rip out your filthy tongue!”

“Step aside, Jarilo.” Mara stood to her feet and hovered over the Bombchu, shielding it with her body. “You know this must be done.”

“And doom Veritas to darkness and thirst? You would destroy our city, our people gone with it, and for what? To knock down a wall? Ersatz can’t be conquered in such a way. And even if it could, you’d kill us all in the process.”

Ironside gripped the hilt of his sword, Cale did the same.

“You know what?” Jarilo stepped to the side of the pillar. “Go ahead. Drop the roof on our heads. I care not. But...”

The shadow reached into his cloak and retrieved a small red orb, its surface swirling with liquid fire. “Before you do, perhaps you should consider this.”

Jarilo lazily tossed the trinket into the water. Sinking towards the immeasurable bottom, it soon began to pulsate and glow, seemingly expanding as it fell. Then, in a flash of light, the four cisterns became fully illuminated, something hidden underneath the stagnant exterior becoming visible.

Encased in crystal spheres, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people in the water, frozen in a wakeless slumber. However motionless, they still looked alive, suspended in some kind of dark magic. Stepping to the edge of the basin, Ironside’s eyes flared with rage. It was his people, the citizens of Ersatz, all brought to the underground as insurance.

“You see?” Jarilo had a rush of power flood through him. “If you destroy the cisterns, you take all these people with it. Have what it takes, my Lady? Do you have the resolve to murder all these people just to throw a stick at a bear?”

Mara gritted her teeth. “How have you done this, Jarilo? *Why* have you done this?”

“Oh, it’s not me.” The shadow held his hands together like a saint. “I have done nothing, save ensure the survival of our people. It is you that have brought this fate upon the innocent.”

Ironside stepped in front of Mara, staring down the shadow. “You will release them. Now!”

“Oh look! It’s Sir Ironside!” Jarilo chuckled as he said the name, his companions doing the same. “Your Empress thought you to be dead after she sent you into the Creydo. Pity, that her plan didn’t work. The boy was supposed to kill you, his rage and power beyond control. And yet here you are. Must have gotten the upper hand, eh?”

“The Empress?” Mara could see the pieces all falling together. “Zelda...the Sheikah...it was you!”

The realization cut deeper than any war-wound. Mara knew Jarilo to be hotheaded, but didn’t think him capable of betrayal. Up until this very moment, her trust in him was immovable.

“Oh, don’t be so modest, Mara.” Jarilo put his hands on his hips. “I’ve done only what you were unwilling to do. We had that chance to take the city, hundreds of years of planning and secrecy put to work, but then you had to go and bungle it all up by pulling us back.”

“It would have been centuries again before we would have had another chance as good as that one. I, for one, would rather come up to the surface now, rather than later. I’ve earned it. I deserve it. Even if it has to be as a servant to our enemy, it beats breathing in mold for another age.”

“You will pay for this in blood and spirit!” Ironside was livid, well beyond consolation. “If you harm one innocent on this field, you will suffer with not only with the last of your life, but

within your death as well!”

“Me?” Jarilo felt he had total control, and he was loving every moment of it. “I’m not going to do anything. If you destroy this cavern, then it will be you that performs the culling. My hands are clean.”

“As clean as a Bublin’s rear end!” Cale remarked. “Treachery will only go so far, Jarilo. Let’s see you put your hands to work instead of just your rotting mouth!”

With a cocky grin, Jarilo raised a hand. Rushing into the cavern, a platoon of dark-armored soldiers filled the bridges and byways, archers lining the upper walls with arrows strung.

“I guess I have to say it, don’t I?” Jarilo leisurely propped himself against the pillar, thinking himself completely safe behind the power of Ersatz. “Your path ends here.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight - “Thus I Clothe My Naked Villainy”

“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.”

- Hylian Folklore

Link merged in with the soldiers who were desperately trying to bring the towering Water Drake down, causing chaos within their already fraying ranks. The other platoon from the side streets flowing into the square, the bedlam furthered even deeper, giving him some time to formulate a plan to get into the tower as the focus shifted from him to the scaly blue dragon.

The main tower had only one known entrance, it’s already impassable iron-wood doors made even more so with a portcullis of reinforced black steel. In hindsight, getting within the inner cloister of the city was the easy part. The taking of the keep was going to be the real problem.

Noisily entering the skirmish from the southern alleys, a group of horse-mounted knights galloped at the Drake, lances in their grips. Charging fast and straight, striking one by one in a train, their elongated lengths of wood and steel failed to penetrate the thick hide, glancing off or shattering entirely. Men on the ground hacked and jabbed at the monster’s legs and underbelly with daring courage, only to be crushed by the emaciating talons as they tromped.

The Drake seemed impervious to the little splinters, only growing more agitated as the mass of men increased. It’s nostrils began frothing and smoking, the very air seemingly beginning to feel cooler as it reeled.

High upon that upper balcony, the Empress looked to be amused. Link caught her dancing around credulously, entertained with the havoc and death at her feet. Spinning in throes of delight, a childish laughter echoing off the ramparts as her long black cape fluttered and swooned in the air, revealing the crimson red interior as she went. Jumping onto the railing, she appeared to glide as she moved, the ground paying no heed to her drifting steps.

Having it’s fill of pokes and pricks, the Drake inhaled a deep breath into it’s lungs, the resulting pressure change in the air making all the men’s ears plug and ring. At this point all the fighting ceased, the square turning as quiet as a graveyard as all looked up at the dragon with an unknowing anxiety. Friend and foe alike were captivated in fear for their own lives. Even the Empress stalled in her promenade, keeping a watchful eye on the beast as she moved towards the

safety of the doors.

Using the distraction to his advantage, Link carefully skirted the outsides of the square, taking cover behind a short wall. Unsure of what was going to happen, he held his shield in front of his body, curling tight just as the dragon unleashed its fury onto the guard.

Dropping down to its front legs, lowering its head close to the ground, the Drake exhaled a blast of water, mist, and ice, freezing man and beast alike into petrified statues of winter. Swords shattered, shields buckled. The very hair on the men's bodies turned stiff and broke off like kindling. The entire square turned from its pleasant warmth of summer into a veritable frozen waste, the Drake playing the part of the besieging deity.

The ice stopped just short of Link's feet, his Sheikah shield frosted with little jags of crystalline water protruding from the edges. Brushing the chill off his tunic, he slowly stood up and looked around the corner into the square; a deathly garden of blue and white grown dark by the snuffed torches.

The Drake's rage erupted in a fiendish brutality, swinging wildly at the frozen soldiers and horses, shattering their bodies with ease. Shrieking into the air, the beast raised up straight and howled its victory over the frail and the foolish, looking for more destruction to be had.

Seizing the opportunity, Link dashed for the gate of the tower, bringing the Drake's gaze along with him.

Spying another still alive, and the one that brought it here out of its cavern no less, the Drake did not hesitate to take in another deep breath, its head staying lined up with the sprinting boy.

The entire square slick with ice, Link found himself more skating and sliding rather than running, and found it hard to keep his balance. Twice stumbling, he launched to his feet with all the speed he could command and threw himself at the portcullis of the tower, clasping the frigid steel as tight as he could for stability. Turning to face the Drake, he raised up his sword in defiance to ensure it would take the bait.

Roaring as it dropped again to the ground, its sundering weight making the icicles on the ground crack and dance like a spider's web, the Drake expired another arctic blast, Link rolling away just as the freezing liquid hit its mark.

