

Super Smash Bros: Armageddon

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The Nintendo Universe is thrown into chaos. Sides will be chosen, worlds destroyed, and lives changed forever. Armageddon has arrived.

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1 - Tragedy

It all starts on a joyous day. The Mushroom Kingdom was celebrating. And why not? It was the anniversary of Princess Peach's coronation. Five years of prosperity, under one of the most beautiful and benevolent princesses in all Mushroom Kingdom's history. And what better day to celebrate this wonderful person than today?

The day had started with a parade arranged by Peach's trusted aid, Toadsworth. Everyone in Mushroom City, and from the rest of the Mushroom Kingdom, was there. The air was filled with the cheers and whistles of all who adored the Princess. All who saw her agreed she looked absolutely radiant and shone with purity.

After the parade, the celebration was moved to the Princess's castle, where the Princess treated a host of honored guests to food, drink, and merriment. Among those honored guests was none other than Mario, the one person to whom she owed so much.

Mario, of course, was more than overjoyed to be in her company. Their relationship was no secret, and all invited knew very well why he was on top of the guest list.

Unfortunately, Mario, being the famous hero he was, had attracted as much attention as his girlfriend, which meant both were hounded to no end by adoring fans and admirers, giving them hardly any time alone. But there was no escaping it, so what else could they do but mix and mingle.

Mario had been telling another story to another eager group of children. This was probably the sixth or seventh time he told this particular story. But then someone yelled, "Hey, more fried mushrooms!" at that, the crowd dispersed and headed straight for the food table. Mario was relieved at the lucky break he got, and felt grateful for brothers.

"Thanks, Luigi," he said to the mustachioed person behind him.

"You looked like you needed some alone time," Luigi replied, slapping a warm hand on his shoulder.

"Well, as good company as you are, I'd prefer some time with Peach. No offense, bro," said Mario.

"No problemo, bro. Daisy's working on Peach," Luigi said encouragingly.

As a matter of fact, Daisy had already extricated Peach and was currently leading her to Mario.

"Thanks for saving me back there," Peach said to Daisy.

Daisy smirked and said, "You always need saving. I just save you from the minor stuff."

They had just passed a dancing couple when Peach commented, "I'm sorry, but couldn't you have worn something more...appropriate?"

Daisy had worn a tight pair of orange jeans and a yellow short sleeved shirt that matched. That's how Daisy was; never formal or proper, and it irritated Peach to no end.

"Well, these are my new favorite clothes now. I just grew out of that silly old dress," she said to Peach.

"I'm serious!" Peach replied, "I mean, you're next in line for the throne. You should at least try to act the role of a Princess."

Daisy simply shrugged and said, "I'll worry about that when it comes. I mean, it's not like you're going anywhere anytime soon."

Peach decided to say nothing in reply. She realized that's how Daisy was, but there was nothing wrong with taking some things seriously. Still, she couldn't help but envy Daisy's spirit.

Daisy wasn't the only one feeling carefree. Everyone at the party was enjoying it to its fullest. So much so, that they failed to notice the strange cloaked figure standing close to the wall. This uninvited person had slipped in with the crowd, literally unnoticed. All the guests were too busy with having fun to even see him, and they probably wouldn't have suspected anything of him. They were all here to celebrate

Princess Peach, so they wouldn't have thought him being here for any other reason. But he did have another reason. He was here on a job; one that would pay off greatly. True, the deed he was about to perform was despicable, but he always made it a rule to ignore morals. Though Peach was the life of the party, she wasn't the reason he was here. The one he was searching for was just ten feet away from the Princess; the one in the red hat and blue overalls.

So that's Mario, huh? Not the kind of guy I expected. Ah, well...

Even when he considered all the stories he heard, he still couldn't believe this fat, mustached, plumber guy was all his employer made him out to be. If his assumptions were right, this would go over with no trouble whatsoever. Of course, he made bad assumptions before.

That moment was when he made his move. Normally he would've preferred him to be alone, but he knew how close he and the Princess were, and if they got together, he'd never be able to get him alone again. With that in mind, he drew the pistol he hid in his cloak and took aim. He hoped it would only take one bullet; less of a mess that way.

His hopes, however were dashed. One guard, who was next to Mario at the time, was a little more observant than the others, and saw this cloaked figure take aim at Mario. And fortunately for him, this guard reacted a second faster than the unknown assassin.

"Get down!" the guard yelled as he pushed the oblivious Mario to the floor. No sooner had he done this than a shot rang out and a bullet whizzed past Mario's ear. The bullet hit the wall, and caused the whole room to go into a frenzy.

At this point, discession was no longer possible or necessary, meaning he could finally remove his cloak and draw the weapon he was more accustomed to.

Both Peach and Daisy, who had heard the shot, froze in their tracks. Peach's first thought was for Mario, and looked frantically about to see if he was hurt, but Daisy, in the meanwhile, was trying to get Peach someplace safe.

Mario was only vaguely aware of what had just happened. As far as he knew, someone fired something at him, and he was only just barely saved. As he looked about himself, all he could see was a storm of rushing feet. It wasn't until Luigi pulled him up that he was able to get a good look at his attacker.

"That's him, bro!" Luigi exclaimed, pointing at the only 'guest' who wasn't running. It only took a minute for the entire ballroom to empty and only a hand full of people were left. Peach and Daisy found shelter behind a buffet table; a number of the castle guards had surrounded the assailant; which left Mario and Luigi, standing their grounds.

So far, the mysterious attacker made no efforts to resist, but the guards were still apprehensive.

"Just who do you think you are, fiend?!" one of the guards barked.

"I am," the cloaked assassin told them, "your executioner."

No sooner had he said this when he threw the cloak off and whipped out the blade he was hiding under it. What followed was a flurry of slices that sliced open all the guards around him. They fell where they stood.

All watching couldn't believe what had just happened. Mario was silent, while Luigi felt his stomach turn. Under the table, Peach had to cover her mouth to keep from screaming. Daisy was on the verge of vomiting.

But just as frightening was the true face of their enemy. He was taller than Mario. He also wore a blue jump suit, with a sheath for his sword at his waist. The sword was short and slender, and designed in a fashion that was bizarre to Mario. What was most bizarre about this character was head. He wore a white helmet with only one eye hole in the middle of it. It gave him the appearance of a demon.

He then pointed at Mario and asked coolly, "You're Mario, right?"

Mario nodded, bracing for what was to come.

"Nothing personal," the assassin continued, "but you need to die now."

With that, he lunged forward, his sword ready to slice Mario like it had the guards. But Mario was a fraction faster, and had leapt away in time to dodge the attack. Luigi had also jumped away, and threw a fireball at the assassin, who easily deflected the attack and refocused on Mario. He had just turned his head when Mario's fist connected and sent him flying backwards into a fountain.

Almost immediately, The assassin recovered in mid-air, rebounded towards the ceiling, and then pushed off against it to dive straight towards Mario. Mario then dodged the attack, and responded with a flying kick that knocked his opponent into the opposite wall.

It was at this point the assassin began to understand Mario's reputation. But he wasn't about to back down now; there was his own reputation to think about.

"Don't think just because you got a couple lucky shots that you can beat the Grey Fox!"

Mario was undaunted, "Then come on!"

With that, both fighters began flying all about the room, striking each other with each pass. It was almost dizzying watching the whole fight. Luigi wasn't worried; he'd seen his brother in action, and knew all too well his brother would win. Peach and Daisy were of the same opinion, of course.

It was a span of a few minutes before they finally stopped. Both had just had one last lunge at each other and stopped on opposite sides of the room, each staring the other down. Mario had suffered a couple cuts from Grey Fox's sword, but nothing fatal. Grey Fox on the other hand had taken a fair amount of blows from Mario, making the match far more one-sided than he would have preferred. Still, failure wasn't an option. Getting arrested here would probably been not so bad; the denizens of this world, Grey Fox surmised, most likely didn't believe in corporal punishment, but returning to his boss empty handed would have meant something far worse, worse than even being stiffed on the bill, and Grey Fox wasn't about to think about that option. On the other hand, what else could he do? He was ordered to get a pure soul, and the target he was told to go after was pummeling him silly.

Then, he noticed something, or rather someone, just over Mario's shoulder. He soon recognized her as that Princess Peach he had heard the other guests talking about. The way they praised her almost made her out to be a saint. Whether that was just celebrity hype or not, Grey Fox had no way of knowing, but if her soul was pure enough...

Well, he didn't say it had to be this guy's soul.

In a flash, Grey Fox lunged again, his sword poised for a stabbing motion. Mario leapt to the side, dodging the attack and preparing to launch one of his own. But Grey Fox didn't stop, and kept flying until he reached his new target.

It all happened so fast. Peach barely got a gasp out before Grey Fox's sword plunged right through her. Daisy only had time to turn and watch in unspoken horror. Luigi felt his blood drain from his face, and his voice leave him. But horrified most of all was Mario. It was only now that he remembered Peach and that she was still in the room. The thought of what he had not been able to stop made his entire body go numb.

"I was supposed to take your soul," Grey Fox yelled to Mario as he pulled the sword from her body and a small orb from his pocket, "but her's will do fine, I guess."

Then, small wisps of blue mist began ebbing from Peach's mouth and nostrils and into the orb. As it happened, her eyes began to grow dim, and her skin grow pale.

At that instant, Mario lunged in a blind rage he never felt in his entire life.

"LET HER GO!!!"

But as he did so, Grey Fox flung a pepper shaker that had been on the table into Mario's face, and he fell to the ground, blinded and bleeding. Daisy in the meanwhile had fallen backwards, still silent. Her dearest friend was in danger; she needed to do something. But what? Any action Daisy could have taken would have resulted in her death too. The thought of death terrified her to no end. She wanted to scream, but couldn't. It was like the fear was a snake wrapped around her neck and waist, squeezing

the air out of her.