The strips of steel on the gate shuddered and clenched, the sound of scraping metal filling the air. The door behind faired little better, its facade turning brittle and its hinges failing.

Seeing a miss, the Drake kept its feet on the ground and started to run at Link's nimble frame, giving chase right at his back. Circling the square, Link let the beast pursue him across the frigid grounds, leading it back to the door just as he had in the waterway.

Sliding to a stop again right in front of the portcullis, Link turned and faced the charging Drake, holding his shield outward. Waiting for the dragon's teeth to be at his chest, Link dove forward underneath its belly, using his shield as a sled to fly past to the other side.

Unable to stop, the ice on the ground unforgiving, the Drake's jaw snapped shut just as it slammed right through the portcullis and its adjoining archway, giving a clear shot at the tower's concealed interior.

Link got to his feet and moved for the entrance, guardedly keeping his shield and sword ready. To his relief, the Drake wasn't moving. It was still alive, its lungs heaving and mist coming from its nostrils, but it was unconscious and docile.

Looking up to the sky before he entered the keep, Link saw the moon disappearing just over the western wall. Sunrise was near. The shouts of more soldiers entering into the square, he gingerly moved around the bloodied talons of the fallen Drake and entered the tower.

For some reason or another, he knew that he wouldn't be followed. Something truly sinister lived within this citadel, and not even he would have wished to pass through it's arch.

Keeping his shield raised, eyes level, Link buried his trepidation and headed into the maw.

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Cale, Ironside, Mara, and her unspoken bodyguard all huddled close, back to back, creating a protective circle around the precious Bombchu on the ground. If they could somehow find a way to spare the lives of the innocents, they would do it. But Mara knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that sacrificing them to stop the Empress would perhaps be the only way.

Link was hopefully in that upper level now, fighting for his life as well as for hers. Mara could feel it in her soul that he was still alive and well, and could only pray that he stayed that way for a little while longer.

"Make your move, my Lady." Jarilo's tone was callow, detached. "If you surrender now, I'm sure I can...arrange something to suit all parties."

Mara kept a stern lip.

"What, are you going to wait for your friend?"

Mara's fondness for Link betrayed her, her eyes lifting and growing soft.

"He's dead, Mara." Jarilo took his weight off the pillar and stood up straight, his arms still folded. "Even if he survived getting into the city, the guard and the Empress would make short work of him. You knew that when you sent him into that deathtrap. And for what? So you could destroy even more innocent lives with this foolhardy plan of yours?"

"And if his inevitable death wasn't fact enough, sunrise is just a few moments away. There's no chance for him; for you; for Veritas. She will succeed in bringing the great hero back. And then, with Ganondorf at her command, there will be no stopping her by any means. We must yield while we can, or we will all perish. Help me save what is left of us!"

Jarilo filled his demeanor with insincere goodwill, hoping to sway the Lady in his favor. "Even if you did bring the city down, what good would it do? It's folly, Mara. There's no army to invade, no distraction to be had that could help. The fortress is without weakness. It's guard is too strong to let it fall. Sure, you may make a big hole in the wall, but the army within would still be without equal. Not even us shadows at full strength could take the city as it is now."

Mara was finding it hard to keep her will intact. She didn't believe Jarilo, when he said that Link was dead, but something within her was shattered all the same. She had fought so hard for so long, and her grip on the situation was gradually degrading to the point that she almost wanted to believe anything that Jarilo had to say.

Looking up to the archers on the balcony up above, their jagged bolts aimed at her heart, Mara was beginning to feel the despair growing within her.

The traitor walked forward, slowly edging towards the small cluster. "It doesn't have to be like this, Mara. Just come with me and we can come up with a plan. The Empress isn't without enemies. We can overthrow her, beat her at her own game. All we need to do is let her think she has this one victory over us and then we can strike! We can take the city, you and I, and free our people to rule the overworld as gods!"

"You're deranged." Ironside commented. "You give that virago one inch and she'll take two. You'll be dead before you even know it!"

“Come with me, Mara.” Jarilo ignored the other, keeping his cold eyes on the Lady as he inched closer. “Link is gone, lost to the tide. There’s no need for any of this irrational destruction now. Take my hand and we can make this work. Do it for Veritas and your people.”

Seeing Mara was about to break, her eyes looking away, Jarilo reached out a hand and delivered the final gambit. “Do it for your mother. Think of what she would do.”

Fighting it as long as she could, Mara’s resolve crumbled. She knew, deep in her heart, that Zelda would never endanger the life of an innocent to further her own goals. A tear came to her eye as she relented to the inevitable demise of her kind. She slowly began to raise up her hand, ready to take the other’s and save what she could. Maybe he was right. Maybe there would be another chance down the road to free the Highlanders from the stifling underground. Maybe things would get better.

Cale also could see that she was at her wit’s end. “Mara...”

“No, Cale.” The Lady interrupted, pained strings in her voice. “He’s right. We can’t take this on alone. Not now.”

“You’ve made the right decision.” Jarilo’s forged smile turned wicked in his triumph. “Do this for me and all will be set right in time. I promise.”

The last statement bringing her back from the abyss, Mara’s eyes hardened. She had convinced herself that Jarilo, even in his corruption, had the best interests of Veritas at heart. Had he not told her to do it for him, she might have taken him up on the offer and looked on to fight another day. But now, decidedly knowing his purpose to not be genuine, she made up her mind.

Staring him down for a moment, she lurched forward and violently took Jarilo by the wrist, drawing him close.

“Not for you.” Mara whispered harshly into his ear, teeth bared. “For Link.”

Setting into motion events that now could not be stopped, Mara unsheathed a small dagger from her hip and plunged it into Jarilo’s heart with an upwards motion, the man gasping in both pain and shock as the cold steel ripped into his body. Pressing the blade up to the hilt, the shadow’s dark blood slowly trickled down the grip and across Mara’s hand, softly pattering onto the cold, mossy stone below.

Jarilo’s lip trembled as his eyes darkened. A frothy mixture of blood and saliva grew to the corners of his mouth as he uttered his last breath, knowing himself to be doomed.

“Forgive...me.” Jarilo strained to find redemption in Mara’s eyes.

No remorse left for the man she thought she knew, Mara kept a firm grip on the dagger and shoved Jarilo back, the blade tearing free from his body.

Crumpling to the ground, lifeless, the Highlander’s eyes were frozen with that same dolorous glare. All his wants, all his wishes, growing dark as quickly as the life in him escaped.

The entire scene lay quiet in astonishment. Mara stood back and took in a deep breath, letting her anger flee from her and escape into nothingness. Link, by his own actions back in the grove, had taught her that no matter how bad things could get there was always hope.

Letting the bitter rage go, she turned her overcast eyes to the other treacherous shadows in her midst. She didn’t hate them as she thought she would, but instead knew that no matter how dark and crooked they became, they were still of her own and deserved the mercy that their new ruler would not impart.

Link may have been killed, fact or fiction, but the fight in the underworld was far from over. If it needed be, Mara was prepared to go to any lengths to ensure that Ersatz would be brought to it’s knees. Wether by Link’s hand or hers, this night the city would fall.

Seeing the fatal consequences of their actions, one of the other dissenters near the center

pillar took a step back, the other swallowing his fear and standing firm.

Mara looked at them with pitiful eyes, wondering what would drive men that she knew and trusted to lose hope in such a way as to try and destroy their own kind. She tracked their eyes down to her hand, the bloodied dagger still trickling with the blood of its initial victim. Flicking the dark material onto the ground, she looked to her companions to ensure they were ready and at her side.

“For Link!” She yelled as loud as her lungs would carry and charged, dagger at the point.

Following suit, the other three moved to attack, weapons drawn and courage radiating. Cale, his mind still alert, snatched up the Bombchu and cradled it in his off hand, shortsword in the other as they rushed towards the center column.

The offensive nearing the pillar, the two deceitful countrymen desperately signaled to the archers above to release a volley, which they did with lightning speed. Reacting as a shadow should, all four heroes moved into the pillar, phasing through the stone as easily as a sharp blade cuts parchment.

Mara gawked in amazement at Ironside entering the Eventide. Gazing at him as he stood with her inside the solid rock, sigh of relief escaped her lips. She thought he was going to be a dead man for sure when those arrows were loosed.

“What?” The knight responded nonchalantly to the wide-eyed shadow. “You didn’t think that I’ve been around this long and didn’t learn a thing or two about you?”

Mara gave him a smile before leaping back out into the open, slashing at her fellow Highlanders. They defended themselves bravely, trying to contour to the surrounding terrain, but fell short of Mara’s skill and speed. Cale, Ironside, and the other coming close behind, the renegades were quick to be overpowered, their bodies overturning and splashing into the dark cisterns below, sinking towards the bottom.

Seeing their commanders slain, one of the overworlders stepped forward, sword drawn, and yelled to the archers. “Volley!”

To his dismay, nothing came.

“Volley!!” The voice yelled again desperately, this time glancing up at the upper catwalks.

To his horror, lining the rows and walls were the bodies of the archers, each and every one slumped over dead.

“By the Empress!” The man cursed as he fell back into rank, shield to his face. “Take cover!”

Coming down from the upper levels like bats swooping from the cavernous rock, the few remaining Highlanders from Veritas descended upon the dark-armored platoon of Ersatz, their dusky forms hardly visible in the bleak light.

Mara suffered indebtedness to the powers that be. With Jarilo here, villainy’s mantle shed, she thought the rest of the city either turned betrayer or taken captive. It was a sweetly-taken solace to her, knowing that some were still loyal to the cause, ready to take up the fight.

Not waiting for another instant, her faith renewed, Mara flew in to join her fellow underworlders, Cale, Ironside, and the nameless one close behind. If Link had indeed fallen to the blade of evil, then they would do his memory honor and shake Ersatz to its very core.

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Link worked his way to the center of the tower, a winding staircase of red-carpeted stone firmly rooted in the eye. No windows to speak of, the entire climb was dimly lit with flickering torches, each seeming as if it were breathing its last against the cool gray-stone walls.

Spacing the torches were oil paintings of a frightful sort, each twisted, dark, disfigured. Encased in black and red streaked frames of metal, some in odd patterns and design, strange landscapes, black-burning stars, and creatures of unimaginable horror stood in affirmation of the wickedness within the tower. Every few circles up the flight there would be a small table against the inner wall, simple white flowers in ornate vases its only companion. Link thought the juxtaposition strange, something natural and beautiful within this perverted spire, but ignored it best he could and kept his thoughts on each ascending step.

Link cautiously moved up the curling rise, keeping his eyes, shield, and serrated edge at the forefront. He could smell something sickly sweet on the air, a thick, musky perfume of sorts, nearly gagging his breath. It had something else mixed within the scent, a fleeting memory that he couldn't quite grasp. It was faint, hidden deep within the layers of essence, and it bothered him that he was unable to determine its individuality.

Curiously, there were no guards to be seen anywhere in the tower. Link thought for sure that this place would be the most fortified of Ersatz's grounds: the inner sanctum of their sovereign. Left vacant, there was no presence, no track, no breath on the wind to be seen or heard. It was as if no person had ever set foot in this place. Deathly quiet, it seemed abandoned, haunted. The uneven emptiness of it intimidating, it was all Link could do to keep his mind from wandering into dark speculations.

Reaching an open archway, the stairs coming to their end, Link's body felt prickly, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. The archway's leaden door of iron wide open, he could see into a circular room, its floors empty save one feature.

Laying on a crumbling sandy-colored pedestal was the shattered hilt of the Master Sword, wrapped devilishly in a tan scarf: tattered fabric painted with the sharp emblems of the desert people. The grizzled edge of the scarf spoke to its age, possibly hundreds of years.

Accompanying the scarf was a faded red cord, tied to the hilt and gently swaying off the side of the pillar. The woven cord also looked to be quite old, time making it frayed and dry.

Seeing no other soul present, Link gingerly moved into the room. The chamber was large, the full breadth of the tower, and was surrounded by fourteen windows, each veiled by heavy curtains of blood-red velvet. One other door lay at the rear of the room, bolted and shut. Link assumed that it was the door that led to that upper balcony, the Empress on the other side.

Eluding memory, the room seemed ominously familiar.

Moving towards the pedestal, he noticed the cord dangling from the hilt not to be of rope, but of braided hair. Red hair. Exploring it with his Hylian eyes, he immediately knew of whom it once belonged.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine - "Legend"

"And now, finally, the day of destiny has come!"

- Deku Tree Sprout

Surrendering his fear, Link moved to reclaim the hilt of the Master Sword, his heart and head pounding. Down at the base of the tower he could hear men's voices, raucous and boastful as they swarmed over the Drake, oblivious to the fact that it was still alive and could possibly rise again.

Link was glad the Drake was no longer rampaging in the city, but now felt the situation to be even more perilous. With the beast incapacitated, now only he was the target.

He reached up and wiped the beading sweat off his brow. The upper level was remarkably warm, growing even more so as he climbed. In contrast, the stairs coming up the tower were cool, almost chilly, but the crown felt as if it were standing under a midday sun, not just nearing dawn.

Link was near the pedestal now, the hilt within arms reach. Sheathing his sword to give him a free hand, shield still at the ready, he extended downward and stretched out his fingers.

To his surprise, no hit or assassin struck. He had convinced himself that taking the sword would set in motion some trap or warning sign, but the room stayed as empty as before. Relieved, he pulled the hilt close to his chest cradling it tightly.

The piece of Gerudo cloth wrapped around the sword tore and fell to the ground, gently swaying until it crumpled into a tattered pile. The braid gently swung against Link's arm, its fibers prickly to the touch.

Link sighed to have the familiar grip of the blade back in his hands. Thinking himself lucky to have found it unprotected, he moved back towards the stairway, ready to run for the safety of Veritas.

Then, acting outside the realms of reason, the braid bit him.

Link yelped as the strands of hair latched on to his forearm like a leach, blood running freely from the puncture. Invisible teeth rooted themselves firm as he swung his arm wildly, trying to dislodge the snake-like weave.

The pain was immense. Nothing like the sting of an arrow's barb or the hew of a sword's cut, it seemed to bleed Link down to his very core, making him feel nauseated and light headed. It made his mind churn and smelt, his memories and nightmares becoming indescribable from one another. He felt as if he had entered into another world; a world of pain and illusion.

Then, after having its fill, the braid began to burrow into Link's wrist. Forcing itself under his skin like an invading parasite, it wound and wriggled up his arm and across his chest.

Link fell to the ground, no longer able to hold himself up as the pain began to build. He lost his grip on the Master Sword, its decayed surface falling back onto the pedestal with a loud clatter.