Luigi was the next to attack.

"YOU MONST-!!"

Luigi never finished his sentence. It was then that Grey Fox threw his sword in a frisbee like motion towards Luigi. In his anger, Luigi was unable to react in time, and the sword found it's mark, wedging itself into Luigi's head and cleaving it like a watermelon. Luigi's body fell to the ground and slid a short distance before coming to a final rest.

Mario had wiped away enough glass, pepper, and blood to open his eyes to a tiny slit, just in time to see his brother's final moments. Had it not been for the pepper still in his mouth, he would have cried out in double pain; but he could only manage a soft, strained yell.

It wasn't long before the blue mist stopped ebbing from Peach's mouth and nose, and Grey Fox's mission was complete.

"This should do just fine," Grey Fox said smugly as he dropped Peach's lifeless body. Then, he turned to Mario, who was still struggling to clean his face, and said, "Just business. Nothing personal."

And with that, he leapt through the stained glass window that shone over the entrance to the ballroom and was gone. Mario had cleaned up his face enough to see and crawled to Peach's side, clinging to hope beyond hope that she was okay.

"Peach," he managed to sputter, "Peach..."

But the Princess didn't respond. She simply lay there, the color of her rosy cheeks now turned to white ash, and her eyes now completely devoid and blank. Mario felt his heart start to bleed, and the memories he had of him and Peach together beginning to grow cold and lifeless. He then turned to Luigi. He, too, lay still, the sword still lodged in his skull and blood leaking onto the floor. It was a double blow that wounded Mario more painfully than any other wound he could have recieved.

As the reality of the moment sank in, Mario forced air into his lungs and roared out his rage...

2 - The Plot

"You insufferable idiot!!"

Grey Fox was flung once again through the air and slammed right into the brick wall. He felt his bones begin to strain to the verge of breaking. He expected as much; you don't anger a mutant turtle without some form of consequence.

The mutant turtle in question, Bowser, was none too happy with the news, despite the fact their plans wouldn't be deterred.

"I told you to kill Mario! Not Peach!" he bellowed. His angry voice seemed to mix with his reptilian growls, making it hard for Grey Fox to fully understand him.

Struggling to his feet, Grey Fox pointed at Bowser and said, "Look, you needed a pure soul? You got your pure soul! Whose one it happened to be shouldn't matter!"

"It matters to me, blast you!!" Bowser roared, small embers popping from his mouth, "I wanted Mario out of the way! You only completed half of the job!"

"Well if somebody," Grey Fox retorted, making sure his words reaked with sarcasm, "had taken the time to more properly warn me about this fatso, then maybe we wouldn't be in this mess, would we?"

Bowser was beside himself; this was the first time he'd ever had to put up with insubordination of this manner.

"I oughta toast you right here, you-!"

"My Liege," a voice called from the shadows.

Bowser turned in time to see his other new 'friend'. From the shadows he emerged: a skeletal being wearing faded armor and holding a bizarre staff in his bony hand. His eyes glowed with an eerie malevolence that intimidated Bowser, if only by a tiny bit.

"What, Pious?"

"This...behavior is most unbecoming of you, my Liege. It is not a total loss; with this pure soul, I can complete the ritual, and you shall be granted your heart's *true* desire."

Bowser fell silent and looked down at his fist as he recalled the answer to this question: power.

"This essence you're creating for me...it will make me stronger? Without a shadow of a doubt?"

"But, of course, my Liege. More strength and power than you could possibly imagine," Pious told Bowser assuringly, "and with it, you shall rule the kingdoms of this world with an iron fist!"

Bowser raised his vision, and seemed to stare off into emptiness, "For years, the Koopa Clan has been nothing but the butt of every joke known. We've been bottom feeders, living off the scraps of the Mushroom Kingdom's wonderous fortune," Bowser punctuated this point by slamming his fist into the wall, creating a clear imprint, "But no more. After today, I will raise my kingdom to the highest level of respect and glory! The Koopa Clan will no longer be mockery, but a name to be feared by all generations!!"

"As it was meant to be, my King," Pious added, bowing in humility.

Grey Fox wasn't as easily moved, "Well, that's fine and all, but where's my payment?"

It looked as though Bowser would throw him again, but Pious intervened this time, and addressed Grey Fox's request.

"For bringing the soul, 500 coins," he said plainly as he produced the bag of gold.

"But our deal was for 800 coins," Grey Fox said irritably, to which Pious replied, "800 coins for the soul *and* Mario's death. I see no reason to pay you for half a job completed."

It looked as though Grey Fox was about to protest, but he then decided against it after seeing the look

Bowser shot at him.

"Fine, but what about my ride home?" Grey Fox asked.

With that, Pious pulled out another item: a blue, glowing, cube. The inside crackled with electricity around a small whirling cloud.

"Your transport, as requested," said Pious. Had the talking skeleton been able to, he might have been wearing a sly sort of smile.

Grey Fox probably should have been more cautious, but being anxious to return to his own world, he hardly suspected anything. He grabbed the cube and gave it a good squeeze. Instantaneously, the cube crackled to life, and began to vibrate in his hand.

Then, without warning, bolts of energy shot along Grey Fox's arm, and he felt his entire body begin to tingle as if he were being electrified.

"What the hell-?!" Grey Fox exclaimed.

Pious, watching him coldly, simply stated, "You're just reward, Mr. Grey Fox."

Before Grey Fox could resist, a vortex opened up around the cube, and it began swallowing up his arm. Grey Fox tried to pull it away, but the force gripped him tightly, and he was eventually pulled in. His entire being was warped and bended as he was sucked into what seemed like a gaping maw of emptiness. And then, he was gone.

"Good riddance," Bowser snorted.

"But, of course, my Liege."

* * *

Mario sat alone on his bed, thinking on what had happened. It all seemed like a bad dream; he wanted to believe it was. He'd even gone to bed three nights before, praying that it was; hoping that in the morning, his brother would be in the bed just opposite of his, and that his love would be in the castle, probably baking a cake just for him. But it wasn't to be; his brother's bed was empty, and his love was not waiting for him.

Since those three days, he'd been secluded in his house. So many regrets, so much sorrow; it was more than a man like him could stand. For so long, he'd wallowed in his depression. It wasn't until he'd done some reflecting on past adventures that he came to a sudden realization: Bowser.

This was his fault, Mario realized.

And for Mario, it made sense. Who else would commit such a despicable crime? Who in the entire world would want to hurt Mario this badly but that overgrown, koopa, beast. No one in the world could match the kind of evil he was capable of. And if Bowser was willing to go this far, who knew what other atrocities he'd commit.

No, Mario thought to himself, *I will not let him. His evil ends now!*

With that, Mario jumped off his bed and set forth on his new mission. Going over to his clothes drawer, he pulled out his cape and tied it around his neck. He also pulled out his trusty hammer and strapped it to his belt. This would be his toughest mission of all. But nothing was going to stop him. With his preparations complete, he was out the door, and launched himself into the sky.

Next stop: the Koopa Kingdom.

Three days had passed. Pious had still not completed the ritual, and Bowser was starting to wonder if he would ever be finished. That wasn't to say Bowser just sat around, of course. He kept himself busy: building up his army, training his army, overseeing fortification of his castle, that sort of thing. This was, of course, at the advising of Pious. Bowser never really would've thought of doing these things on his own, and it was a wonder to Pious how Bowser would've ever gotten along without him.

But despite all this, Bowser still wanted his power now, not later. And to Bowser, three days was enough for one ritual.

Bowser burst through the door into Pious' chamber for a sixth time and barked, "Well?!"

"Please, my Liege. These things take time," Pious replied, with more patience than he felt, "I will inform you when the ritual is complete."

Bowser was about to go into more ranting when he was interrupted by a tiny, meek, voice from behind him.

"M-m-master?" the voice stammered.

Bowser turned to find one of his koopa servants quivering right behind him.

"What is it?" he bellowed.

"It's M-Mario, S-sir...He's...c-c-coming...here," he said, ducking at the moment he finished his sentence. But to his surprise, and relief, Bowser didn't explode, but simply told the koopa, "Tell the others. Prepare for battle."

At this, the koopa saluted, said, "Yes, sir!" and sped off with his news.

Bowser shot a glare at Pious and said, "I want that essence by the time Mario gets here, you hear?"

"By your command, my Liege," Pious replied, quietly so as to not sound testy.

With that, Bowser slammed the door and stalked off.

"Pathetic fool," Pious whispered when he was sure Bowser wouldn't be able to hear, "After tonight, I will be the one to rule over not only this world, but all worlds, not that insufferable twit."

3 - Birth of Darkness

It didn't take long for Mario to reach Bowser's castle. It's location wasn't exactly a secret, and it was a wonder to Mario why he hadn't done this long ago. Maybe if he'd had, then...

But he couldn't think about regrets now. He needed to be focused. There was a job that needed to be done, and he was going to see it through to the end, no matter what.

He pushed his thoughts aside for the time being and got back to surveying the castle. To be honest, he was a little surprised. Bowser had taken new measures to protect his castle: new guard turrets, catapults, search lights; far more threatening than the usual spikes and statues of himself. Mario had never thought that Bowser would've been capable of being this prepared. No doubt, further evidence of his growing evil.

Mario was now sure more than ever that he needed to be stopped. And he was going to stop him...no matter what.

"Daddy?"

The tiny voice caught Bowser off guard. He turned in time to see his son's smiling face.

"Junior!" he said with more joy than he felt, "What're you doing here? You're supposed to be in the safe room."

"I just wanted to say good luck to you," Junior said, "I just know you're gonna get that Mario this time, right?"

"You bet," Bowser replied, feeling comforted by his son's confidence.

"And after you beat him," Junior continued, "the Koopa Clan will be better off, and you, me, and Mama Peach can be a family, right?"