Circling around Link's heart for a moment, soaking itself in the rich, plentiful red, the weave twisted upwards and went down link's shield arm, coming to a stop near his wrist. Bulging up as closely as it could, it pushed with all it's strength and exploded out of the arm, blood spraying across the pedestal. Little red droplets ran down the length of the Master Sword's hilt, staining it with that of which it had never tasted; the blood of an innocent.

The braid fell upon the hilt, wrapping itself fiendishly around the blemished rust and smearing blood across the grip and pommel. It seemed to sneer at Link as it curled, acting as if it were protecting it's treasure.

Link nearly fainted from the sudden surge of pain through his system, but stuttered out a sigh of relief as the worst of it passed. He lay there, on his back, staring at the arched ceiling with empty eyes. For a moment there, when the agony had reached it's cruel apex, he almost wished death to have mercy upon him.

"And again, history repeats itself." A slightly accented female voice came from the direction of the pedestal. "Time after time, you have been given the chance to turn the tide in your favor, and yet you had not the cleverness to see it."

Link's tear-streaked eyes looked to the pedestal, no shape or form, save the hilt and braid, present.

"Had you but hid, or even taken your own life, none of this would be." The voice seemed to float in the air, the speaker invisible to the naked eye. "So, in your own quaint way, by fighting me you have, in fact, aided me in my design."

The voice seemed to stop right above Link's face. "The last piece is here at last. For it is not the blood of the maker that we need, that would be useless to me now. Only the blood of the destroyer can open the gate."

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it at first, those pesky Sheikah trying to keep you hidden, but after we ferreted you out I was fully confident. The blundering fools that protect this city are just that, blundering fools, but at least they can follow orders. I see one skimmed your nose, just as I asked."

Link scoffed at the notion that he was just another pawn to be used.

"Oh, come on now, little boy. Didn't you think that if I truly wanted you dead, I wouldn't have let you escape when you were reawakened from the sword?"

Link was ready to fight this apparition, with what little strength was left in him, but knew that without being able to see what he was fighting he was powerless to do anything. Suddenly the thought occurred to him. He entered into the Eventide, but kept himself within the room, only to use the power's ability to give sight beyond sight.

Floating directly above him was the Empress, her face only an arm's length away. Finally seeing her up close, she had very distinct Gerudo traits about her; dark skin, large eyes, a long nose; but what was different from the Gerudos that Link had known in his time was that she had brown hair, instead of red, and her eyes were a peculiar shade of crystalline green.

"What?" The Empress said with a jaded smile. "Don't you like this new form of mine? I wasn't sure of it at first, as what good is a half-blooded Gerudo woman when you are to be King of the world, but it hasn't been without it's...advantages."

Link began to think of the man he had met back in the Sacred Realm. The man who called himself Ganondorf; all the good that was left in him. Remembering how he had to see with his heart instead of his eyes, Link gently let his eyelids close, blinding him to the world. Letting all the walls, lies, and consequences pass through him, he at last got a good look at whom he was facing.

Phantom Ganon.

Still clad in that dark Gerudo armor, his face was that of a skull, long bull-like horns protruding from his forehead. They pointed menacingly at Link's face, burning yellow eyes exhaling all evil from within himself as he hovered in the air.

Link had defeated this being before, back in the Forest Temple on his quest to try and save Saria. It seemed just yesterday that he laid this shadow in his grave, and yet here he was; Ganondorf's darkness in the flesh.

"So, you can see me as I am." Phantom Ganon leered with a skeletal grin "Seems to me that you've met up with my other half."

The shadow pulled away and dropped to his feet, towering over Link with that muscular build. "Well, I guess there's no sense in waiting. Dawn is upon us! The alignment is perfect; the Sacred Realm within my grasp! All I need now is but lift my fingers, and both worlds will join and perish!"

Link pushed to his knees, blood still flowing from the holes in his wrist. He reached up for his sword, but his hand wouldn't grip it. To his horror, all the strength and control in him was gone.

Phantom Ganon laughed. He knew what he had done to Link and that now, after all these centuries of waiting, he was about to take back what was his.

Lifting his right hand into the air, curling it into a fist, a purple ball of dark energy culminated in the shadow's grip. Growing it larger and larger until it was nearly the size of a man, he hurled it at the pedestal and the bloodied Master Sword, the resulting explosion blowing Link back against the wall.

Link propped himself up against the warm stone, holding his shield in front of him best he could. He couldn't parry a thrust from a sword, but at least he could defend himself from flying debris.

The fiery discharge in the center of the room soon pulled in upon itself, glowing brighter and emitting a charring heat. Streaks of purple darkness rippled through the air like banners in the wind, an electric charge making Link's hair stand on end.

"Come to me." Phantom Ganon raised his arms as if he were lifting a great weight, his fists glowing with energy. "Come to me!"

The Triforce of Power began to glow brightly on Phantom Ganon's right hand. Whether it was his intent or not, the power of Din was taking over.

Link steeled himself against the storm as it reached its apex, the very air losing its sound. The entire room became deathly silent, though the power still raged strong as it tore the room apart.

Stone, wood, and mortar all easily succumbed to the building tempest.

Link nearly tumbled off the side as the wall behind him gave way, the entire crown of the tower ripping off into the sky. Falling onto his side, he could see men on the ground, ten stories below, all running for their lives to escape the city. The tail of the Drake was right where Link had left it, but now there was a greater terror loosed upon the city.

Phantom Ganon curled his fists to his chest and then flung them towards the fury, electricity escaping his fingertips. The bolts wrapped around the vortex, caressing it with their power as they were drawn inside.

"Now, watch as I bridge this world and the next!" Phantom Ganon rose into the air, floating high above the chaos. "I command you, Din: give me my desires!"

Reaching its climax, the vortex burst outwards in a blinding array of light and dust, waves

of darkness following in its wake. And then, in the center, a crack of white light appeared. At first it seemed like a trick of the mind, as there was nothing solid there to break, but then it spread across the space like a feral spider's web. Hauntingly random, the streaks of light coursed through the air until it began to cave in, pulling small pieces of rubble with it.

Link grasped the edge of the tower, the slight feeling of him being pulled by his feet coming to him. He hadn't the strength to hold on for long, but hoped it would be enough to stay himself against the draw.

The cracks spread within itself and pulled back until a white hole appeared at the center. It was small at first, fine enough that you couldn't pass your hand through it, but it soon spread until it was nearly the height of the room that once contained it, and as wide as four men.

Link could see what was happening. Phantom Ganon had done it; he had made a permanent link to the Sacred Realm. The Master Sword, the three Spiritual Stones, the Ocarina of Time; keys were no longer needed. All the work, all the blood and sacrifice by the ancients to seal away the Sacred Realm in order to protect Hyrule, was ripped apart within moments.

"Come to me, Ganondorf!" Phantom Ganon couldn't contain his poisonous laughter, his aim near. "Come to me!"

Link stared into the whiteness that threatened to spill out into the world. In it he could see a small shadow, something emerging from the Sacred Realm.

It was a hand.

Phantom Ganon remained in his lofty position and outstretched his own hand, invisible magics gripping the other from afar. Then he pulled, trying to bring Ganondorf's purity out into the mortal realm.

The hand coming from the white soon grew to a wrist, a forearm, an elbow, and then to an entire arm. Then, fighting to remain on the other side, Ganondorf's head emerged, his face wrought with both determination and apprehension. The blinding light that his aura radiated seemed to diminish as he crossed the plain, like water fleeing from the open air.