Though he didn't show it, those last words cut Bowser like a knife.

"Of course, son," he said, patting his innocent son on the head, "Now off you go."

With that, Junior bolted off down the hall, calling back as he left, "I love you, Dad!"

"I love you, son," Bowser called back, and then his son was gone. It wasn't often that Bowser felt guilty about anything. This, by far, was one of those most rarest occasions. One would suppose it's the kind of guilt that comes with fatherhood.

He knew he had to tell him sooner or later about Peach. It would probably be as hard as the time he needed to tell him that Peach wasn't his real mother, if not harder. Bowser thought he'd gotten over calling her 'Mama Peach', but he supposed that he never really gave up hope for a real family.

Bowser quickly pushed those thoughts from his head. This wasn't the time to worry about family. He needed to focus. Mario was coming, and he was going to be ready for him. After tonight, everything was going to change. The Koopa Clan would be rebuilt, he would be granted his power, and, maybe, he'd be able to give Junior the family he deserved. After all he'd learned from the past few days, anything was possible at this point.

All he needed to do, was to get stronger. Then, nothing would be impossible...

All of a sudden, a horn started to blare throughout the castle, which meant only one thing: Mario had arrived.

So it begins...

He didn't have a strategy. He didn't need one. Mario was just that kind of guy: so long as he could fight, there wasn't any need for planning.

Flying headfirst into the teeth of the castle's defenses, he deftly met the opposition with not confidence, but determined resolve to win. The catapults hurled countless bob-ombs and the turrets fired numerous bullet bills at him, but he met them head on, not avoiding them. Throwing his punches left and right, he plowed through all the projectiles with little effort.

It wasn't long before he finally punched through the castle wall and charged right into the heart of Bowser's army. This was another surprise: this army of his was larger than most other armies he'd created; only further evidence of his growing evil. Mario had shown mercy before, but he would not do so this time. As soon as the koopas charged, he charged as well, and let no one stop him.

Bowser watched Mario from the window in the main tower. It was almost disallusioning seeing Mario this way. His loyal koopas showed great bravery against him, but did little to deter him. Koopas were flying left and right, flying through the air and slamming against walls; Mario was completely obliterating his enemies.

But it wasn't his strength that surprised him; it was his ruthlessness. Mario was changed now; he no longer held back, and he didn't show mercy. He'd come to express something Bowser never thought was possible: hate

There was only one thing left to do...

There were so many of them, and they threw themselves at Mario with single minded devotion to their master. But it didn't matter; Mario simply saw them as extensions of Bowser's evil and needed to destroy them. He never really thought about what he was doing. All that mattered was destroying them. It became almost second nature to him.

The koopas themselves never stood a chance. Their numbers were meaningless against such terrifying rage. It's not known how long it took, hours or seconds, but the entire army of koopas was desimated. All lay on the grounds of the castle, shells cracked, bones broken; they simply laid in piles, either wounded, dying, or dead.

Only Mario stood among them, covered in blood. Not his blood; their blood. He didn't notice, or care. All he was aware of was what he'd felt during all that fighting. He never became aware of it until just then, when he had finished everything. He realized that he did feel something during his fight:

It was pleasure.

He pushed the thought aside, and got back to his mission. He blasted past the doors to the main hall and flew right in. And there, waiting in the shadows...was Bowser.

"Well," Bowser said, "you certainly know how to make an entrance."

Mario simply glowered at him, fire burning in his eyes.

"Let's see here," Bowser continued, "hate, anger, ruthlessness...you're becoming more like me than you even realize."

Mario still didn't answer, though it looked like he twitched when he heard what Bowser said.

"So, this is where it all ends, yes?" Bowser said, his tone sounding more relaxed.

"Tonight," Mario finally said, "you will die."

"Killing," said Bowser, raising an eye-brow, "Now I've truly seen everything."

Mario said nothing, but simply pulled his hammer off his belt and gripped it tightly.

"Like I said, you die tonight," Mario finally said coldly.

"Somehow," Bowser said as he cracked his knuckles, "I doubt it."

With that, their fight began. Mario flew at Bowser and swung his hammer with all his might, bringing a storm of pummels upon his opponent. Bowser held his ground, throwing punches of his own to counter Mario's pummels. Both attacks were coming so quick, they almost seemed to blend into each other. It wasn't until Bowser landed a hit that the exchanges was halted. Bowser's punch connected with Mario's

jaw and slammed him into a stone pillar.

Bowser then followed up his punch with a stream of flames from his mouth. The force his fire breath obliterated the pillar, but Mario was fast enough to dodge the attack and come at Bowser again. Mario tried again to land a blow with his hammer, but Bowser responded by pulling into his shell and spinning at incredible speeds, creating a small tornado attack that blew Mario back a small ways.

Mario began to feel more rage flow through his veins. This rage fueled the fire burning within him, giving him strength he never felt before. This power was comforting; it, surprising as it sounded, helped ease his aching heart, and made him feel...warm.

His new strength flowing throughout his body, he charged forward again, this time with more speed than before. It caught Bowser off guard, and he was blasted hard against the wall behind him.

Mario didn't stop there. It was like the fire inside was edging him on; urging him to beat this hated turtle until he broke the shell. Without missing a beat, he lunged forward, grabbed Bowser by the upper jaw, and threw him into the ceiling. Bowser flew right through it, clear to the second floor.

But Mario kept after him. Thrusting the head of the hammer into Bowser's gut, he forced Bowser into the third floor, then the fourth floor, and then even higher until they broke through the roof top of the main keep.

Bowser was in the air for a matter of seconds before Mario brought on another assault. Flying at blinding speed, he flew all about Bowser, pounding him with the hammer with every pass. Bowser felt his shell begin to crack under the pressure, and he began to fear the worse.

Mario then slammed Bowser back into the roof, blowing him threw the many floors until he was back in the main hall. Mario flew right into the hole and stopped right above Bowser. He wasn't sure why, but seeing Bowser lying there, bloody and bruised almost beyond recognition was...satisfying.

By some miracle, Bowser managed to survive the severe beating he'd just recieved, and squinted up at Mario through a bruised eye.

"What are you waiting for?" he managed to whisper through his broken teeth, "Finish me."

Mario simply stared at him, not saying a word.

"Go ahead and kill me," Bowser continued, "that's what you said you'd do, isn't it?"

Mario still didn't answer.

"Or maybe it's that you recognize the evil within you," Bowser continued still, "and are unwilling to surrender to it?"

At this, Mario raised his hand, pointed his palm right at Bowser's face and said, "You're the evil one."

And then, he fired a blast of powerful fire energy right into Bowser's face. It was over in an instant. Mario looked down at the corpse of his defeated foe. The rush and exhilaration of fighting stayed with him. He didn't fully understand why this was so, only that he began to cherish this feeling.

Mario then felt the presence of another person in the room. He looked up and there, emerging from another doorway was the strangest sight Mario had yet to behold.

Pious had only just finished completing his work, and had gone to the main hall to watch the fight between Bowser and this Mario person he seemed so adamant about destroying. He'd arrived in time to see Bowser crash through the ceiling, and Mario rush in. Truly, Mario had earned his reputation, but still, Pious never expected such intensity of such a warrior; at least not from this world.

It wasn't until Mario actually carried out the execution of Bowser that Pious recognized something else in his persona. It seemed to him like the pure hearted hero had been tainted with darkness. Still, he felt confident this person would not pose a threat. Not with the new power he possessed.

When Mario looked up, his eyes met with Pious' and the stand off began. Pious could tell Mario was taken back by his appearance. It wasn't surprising; he'd recieved that sort of reaction multiple times.

"Well," Pious spoke, "this is the great Mario? Your reputation precedes you."

"Who are you?" Mario demanded, his voice like an icy wind.

Pious was somewhat amused by this; he wondered how much he'd be surprised if he realized what had happened to him.

"You truly have given into darkness, haven't you?" Pious asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mario replied, rather defensively.

"You can't hide it," Pious stated matter-of-factly, "I see it as clear as day. You've been touched by darkness."

"That's not-!" Mario started, but Pious interrupted him by asking,

"Did it hurt when you lost your princess?"

The question cut into Mario like a cold blade. So much so that his voice had left him.

"Yes, I see it. The pain runs deep, doesn't it?" Pious continued, relishing in the moment, "It's the kind of pain that can give birth to such darkness."

Mario remained silent.

Pious continued on, "Pain gives birth to depression. If one gives into that depression, it can manifest itself into fear, and then anger, and then hate, until all those emotions mix into each other, causing more suffering than most men can stand to bear.

Mario looked down, letting Pious' words sink in.

Pious was far from finished, "To relieve this pain, men find that destroying the source of that pain is the only solution. And so they go forth to destroy it, throwing caution to the wind, giving in to their darker tendencies."

"And when the destruction they wrought on their enemies ends, they realize the pain does subside, but only while causing pain and destruction. I'm sure you're aware of this fact all ready?"

Mario looked at his hands, only now noticing the blood soaked into his glove.

Pious went on, "Upon realizing this fact, they decide it is better to cause pain than to live with it for the rest of their lives; thus, they give themselves completely to darkness. Just as you will."

The words echoed throughout Mario's psyche, and he felt cold, dull, pain begin to rise in his heart.

"The pain returns, doesn't it?" Pious asked with utmost certainty.

Mario nodded, only slightly aware of the situation.

"You see this?"

Mario looked up, and saw for the first time the small statuette that Pious had created.

"This is the power of a god, from my world," Pious exclaimed, "The power of the Master of the Planes: Ulyaoth!"

It glowed with an eerie light, one that seemed comforting to Mario somehow.

"With its power," Pious continued, "I can bring all of this world, and many other worlds under my control!"

Mario wasn't sure he heard right, "Other...worlds?"

"Yes," Pious explained, "other dimensions, other realities, other worlds. You didn't really think me and that Grey Fox fellow were always from this world, did you?"