Link knew that if he was going to do something he was going to have to do it fast. He tried to stand, but the loss of blood was too great. Slumping onto his back, his breath was short. He couldn't even carry his own weight anymore, and he had an overwhelming desire to drift off into a deep sleep.

But then, just as he was about to give in to his longing for repose, a small blue light appeared above his face. At first he thought it to be Navi, there to save him as she always had before, but then he noticed the light didn't have wings. Soon, other lights joined: one red, one yellow, one orange, one purple, and coming up last was one that was green.

Six in all, they hovered above Link, staring down on him like the Goddesses in the heavens. Beginning to swirl about, they flew in close to one another like a centrifuge, spinning faster and faster until they formed one single bead of whiteness.

The bead slowly drifted down and brushed against Link's cheek, its mystique warm to the touch. It stayed there for a moment, content to stay close to the hero, but then lifted back into the air.

"The power of many." A voice echoed in Link's head, sounding like many voices put together. "The power of one."

The light plummeted back to the ground and into Link's chest, nesting firmly in his heart. The hero gasped and convulsed, his muscles tensing painfully as the power surged through him. He spread his arms wide, hoping the entity would escape his body, but it was firmly rooted within him. Gritting his teeth, he screamed out to the universe as he was taken over.

Phantom Ganon took note of the happenings, slightly relaxing his grip on his counterpart. Ganondorf was stuck half way in each world, but at least he could hold himself from entering further into the Mortal Realm as long as his shadow was distracted.

All the pain gone, Link sat up and pushed to his feet. The weakness in his veins replaced with the feeling of ultimate power, he took in a deep breath and looked towards Phantom Ganon, his eyes still closed.

“What is this?” The shadow was stunned to see him on his feet after losing so much blood. “Still got some fight left in you, huh? You want a piece of me, boy?”

Link opened his eyes. Phantom Ganon reeled; shocked by the look of them.

They were completely white.

For the first time, Link could clearly see everything. Not just physical and spiritual essence, but the very fabric of time itself was laid out before him. He could see past, he could see present, he could see future. The very eternities were stripped bare of their veiling, the dawn and setting of time standing disrobed against a backdrop of ageless stars.

Silently, Phantom Ganon dropped to the ground, his eyes wary of whatever this being was that had entered into his circle. Holding his hand out to his side, a vicious spear with jutting blades materialized, its dark metal glinting in the light of the Sacred Realm.

Link reached up to his sword and slowly pulled it from the scabbard, raising it high in the air. Looking upon it, the dark serrated edge slowly began to melt into the empty grooves, making the blade whole and solid. The dark hilt shuddered in his grip and faded to white, all evil deeds done by its edge melting away into memory.

Phantom Ganon felt a shred of fear graze across his mind at the sight that was before him. He took a step back and readied his weapon, unsure of what to expect.

Link gazed at the flawless blade, in awe at the way it had changed from the infamous dark weapon of evil into this pure instrument of good and light.

The Master Sword had been reborn.

“But there is still hope.... The power of the Sages remains.”

- Rauru

Link stood there, motionless, brandishing hope rekindled. He didn't know how, he didn't know why, but the everlasting fire of the Sages burned within him. He could distinctly feel every one of the chosen few, from Darunia to Ruto, layering him with their strength. Even the wispy air of Saria's ocarina flowed through his very core, feeding this growing hunger to spare the world from the approaching mantle of darkness.

The Sages were a buffer, a shield against Phantom Ganon and his power. Blessed with the authority of the ancients, they added their power to Link's, letting him take them as his own.

Link wanted to see them, hear their voices, take up arms with them as he did in the imprisoning war, but he knew that their mortal forms were long since parted. As powerful as they may be, to Link they were just the ghosts of time, sent to help him in his time of absolute need.

Even with that force rushing through his veins, he still felt alone.

Phantom Ganon quaked in his step, that ethereal glow from Evil's Bane-reforged dancing across his face. His lidless yellow eyes burned hotter, deeper, the rage from within him culminating in that eternal hatred for all things pure.

“It's too late, boy!” Phantom Ganon snorted. “It doesn't matter what you bring to the table, you're still one step behind!” The skull-faced creature started to circle around the room, Link keeping pace and Ganondorf between them. “I have...something else that might sway you in my favor. For you see, I am not without my own tricks.”

Reaching behind him, Phantom Ganon retrieved a long piece of rusty metal, it's cancerous face stained red. He held it out so Link could see it clearly.

But a few moments before, Link would have thought it nothing more than a strip of the shattered Master Sword. But now, his peerless eyes keen, it had become so much more.

It was the piece that took Zelda's life. But something was different about it. Link looked beyond the physical, passing through layer after layer of dust and time until he came upon it.

Hidden deep within, there was a faint presence, nestled firmly in the core. At first it seemed very weak, almost nonexistent, but looking deeper in it Link could sense an overwhelming force.

The truth caught him in his breath. Princess Zelda, albeit without her mortal form, was trapped within the shard. Her spirit had somehow been drawn into it, trapping her just as it had him and Ganondorf.

“Yes...you can see it now, can't you?” The fiend began to gloat. “I had one of my lieutenants pick it up for me after those wretched underworlders had left for the cisterns. A good lapdog, that Jarilo, but I am afraid that he won't make it out of that cavern this night. Not with Mara and Ironside against him, anyway.”

Link felt as if his wrath should explode at any moment, but to his surprise he remained firm and tempered. He almost wished it, to release that anger upon the shadow as he did to his own, but was denied. His own imperfections were stripped clean, the Sages and the blade making him again pure. Divine justice was now his command, and no thought nor fear could break him from that immortal kinship.

“Hear me now, Hero of Time.” Phantom Ganon twirled the shard in his fingers, weaving it around his digits superlatively. “Ganondorf was allowed to pass through to the Sacred Realm by nothing short of my mercy. He has had eons to ponder the meanings of existence and his own meager life because I have willed it. Am I not a merciful god?”

“It was quite simple, really, as the Master Sword is the vessel in which the spirit can travel the stars, the Sacred Realm being the destination of all the victorious dead. All I had to do was let him pass and off he went, onto a presumed eternity of immortal bliss.”

Phantom Ganon stopped pirouetting the shard and held it in his right palm. Letting that dark magic flow to his hand, the purple fire engulfed the shard, bathing it in darkness.

“My only mistake was to underestimate your power and the power of the Sages. Taking that into account, the poor Princess doesn’t look like she’s going to receive the same treatment as the Gerudo, I’m afraid. Unless, of course, you yield to me.”

Link tightened his grip on the Master Sword. If anything that was escaping Phantom Ganon’s forked tongue was indeed truth, he would have to hear of it, lest something foul happen to Zelda once more.

“I could make her suffer.” The shadow’s tone was chilling. “You think that death is pain? No...pain is just a word. One that is insignificant on the grand weave. I’m not talking about the pokes and pricks; small discomforts to the living. I am talking about anguish, affliction, agony. If I were to will it, I could very well end Zelda’s continuance altogether!”

Phantom Ganon gripped the shard in a fist and held it up, the Triforce of Power burning. “Have a taste.”

Dark waves started to ripple from the creature’s fist, drenching the sky in their glow. Ganondorf, still trying to keep his hold on the Sacred Realm, seemed to shudder as the rush passed over him, the power of darkness absolute slowly wearing him down like water upon rock.