The name sparked a small flame in his mind, "He was...from another world as well?"

"Yes," Pious replied, "and there are countless other worlds out there, with villains and demons far more vicious than he could ever have been."

Mario only barely heard him; his mind was racing as he considered what he'd just heard.

Pious didn't seem to notice, and kept on talking, "With such dangerous foes out there, establishing my rule could prove difficult. You see, Ulyaoth's power allows me to create portals to other dimensions, and thus, giving me the power to travel to wherever I please. But one god's power alone can only do so much."

Mario looked only vaguely interested at this point, so Pious brought his thoughts to their point, "What I

mean to say is: if someone as powerful as yourself were to join me, then control of the universe would be all that easier."

It was this point that got Mario's attention.

"Join me," Pious continued, "and I can give you the freedom from that cold pain that you suffer from. You will never have to be in pain ever again."

Mario was silent for a short moment, then said, "I could do that...but I have a better idea," and lunged forward, with speed beyond Pious' ability to react, and pinned Pious against a pillar by the throat, immediately grabbing the essence from his grip.

Pious at first was silent in disbelief, but then began to laugh insanely as the moment sank in.

"I was right!" he exclaimed, "I was right!"

Mario simply stared coldly at him and said, "You find this funny?"

Pious simply said through his laughter, "Surely you must see the irony in it? You who have spent your life fighting the darkness, now resolved to bring darkness into the world? It is simply hilarious!!"

Pious continued to laugh hysterically, and managed to sputter out, "You proved me right!!"

It was at this point that Mario had had just about enough, and threw the laughing fool to the ground and destroyed him with a blast of fire from his hand, obliterating Pious' body completely.

Mario then looked down at the essence in his hand, and relished in the comfort the warm glow provided. It was like a warm blanket that wrapped around him and drove away the cold pain that had plagued him these past few days.

Next, he thrust into his chest, for reasons not known even to him, and the essence began to sink into his body, until he completely absorbed it whole. Mario had never before felt such warmth flow throughout his body in all his life.

All of a sudden, his mind began to crackle like fire crackers. His eyes began to grow fuzzy and the warm feeling began to turn into a burning sensation. All of a sudden, his eyes glowed as new knowledge began to seep in from the essence he'd absorbed. The sensation had only lasted a few moments when finally, it stopped.

Mario had fallen to his hands and knees, and breathed heavily as he took in the sensation he now felt: power. His mind was now sharp; he now had understanding beyond understanding, and it made him feel stronger, more in control.

Everything made sense now, and Mario was astonished at how little he knew before. Now realizing what he needed to do, rose to his feet, and strode out of Bowser's castle, with a new resolve; a new ambition that would ease the pain he felt, and would define his new life:

I will rule the universe.

4 - Rise of an Empire

Daisy had been sitting in her room alone for quite some time now. It was the day of her coronation, and the ceremony was quick approaching. Daisy had felt like throwing up that entire morning; she wasn't nearly as ready for this as she probably should have been. She simply stared at her royal gown hanging in the closet, still feeling reluctant to change from her casual clothes.

She just couldn't believe Peach was truly gone. She remembered her last words to her: "It's not like you're going anywhere anytime soon."

If I'd only known...

Unfortunately, there was no changing the facts. Peach was gone, and the Mushroom Kingdom needed a leader. Still, she couldn't help but be resentful. Being a leader of a Kingdom wasn't exactly all it was normally cracked up to be. At this point, she'd be willing to trade places with just about anybody else. Just then, the door opened. Daisy looked up, half expecting Toadsworth to trot in and tell her it was time to go, but it was Mario instead, wearing a completely emotionless face.

"Mario!" Daisy was surprised, "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I thought maybe you and I could have a small chat," Mario replied.

Daisy's gaze left Mario's and drifted to the floor, "I didn't see you at the funeral..."

The funeral service had been held the day Mario went off on his...mission.

"I was preoccupied," Mario answered, "But enough about me; what about you?"

"Me?" Daisy asked meekly, "I'm about ready to hurl." The room went silent for a while, then Daisy continued by saying, "I don't wanna do this. I mean, I'm not a princess. Not really, anyway. I mean...look at me. Do I look capable of leading an entire Kingdom? I can't even manage my own ant farm."

Daisy's eyes began to well up as she spoke, "I can't do this..."

Mario showed little emotion, "Well, if you don't, who will?"

"There's the rub," Daisy answered, who hardly noticed Mario's emotionlessness, "There is nobody else."

"Well, not exactly *nobody*," said Mario.

"Wha'dya mean?" Daisy asked, finally looking straight at Mario.

"Simply that maybe...I could take you're place," Mario stated in simplistic manner.

Daisy chuckled a little and replied, "Thanks, but I doubt old 'Bushy Shroom' will ever agree to that."

"Well," Mario said as he raised his finger, "There is one way."

Before Daisy could ask, Mario shot a bolt of energy from his finger and connected it with Daisy's throat. Her eyes popped open wide, but her voice was choked out. Mario then brought her off the ground with the energy bolt and opened up a worm hole directly beneath her feet.

"Sorry," Mario continued, in a much more cruel tone than before, "But if I'm to become King, you have to disappear."

Daisy tried to scream, but couldn't. She tried grabbing for the her throat, but the energy bolt singed her hands. She glanced down; the worm hole below her looked like a gaping mouth of doom, ready to swallow her whole. Desperately, she looked at Mario with pleading eyes, praying he'd come to his senses and let her go. Mario's eyes, however, were unrelenting.

"Good bye," Mario finally said, and released the energy bolt, letting Daisy fall into the worm hole. She barely got out a gasp before the worm hole sucked her in, and then she was gone. Mario then closed the worm hole with a simple snap of his fingers.

Smiling to himself, he strode over to Daisy's stationary desk, pulled out a piece of paper and pen, and started scrawling a 'farewell note from Daisy'...

The news that broke in the following hours was astonishing. Daisy actually running away; the people couldn't believe their ears. To think she would actually abandon them in their time of need. It was simply despicable.

At this point, all of Mushroom Kingdom began to lose hope. With no leader, the entire Kingdom would surely collapse into chaos. But then, another unexpected event occurred: Mario stepped forward, and offered to be their leader.

It made perfect sense. Why shouldn't he be their leader? It actually shouldn't have been a surprise that he would do this; he'd already done so much for the Mushroom Kingdom. And now, with Mario in command, there could've been no going wrong.

And sure enough, Mario had done exactly what a real leader should've done: he took action. From the moment he assumed the throne, he proposed a whole slew of changes for the Mushroom Kingdom. First off, he felt the Kingdom deserved so much more than simply to be a tiny little Kingdom. He wanted the Kingdom to be so much more. Thus, he instigated a new Manifest Destiny plan, in which the Mushroom Kingdom would expand its borders, and in time, seek to unite the entire world under the Mushroom Kingdom's Banner. And sure enough, the Mushroom Kingdom's influence expanded until all the world accepted it, willingly or otherwise, as the one and only world power.

But this was only the beginning. In the midst of their expansion, Mario had revealed to the Mushroom Kingdom the knowledge he'd gained not too long ago. He told the people that, through a mystical vision, he'd been made aware of countless other universes. The concept was somewhat mind-boggling to them, but there were a select number of scientists in the Mushroom Kingdom who felt his ideas were more than sound.

Mario also told them that, in this vision, he'd been told that these other universes were dangerous places. Worlds with horrors far beyond anything in the scopes of their imaginations. In order to protect themselves from such threats, Mario proposed building an army to strengthen themselves and to capture these new, hostile worlds, thus making themselves more secure and spreading their influence throughout the different universes, in the name of promoting peace among these other worlds. Some were a bit skeptical about Mario's ambitions, but the plan was welcomed in general, and received the support of the entire Kingdom.

And within one year's time, Mario had taken his tiny Kingdom, and elevated them to a mighty empire. All that was left, was to make their presence known to the rest of the universe. Gathering his new armada, and utilizing the new inter-dimensional technology created by the kingdom's scientists, he led his people down their new path...

As for Daisy, her fate wasn't as final as Mario would have assumed. Whether by chance, by his lack of knowledge on how to use his powers, or by some other twist of fate, Daisy was not sucked into nothingness, but simply moved to a new location.

The worm hole in question had opened up high over a grassy plain on a completely different planet. Daisy simply stared down as the ground rose up to meet her. She was certain that this was her end. But then, in a flash, she was whisked from the air and in the grips of someone while flying at incredibly high speeds. Completely delirious at this point, Daisy felt capable of no other reaction than to faint. But just before she faded out, she glanced towards her rescuer, to see a small pink face...

5 - A New World

Daisy's eyes flew open and she bolted upright. She'd just seen a horrible nightmare. She was remembering back to only a few moments ago, when Mario had her by the throat, and dropped her into nothingness. She felt sure she was dead, up until the point where she opened her eyes.

Once she awoke, she felt confused and afraid. Why had Mario done this to her? What had come over him? What would he do now? And...

It wasn't until that moment that Daisy realized she wasn't in her own room, or any room she could recognize. From the inside, it looked like a one-room hut, with the walls rounded on all sides to create a perfect dome. Everything was arranged simplistically: The bed she was in on one part of the wall, a stove lined up against another part, and a low standing table in the center. Daisy also noticed the ceiling was somewhat low, meaning whoever lived here wasn't exactly on the tall side.

Just then, a small door on another part of the wall creaked open. Daisy quickly pressed her back against her side of the wall, fearing who might walk in. But just when she was fearing a terrible monster, in walked a tiny pink creature.

It stood at about 8 inches tall, and had a completely round body. The 'body', itself, seemed to comprise of just it's head, with two small stubs for hands and two feet with no legs connecting them.

The small creature looked up at Daisy with friendly eyes and gave her a light-hearted smile. Daisy was slightly relieved; at least the creature was friendly.

Then, Daisy mind was shot with realization. It happened when she got a good look at the creature's face. That small face with moony eyes and a small mouth. It was the last thing she'd seen before blacking out. It was the moment she was saved from her fall.

Daisy shook her head at the thought. There was no way that she could've been saved by this...knee-high being.

"Um," Daisy spoke, "excuse me."

The pink creature, who'd been busying himself by pulling food ingredients from a small cupboard near the stove, looked up at her.

"Where am I, exactly," Daisy asked.

The pink creature didn't speak, but simply waved it's hand and smiled at her as it pulled out a small cooking pot.

Daisy was confused by the reply, wondering if maybe there was a language barrier between them.

She tried again, this time speaking a little more loudly, "What place is this?"

The pink creature turned from it's work and looked at her curiously for a second, then it's face lit up with realization. After which, he waddled over to a small pile of books haphazardly stacked in a pile in another part of the room, and pulled out what looked to Daisy to be an atlas of some kind.

Daisy caught a glimpse of the books cover. The title read: 'Maps of Pop Star'.

Pop Star? Daisy thought to herself, *What's Pop Star?*

The creature opened the book, and then started methodically flipping through each page, looking carefully at each map in it. When it finally found the map it was looking for he quickly placed it in front of Daisy and pointed excitedly at the title of the map: Dreamland.

"Dreamland?" Daisy read. This caused the pink creature to go into an excited frenzy, jumping up and down giving cheerful little yips.

It was at this point that Daisy realized that this creature was in fact answering her question. Of course, this provided an answer to another question: This creature, whoever he was, probably couldn't speak. It

would make sense considering what had just happened. Looking at the tiny creature, she couldn't help but smile. It's little innocence gave her the impression of a little baby.

"Thank you," Daisy told the little creature, patting it on the head. The creature smiled at this, and seemed to be blushing slightly.

Just then, a light knock came at the door, followed by a friendly voice, "Kirby? Are you there, Kirby?" The creature turned towards the door at the sound of it's name and quickly trotted over to answer it.

Daisy couldn't help but giggle, *So that's you're name, huh? How cute.*

As 'Kirby' opened the door, it silently welcomed the new guest in. The guest in question was a small boy; probably no younger than Kirby, with an artists cap and paint set in hand. He walked in wearing an innocent smile and spoke in a gentle voice.

"I came as soon as possible," the boy told Kirby, "I wonder what this news is you want to-."

He stopped when he saw Daisy sitting on the bed and said, "Oh, you have a guest."

Daisy humbly bowed her head, but before she could speak, Kirby began jumping up and down in front of the boy, pointing at her with utmost excitement. When the boy's attention went back to Kirby, he then began pantomiming what he saw, crudely immitating what one would assume to be a hole in the sky and a person falling to the ground. The boy seemed unable to make the connection at first.

The boy then asked Daisy, "I don't suppose you were skydiving or something like that, were you?"

Kirby fell over upon hearing this, and Daisy gave a light giggle as she began to explain.

"No, no. My name is Daisy. I'm...well...not from around here."

"Ah," the boy's face lit up, "a newcomer. Welcome to Dreamland. Where exactly do you hail from?"

"Well," Daisy replied nervously, "I don't suppose you've heard of the Mushroom Kingdom, have you?"

The boy was taken back and asked, "'Mushroom Kingdom?' What sort of name is that for a kingdom to call itself?"

"Then you haven't heard of it?" Daisy asked disheartedly.

"No, sorry. In all my life, I've never heard of a kingdom in Pop Star with a name as ridiculous as 'Mushroom Kingdom.'"

The boy's comment aside, Daisy began to grow worried, wondering if she'd ever be able to return home.

"Oh," the boy suddenly said, "where are my manners? I am Adeleine, a great painter of Dreamland."

"Pleased to meet you," Daisy replied, and then asked, "Where is Pop Star?"

Adeleine looked at her as though she'd just asked the dumbest question in the world. Kirby gave her a similar look, only more of inquisitiveness rather than being critical.

"You're...joking, right?" Adeleine asked worriedly.

"Well, like I said, I'm not from around here..." Daisy replied, her voice becoming ever more depressed.

Adeleine caught on to this, and realized she, as incredible as it sounded to him, was not from Pop Star at all.

"Well," Adeleine said awkwardly, "how is it that you came to Pop Star?"

Again, Kirby showed Adeleine his impersonation of the hole in the sky and Daisy falling, but Adeleine was still confused and asked, "You were...in a space ship?"

Kirby began to look exasperated.

"Perhaps I should explain," Daisy piped up, noting the relieved look on Kirby's face.

She then went into detail about the horrific events that had transpired in her homeland: Peach's assasination, Mario's change in character, all leading up to the point when Mario had thrown her into the worm hole and she wound up here in Dreamland.

The story sounded incredible, and Adeleine would probably have dismissed it outright. But looking at Daisy's face, he could tell she had an honest look about her, and was obviously not insane.

"That is quite a story, Princess," Adeleine said when she finished, "To think other worlds exist beyond just our own galaxy." Adeleine had visited other planets before, and was well aware of the possibility of

other worlds.

"Yes," Daisy continued, "I don't know how, but Mario gained some kind of...inter-dimensional magic."

"Well, if that's the case," Adeleine said with a start, "what's to say he won't come here himself?"

The thought struck Daisy like a sledge-hammer. She'd never considered that thought until now. He could use that magic, or some form of it, to travel to other worlds, even here. And if he'd changed as much as Daisy had seen...

"We must warn your people," Daisy said as she rose from the bed, "tell them of the danger! Even the ruler of this land should-!"

Adeleine stopped her there, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid telling our king is not an option. He'll most likely turn a deaf ear to our warnings, and the people will more than likely follow his example."

Daisy remained adamant, "We have to do something! I will not sit idly by and watch this world be ruined!"

Adeleine seated himself on a floor cushion and lowered his head into thought. He was sure there was a solution, but what could it be?

Kirby had also pondered this thought for a short while, and then a bright look of excitement came upon his face. Quickly, he dashed to his pile of books and dug through it, flinging books and paper left and right until he found what looked to Daisy to be an old wanted poster.

In a flash, Kirby rushed to Adeleine and hopped up and down excitedly, waving the poster in his face. Upon seeing the face on the poster, Adeleine grew wide-eyed. Unfortunately, this expression was more of worry than of excitement.

"Kirby, are you certain of this?" Adeleine asked incredulously.

Kirby nodded, somewhat, and beamed brightly at him.

Adeleine, however, still couldn't be sure, "Kirby, you do remember who this is, don't you? Who knows what he'll do with this sort of knowledge."

Kirby remained resolute with his suggestion, and looked to Daisy as though he had a lot of faith in whoever they were talking about. Adeleine looked as though he were about to protest again, but seeing the look on Kirby's face, he soon accepted that there could be no changing his mind.

"Very well," Adeleine consented, "but if things go south, you'll take the blame."

Kirby nodded in agreement. Daisy, meanwhile, had risen from her bed and looked at the poster Kirby had found. On it was the picture of a masked warrior, with a body somewhat similar to Kirby's. He wore a purple cape and wielded a golden sword. The words below his picture read: "Caution! This warrior is considered to be dangerous. Avoid at all costs."

The name given to the warrior was Meta Knight.

"So," Daisy began, "who's Meta Knight?"

"That's a good question," Adeleine replied, "To be honest, no one knows who Meta Knight really is. He's a total mystery. He claims to have Dreamland's best interest at heart, but after how he tried to conquer dream land some time ago, nobody's been able to trust him since."

Daisy was a little surprised when she heard this, then asked, "We're asking this warrior for help...why?"

Adeleine sighed and said, "Because he claims to be an honorable man, and Kirby, for reasons known only to him, believes him."

Daisy looked down at the tiny, pink, child-like, creature in front of her, who looked back with honest eyes and a trusting smile. That was a face who probably never knew the meaning of the words 'caution' or 'deceit'. It was the kind of face that made you want to believe in that person's judgement.

"Okay," Daisy finally said, "How do we find this Metaknight?"

Upon reaching their mutual decision, the group gathered outside to embark on their journey. Kirby had taken longer than Daisy and Adeleine because he'd been digging through his tiny closet for something. It wasn't until he finally came out that they saw what it was: a giant star shaped board that seemed to

hover as Kirby dragged it out of his house.

"Of course," Adeleine exclaimed, "the Warp Star! I'd forgotten you'd had it."

Then, after locking the door to his home, Kirby hopped onto the Warp Star and then turned it to face the southerly direction.

"Wait!" Adeleine called out, "Meta Knight is in the other direction! Where are you going?"

Kirby simply pointed towards the mountain ranges in that direction in response. This caused more shock to Adeleine than his previous idea.

"Kirby, you're nuts!" Adeleine exclaimed, but there was no changing Kirby's mind, for he had sped off into the distance in a flash, not giving Adeleine a chance to try.

Adeleine simply hung his head, fearing the worst, "Sometimes I worry about him."

Daisy simply asked, "Why? Where's he gone?"

"Somewhere most other people in this world wouldn't dare venture," Adeleine replied gravely, "for reasons you hopefully won't have to find out."

Daisy fell silent upon hearing this and turned towards the mountain range Kirby sped off to, also fearing what her new friend was attempting.

"Well," Adeleine said, "time to get to work."

With that, he conjured out of thin air an artist's canvas and prepared his painting tools as he got to work.

Daisy was confused at this, "Um...excuse me, but shouldn't we be going?"

"We will be," Adeleine replied as he began painting.

Daisy began to lose patience, "We don't have time for this! We have to-!"

"Patience, please," Adeleine replied again as he continued work on his art. Daisy wanted to protest again, but then she figured this fellow could probably prove as resolute as Kirby, so she simply resolved to wait in the grass.