Link, at first, wasn’t sure what was happening, but then a sharp, piercing pain hit him in his gut. His peerless eyes could see it, in all its grim detail, the torturous sting of grief and sorrow. What made the barb even more cruel was that he could also see that the pain was not his own.

Deep within that prison that housed her, Zelda’s spirit was engulfed.

Link fell to a knee, the pain almost too much to withstand. Everything he had suffered in his lifetime, every last drop of innocent blood that he had seen shed, was immaterial in this scope. It wrenched his heart even more so to know that the pain belonged to another, and that what he was feeling was most likely not but a trace of the true pain.

Seeing the wound inflicted, Phantom Ganon eased his grip on the shard, the energy sparking off and dissipate into the warm air with an audible crackle. “Do you see it now, boy? I am no longer just some petty ghost of a fallen king. I am a god! The only god! Now that the Goddesses have abandoned this rock, the very control of life itself is mine to command! Even you, standing there as you may, will inevitably fall!”

The shadow folded his arms, holding the shard close. “I think I like you in that pose, on a knee before your new master. Be my sword, administer my justice, and no harm will ever come of the Princess. I swear it.”

Ganondorf, awkwardly caught between the two worlds, turned his head and bravely stared his other half in his skeletal face. “If you were truly a god, the power of Din at your bidding, then what would you need with the Sacred Realm? That place holds nothing that you can control!”

“Exactly, brother.” The phantom answered, his eyes still on Link. “I cannot enter that space as I am. But if I were to reclaim that portion of myself that can enter unhindered....”

Link could see it all clearly now. He thought that Phantom Ganon wanted to reclaim his

other half as a mere gesture of his will to dominate, but there was a darker substance lying underneath. If he rejoined with Ganondorf, adding in that speck of purity, and used the power of Din, he could very well enter. Only the Goddesses could tell what kind of destruction he could cause if he were loosed upon a place such as that; the resting place of holy armies long since laid to rest.

The shadow tucked the shard in his belt and tapped the butt of his staff on the stone floor, small fizzles of electricity flowing over the floor with each rap. “Enough of this indolence. It’s time to finish this and birth this world anew!”

Phantom Ganon rose back into the air, taking position high above Ganondorf and Link. Stretching out his hand once more, he gripped the Gerudo with those invisible hands and ripped him out of the Sacred Realm entirely, tossing his body to the ground with a feral violence.

The portal remained open, a curtain of shimmering light into the other world that lay across the stars, inviting any to enter and partake in it’s glory.

Ganondorf gritted his teeth and pushed himself up, looking over to the white-eyed Link. “The power is in you now, Link. The power to end this once and for all. Have faith in that you will know what to do.”

“Yes, let’s see it!” Phantom Ganon unleashed a bolt of electric fire from his staff and hurled it towards the two on the tower.

Both Link and Ganondorf rolled away from the blast, narrowly missing it’s singeing bite. The section of stone floor underneath the portal crumbled and gave way, creating a gap that opened up the core of the tower; the eye of the winding staircase. Link caught a glimpse down below and could see a pile of armored skeletons, piled to nearly the brink, the smell of rot and decay rushing into the open air.

Phantom Ganon threw another bolt down the shaft, dousing the corpses in his wild power. “Behold a new army before you! One, not weak to the sword, one not hindered by pain, one that can claim this Sacred Realm for my own!”

The skeletal warriors all lurched and stuttered to life, climbing their way out of the eye and onto the tower. Yellow eyes glowing like fireflies, they were all equipped with aged weapons and armor, some that hadn’t been seen for centuries. Many of the arms looked so antique that even Link thought them to be ancient; beyond his own time. Some were probably the bodies of soldiers from the great war that happened before Link was born.

“Go, my soldiers!” Phantom Ganon pointed to the portal. “Invade the Sacred Realm! Kill any and all that would stop you!”

Like ants sprawling from their hill, the undead fighters filled the entire space, surrounding the two mortals in their sight. Link and Ganondorf both scrambled to their feet and huddled close together near the portal, back to back, keeping the entrance blocked.

Ganondorf looked up to his other half. “These are creatures of darkness, Shadow! Nayru’s laws that bind these worlds would not allow them to pass through!”

“Bah!” Phantom Ganon scoffed at the notion. “Weren’t you paying attention? Look at their armor and tell me that again!”

Link quickly glanced to the undead and noticed that they all had small streaks or spots of red upon them. Some of it looked fresh.

“The blood of an innocent, the Hero of Time no less, is plenty enough to gain passage!” Phantom Ganon dropped to the ground with immense force, cracking the stone below him and tossing some of his soldiers over the edge and to the city below. “All the work that the ancients did to keep this place from people like me was in vain! Had they the foresight, they would have

destroyed the Sacred Realm altogether!”

“And what of the portal?” Ganondorf kicked one of the undead square in its bony chest and took its heavy blade for his own, ready to fight to stay separate from his other half at all costs. “Once sunrise comes, it will collapse. You’ll be trapped there with no means of escape.”

“Which will give me enough time to make it my new home and build me an army worthy of destroying this world. When the time is right, I will return.”

“Now, my soldiers!” The phantom bellowed to his troops. “Kill them! Kill them both!”

Without hesitation the flood of white bone and steel surged towards the portal, swinging their variety of edged weapons at the two defenders. Crouching low, Link pushed forward into the storm with his shield, hacking and cutting with the Master Sword like a scythe in wheat.

The skeletons all swayed and fell as the white blade sung through the air, the power of it tossing them aside before the blade could even reach them. Waves of light-infused wind sundered them at their feet, pushing them back in a widening arc. Many were thrown over the edge of the tower, tumbling down to the ground with haunting shrieks.

Ganondorf, too, fought with all the strength he could muster, using but brute force to smash and pulverize the wasted remains into dust. Infected with darkness they may be, but they still carried a physical form that could be destroyed and dismembered.

Try as the two did, no matter how many of the undead they destroyed, more gushed from the gap in the floor. It was as if the shadow had dug a hole into the very heart of the world, bringing forth every last fallen soldier that had ever graced the field of battle. Hylians, Sheikah, Goron, Zora; all the races of the world could be seen obeying whatever command Phantom Ganon would issue.

Concentrating solely on the skeletons, Link and Ganondorf were both caught by surprise when the shadow entered into the fray. Swinging his cruel spear with reckless abandon, Phantom Ganon sought to cause confusion and rampant chaos within the battle, hopefully driving the divine power of the Master Sword away from the portal and tearing away any defenses the two could summon.

Leaping towards Link, he dropped the spear downwards like a hammer, the Hylian barely glancing it off with his shield before it hit. Link moved to the side and used the Master Sword to parry Phantom Ganon’s spear and make him lose his balance, giving him a little more breathing room and time to come up with a plan.

Hundreds of swings and jabs were coming from all sides, little nicks and cuts appearing all over Link and Ganondorf’s bodies. Both were competent swordsmen, better than most, but against an onslaught such as this they were nearly powerless.

“Hah!” Using both hands, Phantom Ganon thrust his spear at Link, nearly catching him in the gut. “You’ll have to be faster if you want to defeat all of us!”

Again and again the spear’s triple blades came deathly close to Link’s body, tearing at cloth and skin alike. His senses were keen, stable, and omniscient, but this was well beyond any mortal’s ability to counter.

“Then try this!” The shadow thrust hard and charged, Link sidestepping into the thicket of steel and bone.

Having been the plan all along to get Link out of the way, Phantom Ganon quickly moved to overpower Ganondorf, swinging around to his back and taking his heavy sword from him. Holding the blade to his throat, the shadow breathed a wave of dark energy across Ganondorf’s face, turning a portion of his red hair grey.

Phantom Ganon grinned. “Welcome home, brother.”

Without further hesitation, the shadow pulled the blade to the side and mercilessly slit Ganondorf's throat clean through, deep crimson flowing down his white robes and pattering onto the ground.

"And me."

Tossing Ganondorf's body aside, his phantom plunged the stained blade into his own heart. Gasping at the surge of mortal pain, he fell to his knees, keeping a firm grip on the hilt.

Link moved to intervene, but was cut off by the horde of undead. Pushing them away best he could, he curled himself tight and swung his sword in a wide circle, focusing energy into the blade. The powerful spin attack cleared off nearly the entire tower, giving him a few precious moments to collect his thoughts.

Steadying himself after the spin, he rushed over to a pile of rubble that was near the now-missing tower entrance. Gripping a large block of stone, he shoved it over to the den of the dead, sealing them off temporarily. It wasn't strong enough to hold them off for long, their bony arms jutting through the cracks, but perhaps it would give Link some time.

Turning his attention back to the twin spirits, he was horrified to see that both the bodies of Ganondorf were in the air, a couple of feet off the ground. Being held by unseen hands, their limp forms were moving close to one another, each turning translucent and hazy. Link rushed in to stop the joining, but was too late.

An agonizing shriek cut across the night sky, Ganondorf contorting and writhing as he was again made whole. The base of the tower shook as the power melded, electric branches arcing off from his hands and feet. The stone beneath him charred and drooped, the heat and energy melting the very rock, shifting its properties unnaturally.

Now almost as one, Ganondorf Dragmire opened his eerily bloodshot eyes and stared down his archenemy. A baleful smile came to his lips, teeth bared as the invisible hands gently let him down to the ground, his final act to secure power nearly finished. The phantom was commanding the physical form, but didn't have complete control just yet.

Link could still see the good in Ganondorf fighting to escape, fighting to break free from the evil form that held him hostage. It was deep in his soul, like the far-reaching roots of a tree, but it was still there. Occasionally, Link could see that spirit trying to abscond, faint wisps of spirit reaching outwards, begging for help. Like seeing a ghost that was desperate to flee its body, Ganondorf was embattled within his own self.

"You are mine!" Ganondorf said, falling to a knee as the struggle raged. "You will yield!"

"No!" A seemingly different voice came from the same tongue. "You...can't...have me!"

"You will join!"

"Will...not!"

"Yes!"

The pure side mustered all the strength he could and cried out. "Now...Link!"

Ganondorf looked up just as Link jumped, dropping the blade downwards like a sheet of rain; heaven's punisher. Driving the edge into the ground, the close proximity of Evil's Bane and the sheer force in which it was swung exorcized Phantom Ganon out of his mortal shell, the possessed Empress' body falling limp and to the ground. A wave of white light struck out from the point of impact, igniting nearly the entire city with near-daylight brilliance.

Soldiers below, some being attacked by undead that had fallen from the tower, all covered under the light. They didn't know what it was, and they couldn't see what was happening on top of the tower, but all knew without a doubt that it wasn't good. Many dropped their arms and fled the city, running for their lives out into the wild. Those that stayed remained constant in their

misguided belief that the Empress would be victorious over the Highlander and that Ganondorf would save them once again.

Without physical form to fully command the Triforce of Power, Phantom Ganon staggered backwards, his appearance becoming hazy and his eyes shifting from yellow to red. Now with three enemies upon him; Link, Ganondorf, and the lack of a body; the shadow thundered and shook. Unable to retain all his power, he released his hold on Ganondorf, letting the Gerudo escape his hold.

His lust for power made him think it better to cling to the Triforce. Climbing into the air, some ten feet above the tower, he brandished his spear and made his last stand.

“No!” Phantom Ganon couldn’t understand. “How can this be?!? This cannot happen! I will not allow it! You belong to me!”

Link tore the Master Sword away from its nest, a spray of light and pure energy discharging from the white blade and flying at the displaced shadow.

Phantom Ganon swung his spear to deflect the blast, but could only repulse so much in his weakened state. His dark spirit seemed to react violently to the sudden infusion of light, making him shudder and screech.

“Not this day!” He created a large mass of electric energy at the end of his spear, flinging it at Link with all his might.

“Yes, this day.” Link whispered to himself.

Catching the dark magic with the tip of the Master Sword, Link infused all the power of the Sages into the edge and spun with everything he had, streaks of electricity shooting all over the white sword. When Link came back around to face Phantom Ganon, he released the power in a single stream, aiming the edge at his intended target. A scorching beam of light, dark magic, and divine justice shot out into the night, enveloping the shadow entirely.

Phantom Ganon howled as the stream slowly tore him apart. Piece by piece he dwindled and evaporated, his darkness drowning in the propensity. Exploding into the night, little flecks of dark matter fluttered to the ground like ash; the subtle remains of such a dark countenance.

The Master Sword grew calm, the surrounding air feeling lighter as all the energy dissipated and returned to its cradle. Link was about to exhale a sigh of relief when the crest of the morning sun broke from across the eastern forests, catching his breath.

Link smiled as the warm rays cut through the chill of daybreak, caressing his dirtied face like a mother’s sweet lullaby. It was perhaps the most beautiful sunrise he had ever seen, streaking rays of white and yellow gradients stretching outwards to bid good morning to the realm of Hyrule.

His eyes faded from that pure white back to their original blue, the power of the Sages leaving him and returning to the Sacred Realm. He felt the weight of his body once more come upon him, the immense strength and power fleeting.

It felt good to be himself again. Sheathing the Master Sword, he nodded to himself. His task was done.

Link turned to Ganondorf, his body lying still on the scarred masonry. Moving towards him, he placed a firm hand on the man’s shoulder, shaking him gently.

No response. Link knew what the Gerudo had told him to be true, that one side couldn’t exist without the other. His form was lifeless, vacant. He was gone.

Link fought the tears that welled up in his eyes, tucking them away for another.

On the other side of the tower, the Empress sputtered out a breath, breathing for the first time in years under her own governance. She sat up, clinging to her chest as if a great pain that once abided within her had suddenly vanished, her being unable to believe that it was truly gone.

Link rose to his feet and moved over to her. Reaching out his hand, his body shining with the light of dawn at his back, he stood there like a mountain of power in front of her eyes. The man that had freed her from her mind enslaved. The man who lifted that veil of darkness, bringing the light back into the world. The man who was the true hero of old.

Hesitating for a moment, the Empress took his hand, letting him help her to her feet.

Link glanced over to the boulder that lay over the chasm, half expecting those haggard soldiers to still be fighting to take the tower. But to his relief, the pit had fallen silent as well. Whatever power they contained must have been hushed, giving again peaceful rest to the living dead.

“Look!” The Empress walked over to the open portal, her crystalline green eyes wide in amazement. “There’s someone there!”

Link gazed into the portal, its edges seeming to fluctuate and tremble. He could see Navi, standing there plainly in her true form, blue hair gently swaying. Her smile couldn’t be mistaken for anything but high-spirited. Standing next to her were two individuals, each shimmering brightly.

Link squinted to make out the persons, his own heart soothed upon recognizing them. It was Zelda and Ganondorf.