It wasn't long before Adeleine finished his artwork: a crudely drawn stick-figure bird. Daisy was starting to wonder what this was all about when Adeleine then touched the picture with his paint brush and the bird flew off the canvas and grew larger. Daisy sat in astonishment as she looked at this now living stick figure bird. Daisy had seen amazing things before, but this was by far the most amazing thing she'd seen yet.

"Hop on," Adeleine said as he climbed on top of his creation, "We have a long way to go."

6 - Alliance

It seemed like hours had passed since they left the ground. Daisy, however, hardly noticed. All she seemed to notice was that they were flying on a flimsy stick bird and they were flying just above the cloud line.

"Do we have to fly this high?" Daisy asked, half expecting the bird to break apart at any moment.

Adeleine replied, "If we wish to find Meta Knight, yes. Just relax."

Daisy had probably never heard more ridiculous words in her life.

They fell into another long silence, and then, Adeleine cried, "There it is!"

Daisy followed the direction Adeleine was pointing at and caught sight of a giant air-ship just breaking cloud cover. Even from that distance, she could tell it was a massive vessel; intimidating in every sense of the word. It looked like a strange, metal, bird with four wings and rockets where the tail feathers would be. On the front of the vessel was a giant mask similar to the one she'd seen Meta Knight wearing.

"Let's go," Adeleine said, "Hopefully, they won't shoot at us."

Daisy was about to ask what he meant, but as they moved closer to the ship, it no longer became necessary to ask. As more details of the flying ship began to emerge, she could make out numerous cannons, pointing outward from the top half of the ship. Along the bottom half of the vessel, she saw a much larger cannon that stuck out just beyond the nose of the ship. She became even more afraid of the ship, as well as it's supposed captain, by the second.

Just then, two small shapes popped out of the bottom part of the ship and began flying towards Daisy and Adeleine. As they flew closer, Daisy began to ascertain them as small creatures wearing jetpacks. These also appeared to be somewhat similar looking to Kirby, but were wearing some form of mechanical suit.

"Halt!" one of the guards ordered, "state your names!"

Adeleine stopped his bird and said, "I am Adeleine, and this is Princess Daisy. We come to see Meta Knight."

The two flying guards looked at one another for a moment, then the first one ordered, "State your business with Lord Meta Knight."

"It is a matter of grave importance," Adeleine replied, "for Meta Knight's ears only."

The two guards looked at each other again, then the second said, "We'll escort you to Lord Meta Knight. No tricks, understand?"

Both Adeleine and Daisy nodded, and followed to the two flying guards towards the bottom of the vessel. They flew in through a large entry way and landed inside an incredibly large hanger bay. The floor and walls were colored blue and purple, shining with a top grade polish. In the hanger were a large multitude of small flying vehicles, which looked similar to, and were just as imposing as, the vessel they were housed in.

After dismounting their bird, which desolved back into ordinary paint, Daisy and Adeleine followed the two guards through a series of corridors that seemed to stretch on and on. Daisy wasn't the least bit surprised, not when considering how big the ship looked from the outside.

After some time, they reached an elevator, which took them up quite a ways until they reached what was deemed to be the top floor of the vessel. When they stepped out of the elevator, they found themselves in an unusual command deck.

It was rather large, with several computer stations manned by several small creatures, again similar to Kirby, but red colored with sailor hats. The front had a giant viewing screen that displayed a forward

perspective of the outside of the ship. Towards the center-back of the deck, there was an old fashioned rudder wheel manned by a small caped figure. Daisy only saw the back of this person, but knew it immediately to be the one called Meta Knight. Standing next to him was another armored figure, likewise with a sword, and about the same height as Meta Knight.

"What do you want?" Meta Knight asked without turning back.

"Lord Meta Knight," both guards humbly replied with bended knee, "We brought you the two strangers approaching the ship earlier."

Meta Knight turned halfway to glance back at both Adeleine and Daisy. Both held their breath when they met the gaze of that mysterious, yellow eye.

"Return to your stations," Meta Knight told the guards, who snapped a sharp salute in reply and turned on their heels towards the elevator.

After the guards had left, Meta Knight, and the knight next to him turned fully to face their new guests.

"Welcome aboard the Haldberd. This is my First Officer: Blade Knight," he said, gesturing towards the knight next to him. Blade Knight bowed humbly upon being introduced.

"Just who might you two be?" Meta Knight continued.

"I am Adeleine, and this is Princess Daisy," Adeleine replied, "We are friends of Kirby."

Meta Knight said nothing at first, so Blade Knight asked, "What is your business here?"

"We've come to warn you of a great danger," Adeleine replied, "not just to you and us, but to all of Pop Star."

Adeleine then went into length to explain Princess Daisy and her appearance, as well as the danger of the person who sent her to Dreamland: Mario.

After Adeleine finished, Meta Knight continued to remain silent, eyeing both of them with hardly any emotion. He then turned to Blade Knight and asked, "What say you, Blade Knight?"

"It's an incredible story to be honest," Blade Knight said, "and for that, I find little reason to trust this Princess or Adeleine."

Meta Knight nodded in agreement, "Yes, this much is true. And without evidence to support their claims, I would be inclined to agree with you. However, we must not forget that these are friends of Kirby. And if he is willing to trust them..." Meta Knight trailed off as he fell into deep thought.

"Please," Daisy pleaded, "you have to believe us. Everything Adeleine has told you is the truth, and we must do something to prevent disaster!"

Meta Knight looked up suddenly at Daisy, then, turning to face Daisy full-on, said, "Let's suppose for the moment that I believe you. What would you have us do?"

Daisy tried to build herself up as she prepared her answer, "To build an army. A defense force, some form of resistance to stop Mario when he comes."

"This would be a difficult task," Meta Knight said, "For the denizens of this world know little of fighting, and are ill equipped to defend themselves should the need arise."

"Then evacuate the planet," Daisy continued, "have the denizens flee Pop Star; find other places to hide."

"This, too, would prove most difficult," Meta Knight replied, "and the bottom line is you still have no proof. Without it, you will convince no one into leaving."

Daisy was on the verge of crying. It looked as though Meta Knight was about ready to throw her and Adeleine back out the way they came.

Finally, she fell to her knees and clasped her hands as she cried imploringly, "Please! I beg of you! You must believe me! I am speaking the truth, and something must be done before it's too late!"

Meta Knight stared at her with emotionless eyes. Blade Knight also seemed to be staring at her, though one could hardly tell since there was no distinguishable face to be found on him.

"You seem quite adamant about this matter," Meta Knight finally said.

"I am," Daisy said as tears welled up in her face.

Meta Knight turned away and remained silent for a short time, after which, he turned to one of the sailors and said, "Get the Gim Squadron in here."

The sailor nodded and queued a microphone as he began to transmit the message. The sailor talked in what sounded to Daisy as a 'yada-yada' language, leading her to wonder if it was understood.

As it turned out, it was understandable, because a short time later, out of the elevator, five small robot-like beings trotted out. They were all small, wore baseball styled caps, and had one arm, that periodically emerged from an opening in the robot's face, and a pair of legs.

The 'gims' trotted in and snapped into attention when they came just behind Meta Knight. Meta Knight then turned around and looked straight at them, saying, "I need an interdimensional transportation device. You boys up to it?"

The gims looked puzzled for a second, then convened a small ways away from Meta Knight to discuss. Daisy tried listening in on their debating, but could only make out faint computerized murmuring. When they finished, they all started nodding in unison, showing that they were up to the challenge.

"Good," Meta Knight said, "Get to work on it."

And with that, the gims dashed off to start their new project.

Daisy looked over to Meta Knight as a small, relieved smile began to form on her face, "So you do believe me?"

"I do," Meta Knight replied, "and I believe our best course of action is to flee from this world."

Daisy felt her heart skip a beat, "To...What?"

Adeleine also spoke up, "We can't just leave Pop Star like this!"

"We don't have any other choice," Meta Knight replied, "If what she says is true, then this Mario has made a grab for power. More specifically, for control over your kingdom, Princess."

Both remained silent as Meta Knight continued, "Therefore, it stands to reason, that when he does arrive, he'll have an entire army on his side, ready to fight. The Halberd alone will have no success in stopping him."

"And as you said earlier," Daisy replied, "there's little hope of creating an army here, right?"

"Exactly," said Meta Knight.

"But what good will running away do?" Blade Knight asked, sounding somewhat disappointed in Meta Knight's course of action.

"My plan is this: we are going to take Princess Daisy's plan to a much larger scale," Meta Knight said, frankly.

"You mean," Adeleine said, "go to warn other worlds?"

"Yes," Meta Knight began to explain, "we can't assume Pop Star is the only world in danger. He will surely go to other worlds and attempt to conquer those worlds as well. If that's the case, then the best course of action is to warn these other worlds of the coming danger. And once they're made aware-"

"-They'll join us in fighting Mario." Daisy finished, sounding more hopeful now than she did before.

"Precisely," Meta Knight said.

"Well," Adeleine said, "maybe there are some allies here we could-"

Before he could finish, one of the sailors immediately started crying out in it's yada yada language in a panicked tone. Meta Knight turned to the sailor and yelled, "What?! What's she doing in this area?!"

"Go to red alert! All hands, battle stations!" Blade Knight cried out.

The command deck erupted into a frenzy as the different crew began excitedly chatting amongst each other in terrified tones. Sirens were blaring throughout the ship and red lights flashed from everywhere. Daisy and Adeleine simply stood there in utter bewilderment.

"Um...Blade Knight," Daisy asked as Blade Knight hurriedly grabbed the wheel, "what's going on?"

"We've got company," he said simply, "Dyna Blade's approaching our position."

"Dyna what?" Daisy asked.

Adeleine was the one to answer, "Dyna Blade. The avian goddess of the mountains."

"And now she's coming here," Meta Knight added, "only heaven knows what she wants."