They both stood there, beaming with warmth and immortal gratification. Released from their prisons, they were set free into the wild hereafter, heroes that would join their kin amongst the wandering stars. Taking their places in the Sacred Realm, they slowly faded as the portal started to shrink.

Just before the last bit of white could escape, Link caught Navi giving him a playful wink, her face disappearing as the stars moved out of alignment. The link to the Sacred Realm closed with a slight glitter of light and sparks, the apex of the roofless tower now standing quiet and alone in the growing daylight.

## Chapter Thirty-One - “The New Day of Heroes”

“Thus, peace will once again reign in this world...for a time.”

- Princess Zelda

Link and the Empress stood there tranquilly, breathing in the fresh wind that was blowing up from the south. It tasted sweet, like a thousand flowers baring their redolent petals for the

world to partake.

The two caught each other's eyes, simply standing their reading each other's thoughts, emotions, and dreams. It was a blissful encounter without any threat of danger or fear, the first either had savored in a long time.

But then there was a rumble. Starting deep and low, small pebbles gently quivering against one another, it soon grew to a resounding deluge of crashing rock and thundering waters.

Link gasped.

Mara.

The eastern wall of the city began to sink, slowly at first, but then quickly as it descended into the cisterns below. Following close behind, the streets and buildings inside the city also fell, rushing to fill in the now vacant space underneath them.

The tower creaked and winced, its edge starting to tilt towards the sun.

Link reached out to the Empress, who took his hand without question.

Keeping her close, Link rushed down the spiral as fast as steady feet would carry, avoiding falling rock and toppled flower stands as they dashed.

The tower falling as one, holding together firmly, Link and the Empress soon found themselves running along the inner wall like a corkscrew as they neared the base, nearly tripping on each other's feet as the cylinder fell.

Bolting out into the foyer, Link saw the Water Drake still sitting there, blocking the exit.

It was awake, staring straight at them.

To Link's surprise, the beast motioned them to take hold of its tail, which the two did without question, holding tightly to the blue and white spines.

The dark presence that held to the Empress also was affecting the Drake, hence why it had grown so large and combative. The shadow gone, it had reverted back to that gentle beast it was intended to be. One that could sense when people were in trouble and what to do about it.

Launching out into the air, the Drake miraculously being able to fly without wings, the three soared into the sky, leaving the city as it crumbled and fell. Each and every tower, all the buildings, every street, all cascaded into the earth, which swallowed it whole until there was nothing left but rubble and dust.

The entire fortress had been destroyed.

The Drake flicked its tail upwards, causing Link and the Empress to fly forward and land on its neck, just above its arms. They both clinched tight as the Drake spun and plummeted into a dive, heading straight for the ground.

Link's heart sunk down into his stomach as they plunged, fearing the solid ground that they would hit below. The Empress, too, looked up at the hero, uncertainty in her eyes.

But then, just before they reached the ruins of Ersatz, the Drake exhaled a breath of ice and water, blasting a hole in the pile of rubble wide enough to pass through. Narrowly shooting through the gap, the three swooped down into the cisterns, their waters apparently not completely buried underneath the fallen rock.

Diving deep, searching through tunnels and waterways that lead to almost any place imaginable, the Drake caught hold of something and returned to the surface.

Bursting from the water, lying low to the ground to let Link and the Empress drop from his shoulders, the Drake released his catch and then jumped back into the water in search of more.

It was Mara.

Both Link and the Empress rushed to her side, the Highlander coughing up water and dust. Link propped her up, pulling her wet hair away from her grey eyes.

“Link?” The Lady of Veritas thought it a dream, reaching up and touching his face. “Is it really you?”

“And me.” The Empress took Mara’s hand in hers. “He’s gone.”

Mara let her head relax against Link’s chest, gentle tears of elation hidden in the streams of water dripping off her face.

The Drake exploded from the water again, drenching both Link and the Empress thoroughly as it landed. Dropping two more finds, it curled and dove back in.

Sitting up, rubbing the darkness from their eyes, Cale and Ironside began laughing incessantly.

“Ironside!” The Empress ran to her Knight Captain. “You’re alive!”

“Hardly!” The burly man thundered. “If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought myself reborn a fish!”

The Drake rescued more and more of the Highlanders that had fallen into the cisterns, those few who had survived the battle and the cave-in.

Soon, the Drake even started bringing up soldiers of Ersatz, their armor shed into the claiming deep. Mixed together, huddling close for warmth in the rising sun, they all stood as one, the descendants of Hylia and Gerudo alike.

Cale, when the fight had become it’s most dire, set the Bombchu at the pillar and let it go, thinking they would all perish under the collapsing roof. To his relief, no one had lost their lives in that underground, as all dove into the waters to escape the tumbling arches.

With help from Cale and Link, Mara rose to her feet, feeling the warmth of the sun on her face. She reached up and put her hand to her cheek.

It was warm.

“How...”

Mara was about to ask why she suddenly felt the seed of shadow within her melt away. All the Highlanders were amazed as their gray hair, pale skin, and ashen eyes shed from them and color came to their bodies. Feeling came to their fingertips. Sight came to their dark-ridden eyes. Life came to their souls.

The tears flowed graciously down Mara’s cheeks as she stared into the sun, an emotion she had never before had the chance to savor.

Link stood next to her, just as sopping wet, an amiable smile on his face.

Mara looked to him, taking in all the feelings that now pulsed through her. Never before had she felt so alive, so overflowing with vitality. She, and her people, had been set free.

Just like her mother, as brilliant as the clearest of waters, her eyes were blue.

## Epilogue

And so the people of Veritas left their darkened home, emerging into the light of the overworld. With Empress at their side, together they rebuilt from the ruins of Ersatz and Veritas, the two races becoming one, living under a single banner.

Mara yielded her position to the Empress, wishing to spend her time living her newly-given life rather than running a country. A choice that the Empress and all the Highlanders celebrated.

A great festival was held soon after the new city was completed, one to commemorate all those lost in the war and to remember why it was fought. Former shadows and soldiers alike drank as brothers, joined together in an era of peace, progress, and blooming friendships.

To honor the land long since parted, the fledgling country took upon themselves the name

of High Rule. Though Link still argued the spelling of it, he couldn't convince them to change it.

Ironside reclaimed his seat as Knight Captain, using his ability to command to help organize and rebuild the city. Having his position and his Empress back, he lived out the rest of his years in unadulterated military bliss.

New roads were built through the mountains, connecting New Kakariko with High Rule. The few Sheikah that survived the attack on the village had rebuilt, just like the rest of the realm, and they resumed their role as protectors to the royal family.

Mara soon left the city, choosing to explore a world she had never known. Cale tagged along as her forest guide, also wishing to see the lands beyond the Creydo forests.

And as for Link, well, that everlasting thirst for adventure never really ebbed.

He traveled to the south, Mara and Cale accompanying him through the long, winding canyon that passed through the remains of Lake Hylia. It stretched for miles, the river cutting its path through rock and time, until it came upon that silver line that Link had spied so many times before, but had never seen up close.

Rolling waves of blue and white crashed upon the rocky shores, the smell of salt filling the adventurers' senses. The boundless call of the ocean beckoned to the three; a land never before traveled.

Loading up a large boat, setting those bleached, swelling sails for the growing horizon, Link, Mara, and Cale shoved off into the immortal beyond, adventure at their feet and the wind at their backs.

And for the first time, no longer a shade of doubt in his mind, Link knew he wasn't alone.

The End