"Coming about, sir," Blade Knight said as he turned the wheel. Sure enough, the vessel began shifting to its port side (left) until it was facing a dark silhouette steadily approaching the ship.

Meta Knight began shouting orders to the crew, "Arm all gun batteries! Have repair crews on hot standby!"

The sailors gave confirming 'yadas' and braced themselves as they stared intently at the silhouette as it grew on the view screen.

Adeleine, meanwhile, started calling for Meta Knight, "Meta Knight! Meta Knight, wait! Don't attack yet!"

Blade Knight heard this and seemed near shock, "Are you mad?! Surely, you've some idea what this thing is capable of! If we lower our defenses now-!"

He was interrupted by a piercing screech that echoed off the metal hull of the Haldberd. Everyone winced at the noise; Daisy practically fell to her knees again. Then, after the screeching had stopped, she looked up, and saw Dyna Blade. The majestic bird hovered in mid-air in front of the Haldberd, its eyes seeming to glow with a kind of other-worldly intelligence. The bright colors of its feathers glinted in the sunlight, as though they were made of metal. Daisy felt her heart start to melt at the mere sight of it. She couldn't bring herself to believe this sort of creature could do them any harm.

The crew, however, did not look so touched. They sat there, expecting the gargantuan beast to lash out at any given moment. But instead, it simply hung there, staring at the ship with blue, glowing, eyes.

"What's she waiting for?" Blade Knight thought aloud, hardly masking the tension he felt.

Meta Knight was also curious as to what this creature was doing. Then, something managed to catch his eye: a small something on top of the creature's head.

"Sailor, magnify grid 32, 41, and enhance," he ordered.

One of the sailors complied, punched in the appropriate command, and the screen zeroed in on the top of Dyna Blade's head until they were able to clearly see a small, pink, smiling puff-ball bouncing in the middle of Dyna Blade's crown of feathers.

"It's Kirby!" Daisy exclaimed, giving an inward sigh of relief.

The command crew made their sighs of relief resoundly clear, with most of the sailor's slumping back into their seats.

"Stand down red alert," Meta Knight said, exasperatedly, "and see if we can't provide room in the hanger bay for our new ally."

The sailors quietly tended to the orders, the sirens were silenced, and the red lights vanished.

"I think I'll step outside to greet our guests," Meta Knight said as he strode towards the elevator, but not before taking one last look at Kirby as he continued to smile and wave at his ship. No one could tell, but some might have guessed that Meta Knight cracked somewhat of a smile at that moment.

Daisy, in the meanwhile, simply stared at Kirby with utter amazement. It was apparent from the opinions of the others that Dyna Blade was one to be feared, and yet here was this small, practically innocent, little creature, who seemingly was not only able to keep her calm, but convinced her to join their side at the same time. It looked like there was no end to the mysteries surrounding him. Still, she couldn't help but smile; seeing his smile seemed to make her feel more at ease.

7 - Seeds of Hope

The gims progress was slow. The creation of an interdimensional transportation device was harder than they first anticipated. They all had to get themselves a crash course in quantum physics just to get a better idea of the mechanics involved. But even after that, the concept of interdimensional travel seemed far away. But Meta Knight had faith in the gims, and was confident that if there was a way, they'd find it. The rest of the crew, in the mean time, kept themselves busy with the task now ahead of them. They spent countless days upgrading their ship, making it more suitable for space travel, as well as giving it the kind of armament and weaponry needed to ensure it would stand a fighting chance against any force that would come against it, should the need arise. They also stocked up on necessary supplies in case of long trips. They even created a special nest for Dyna Blade inside the hanger, reserving hopes that they would find an open space more suitable for her.

Meta Knight also kept himself, as well as Daisy, busy. For reasons he failed to divulge to anyone, he started taking Daisy for tours around the ship, helping her familiarize herself with every part of the Halberd. After months of this, Daisy came to memorize every bolt and weld in the ship. Daisy still wondered why this was necessary, though Meta Knight still told her nothing of his intent.

Adeleine and Kirby had also been busy, searching for more allies. They searched through all of Pop Star, looking for warriors, if there were any, who would join them. This, however, proved difficult, as Meta Knight had said. The chances of actually finding capable fighters among the denizens of Pop Star was slim, and those they did manage to find proved either difficult to convince of the danger or just unwilling to join their side. In all the time they spent searching, they were able to recruit no one.

A year had passed since they first began their mission, and Kirby and Adeleine were just returning from yet another unsuccessful search. Daisy was with Meta Knight, going over ship schematics, and Dyna Blade was snuggled in it's makeshift nest, quietly resting.

When Adeleine and Kirby reached the command deck, both simply slumped into empty chairs; the rest of the command crew was enjoying some well needed R & R. When Daisy looked over to them, she could tell the news wasn't good.

"No luck?" she asked.

"Nope," Adeleine answered disheartedly. Kirby punctuated his answer with a deep, depressing sigh.

"Well, it was good of you to try," Meta Knight said as he looked up at them.

"I just can't believe how they were all unwilling to help," Adeleine said, "it's like they're either completely thick-headed or they refuse to believe us."

"It is just how they are," Meta Knight replied, "they boast of their strength, but when real danger arises, they'll be more than willing to avoid a fight."

"I just hope we can find more courageous souls in the other worlds," Daisy said disappointedly.

Just as she finished her sentence, one of the gims rushed in from the elevator directly over to Meta Knight. It then started chatting excitedly to Meta Knight in it's computerized yada yada language. Daisy wasn't sure how anyone could understand the denizens of this world.

Upon hearing the gim's message, he asked, "You've done it?"

The gim began chatting again, apparently explaining the ramifications of the gims' plan.

When he'd finished, Meta Knight asked, "You're certain this will work?"

The gim nodded.

"Very well," Meta Knight said, "make final preparations."

The gim saluted and then dashed off. No sooner had this happened when Meta Knight reached for the

microphone and ordered through the overhead speakers, "All hands to stations. Prepare to disembark." As soon as the order was given, Daisy could faintly hear hurried feet throughout the ship. The elevator started opening and closing periodically as the bridge sailors, or waddle dees as Daisy had learned to call them, hurried to their stations on the command deck. It wasn't long before Blade Knight also appeared on the command deck.

After everyone was assembled on deck, Meta Knight told one of the waddle dees, "Activate the Hyper Cannon and input this wavelength frequency."

The waddle dee looked over the frequency number and carried out the command as directed. Blade Knight, meanwhile, started looking rather worried when he heard Meta Knight's command.

"The Hyper Cannon, sir?" he asked shakily.

Meta Knight simply turned to him and said, "Trust me."

Adeleine looked warily at Meta Knight for a moment, then looked over to Kirby, who didn't seem worried at all.

It wasn't long before a low hum started to echo throughout the ship. Steadily, the sound grew louder and louder until Daisy and Adeleine had to cover their ears; the command crew hardly reacted to the sound and waited patiently. Then one of the waddle dees turned to Meta Knight, yelled something in yada, then Meta Knight yelled, "Fire the Cannon!"

The waddle dee pressed a bright red button on it's console, and the entire ship shook violently as though a storm had suddenly appeared from nowhere. On the viewing screen, Daisy could make out a great energy beam flowing from the bottom of the screen to a point not so far away from the ship. She could only assume the beam was being fired by them, and it's purpose was far beyond her at the moment. The Haldberd continued to shake as the energy beam it was firing surged forward. It wasn't long before Daisy noticed that the beam was only going a short ways, disappearing into what looked to her as a semi-invisible ripple. Before long, the ripple exploded into a bright flash; so bright all present had to cover their eyes.

When the light dimmed, everyone on the command deck looked out to see a giant portal of light, gently glistening in mid-air. It looked as though someone had torn a hole in a moving picture screen, and through the hole they could see a blue, rippling, surface.

"Is that it?" Blade Knight asked warily.

"It is," Meta Knight replied, "this is your ticket away from here."

The crew remained silent as they stared at the wonder before them. Daisy, however, had caught Meta Knights words and was facing him asking, "What did you mean by that?"

Blade Knight turned, curious as to what Daisy was talking about, then she asked again, "What did you mean by 'your ticket away?'"

Meta Knight said nothing, and soon the whole command crew was watching him. He then walked over to the microphone and switched on the overhead speakers.

"Men," he spoke, "this is Meta Knight, your leader. Over the years, you've served me well and true. For that, I am truly grateful. You've never hesitated in following orders, no matter how ludicrous they may have sounded."

Daisy saw two waddle dees exchange worried looks as Meta Knight continued, "With that in mind, I'm certain that you all will live up to your vows, and accept one last command from me."

A dreadful hush fell over the entire ship as Meta Knight gave the command: "For now, I resign my command over the Haldberd."

The silence was broken by fearful murmurings among the waddle dees. Blade Knight was about to protest, but Meta Knight raised his hand to silence him. He then continued his speech, "I know how you all must feel, but I ask you to have faith, for I leave you in capable hands. I turn command of this vessel...to Princess Daisy."

The entire crew became silent again, this time in true shock. Daisy was no less shocked than everyone else.

"Meta Knight! you can't be serious!" Daisy blurted out.

"My Lord, I must also interject! This is simply insanity!" Blade Knight added. The rest of the crew raised similar concerns.

"I understand your concerns," Meta Knight responded calmly, "But I've shown her all she needs to know. And I believe, since she is so adamant about taking action, that she should be the one to lead the new rebellion."

"But Meta Knight!" Daisy protested, "I can't lead! I'm not a leader!"

"You are a princess, correct?"

"Well, yes, but-!"

"That settles it, then."

"Meta Knight, you're not listening-!"

"Listen to me, Princess," Meta Knight said as he took Daisy's hand, "great leaders do not become great because they chose to be great. They have greatness thrust upon their shoulders."

Daisy was silent for a moment, so Meta Knight continued, "I know you are capable of this. You just need to step up and try."

Daisy felt that same queezy feeling start to sneak up on her again, but this time she did her best to suppress it. Taking a big gulp, she plucked up her courage and stood ready to take charge.

"Blade Knight," Meta Knight turned to his first officer, "I trust you can assist the Princess in her new position?"

"Of course, my Lord," Blade Knight replied, his voice shaking slightly.

"Where will you go, then?" Adeleine asked hastily.

"As I said before, the people of this world have few champions. Therefore, they will need someone to look after them when danger draws near. I will do what I can for Pop Star; the rest of you must see to the rest of the universe."

"I understand," Daisy said as she choked back tears, "I... we won't let you down."

Meta Knight gave a good nod in response, then marched off to the elevator. As the doors shut, he gave one last look over to Kirby, who stared back with confident eyes. A while after the doors to the elevator closed, the view screen switched to the ship's rear view, showing Meta Knight as well as a few loyal soldiers flying off in the ship's fighters back towards Dreamland. After they disappeared from sight, the entire crew looked over to Daisy, who began to feel their stares.

"Your orders...my Lady?" Blade Knight asked humbly.

Daisy remained silent for a moment, getting a good look at the portal, which was now beginning to close on itself. Her entire future was about to take a radical new change in course. But there was no turning back now; it was do...or die.

"Full speed ahead...please," Daisy said.

Blade Knight then turned to the crew and barked, "You heard the Captain! Full thrusters! Into the portal!" The waddle dees immediately set to work, and the ship slowly glided into the portal.

Meta Knight had halted his squadron just out of visual range of the Halberd to see her one last time. He watched as the ship flew into the portal and eventually disappeared. After the portal closed completely, he gave a deep sigh.

The seeds of hope have been scattered to the far winds. I pray they bear fruits of success.

No sooner had he thought this that at that moment, more dimensional portals began popping out of nowhere in the skies above Dreamland. It wasn't long before large, black, ships began coming into view. They were enormous; shaped like sailing vessels only with black wings for oars and several cannons

mounted on their decks.

"Men, our enemy has arrived," Meta Knight had told his comrades.

"Shall we engage?" one of the pilots asked.

"Not now," Meta Knight replied, "We must plan our strategy first. If we are to be successful against our new foe, we must be at our best. For now, we break to the West."

At once, the fighters sped off towards the Westerly direction, making sure to remain hidden among the clouds. Meanwhile, the flying warships, which were steadily growing in numbers with each new arrival, started heading downwards towards the planet surface. Escorting them were large numbers of fighter planes known as Rocketons. The entire armada floated menacingly towards the planet as if out for blood...

8 - A Hero Emerges

Three years had passed since the invasion of Pop Star. Pop Star itself fell in less than a week. With little resistance against them, and the new machines of war used by the Mushroom Empire, they made short work of conquering the planet.

Of course, that's not what the citizenry was told back home. According to the news they received, their great leader, Mario, had offered an alliance with the people of Pop Star, hoping to build interdimensional relations with them. But then Pop Star refused, and tried to capture their armada in a gambit to take over the Mushroom Empire. That was what they were told, and after the Mushroom Empire's victory, the streets were filled with celebration.

After Pop Star, four more worlds fell to the Mushroom Empire. Out of those worlds, only one tried to make a fight of it, and only one succeeded in doing some damage to the so-called invincible armada; this, of course, was only because the entire planet in question had blown itself up. As for the planet that fought, its situation was similar to Pop Star, thus the few champions that did try to fight were either killed, or were converted to join Mario's Armada. The other two worlds felt they had no other course but to surrender immediately, in an effort to save as many lives as they could.

Of course, the armada did not go unchallenged. During their conquest through the different dimensions, they also met resistance from a small rebel force, now calling themselves 'The Knights of Hope'. This small group, led by Princess Daisy, had been traveling to the same dimensions the Mushroom Empire had aimed at, warning of the coming danger and preparing those worlds however they could. And when the Mushroom Empire came, the Knights of Hope made a fight of it, dealing as much damage to the armada as possible, though sometimes this was a bare minimum of help.

But some of their exploits didn't go unrewarded. By visiting these worlds, they were able to gain the aid of some great warriors as well as some new weapons at their disposal. Slowly but surely, their army was growing. And even better, they had been successful in finding the perfect hiding place to plan their next attacks, one that they were sure not even Mario himself could find.

But Mario's armada was still going strong, and was not about to be deterred just yet. After the completion of the fourth world's colonization, Mario immediately got his forces on the move to conquer yet another dimension. Some might have tried to convince Mario to slow things down a little, but they would have had little success, if not receiving dire consequences. Mario had an ambition, and wanted it done as soon as possible.

This led them to begin their campaign against a new dimension: a galaxy known as the Lylat System.

Conquering the Lylat System proved difficult, and took longer than anticipated. True the colonization of the other planets in the Pop Star dimension was still ongoing, and there was still some uncharted territory in the disorganized galaxy of third dimension, but Mario felt they should have made some significant head-way ages ago. But, as always, they met resistance, not only from the denizens of this dimension, namely the Cornerian Fleet, who'd been warned of their coming, but also from the Knights of Hope, who had warned them.

But despite their valiant efforts, the Mushroom Empire simply proved too powerful. Every battle brought small victories for the defending Cornerian Fleet, only to be eclipsed by the even greater defeats. It was coming to the point that three quarters of the Lylat System was now under control of the Mushroom Empire.

The leader of the Cornerian Fleet, General Pepper, had called a meeting at the capital planet, Corneria, to determine their next course of action. At this point, they were starting to feel desperate; the Cornerian Fleet was practically on the verge of collapse.

The more prominent figures in the fleet consisted of the well known Star Fox team, who'd been leading most of the campaign against the Mushroom Fleet. Their team leader, Fox McCloud, was feeling just as depressed as anyone at this point. Never before in his career had he faced a more skilled opponent. No matter how well he planned his attacks, the enemy always seemed to be one step ahead, beating him to every punch and sacking his team harder than before. He wasn't sure how much more of a beating the fleet could take.

The meeting was held on board the space station orbiting Corneria. The meeting room had a somber feel about it. On one side stood General Pepper, along with his advisor, Beltino Toad. On the other side, Fox McCloud, along with his team, Falco Lombardi, Slippy Toad, and Krystal, were all assembled. After taking their seats, General Pepper began the briefing.

"Everyone, I will not lie to you; our situation has taken a disastrous turn. Our forces have been reduced to twenty three percent. Despite the intel provided by the Knights of Hope, our efforts have been less than beneficial."

"We know that already!" Falco burst out, "You think we don't know that?! You have any idea how many friends we've-!"

"Falco, that's enough!" Fox barked angrily, "You're not the only one hurting, here!"

Falco was about to rebut, but he caught a glimpse of Slippy, who'd lowered his head and looked like he was fighting back tears. For Falco, mourning the loss of Katt Monroe didn't make the past month easy, but he had to remind himself of Amanda's death only two weeks ago, and what her death meant to Slippy. With that in mind, he silently sat back down.

"My apologies, General," Fox said, "Please continue."

"I understand the pain you're going through," Pepper continued, looking mostly at Falco, "And ordinarily, I'd be just as willing as you to simply rush out there and give them as much of my wrath as possible before drawing my last breath. However, we must keep the thoughts of the citizenry in mind. And it is for that reason, that I've decided to evacuate the capital planet, Corneria."

The entire team leapt to their feet when they heard this. Slippy spoke up first, "General! You can't be serious!"

"I'm afraid I am, Mr. Toad," Pepper replied, "There is little to be gained by continuing to fight on like this. If we all die here, the sacrifices of our departed will be in vain. If we can move the citizens of Corneria to a safer place, they'll still be able to live safe and secure lives outside the control of the Mushroom Empire."

"Well, where are we supposed to go then?!" Falco demanded.

"I know where," Fox replied, "the Dimensional Gap, right?"

"Precisely," Pepper continued, "The Knights of Hope have told me that there are multiple uninhabited planets there, meaning there's more than enough room to accomodate our citizens."

Beltino stepped in next to explain their plan, "With the help of some of Haldberd's technicians, we were able to recalibrate the Warp Gate to act as an interdimensional gate. Once everyone is ready to leave, we'll send our ships into the gate and wind up in the Dimensional Gap. We should be safe there, if that Mario fellow hasn't found it yet."

Pepper began to speak again, "I've already begun the evacuation plan. Our transport ships should be ready to depart shortly."

"What about the gate?" Fox asked, "Who's to say those Mushroom punks won't try to use it to follow us?"

"I've already taken care of that problem," Beltino answered, "We've programmed an automatic self

destruction sequence into the gate. Once it closes, the gate will destroy itself, completely closing the door behind us."

"And what about the Haldberd?" Falco asked.

"I've already asked the Princess Daisy to assist Peppy and Lucy Hare in evacuating the planet Sauria, as per request," Pepper answered, eyeing Krystal slightly. Krystal lowered her vision slightly when Falco turned and shot her a look.

"Rest assured, all will be well once we've escaped," Pepper said as assuringly as possible.

Just as Pepper finished his sentence, however, a message came through on the communicator on the table.

"General Pepper! It's the armada! It's on it's way here!"

A deathly hush fell on the entire group. It was as if the fates were conspiring against them.

"How long until they arrive," Pepper asked.

"Ten minutes, sir!" came the reply.

Pepper lowered his head, "The evacuation fleet won't be ready until fifteen minutes."

Fox slammed his fist to the table, "I don't get it! We destroyed their supply depots yesterday! How're they still able to fight after a loss like that?!"

"It doesn't matter," Pepper said strongly, "What matters is that we save as many people as we can! Fox, I'm charging you with the protection of the gate. You must hold them off long enough for the evacuation fleet to escape."

"Understood," Fox replied, "We won't let you down!"

With that, all four pilots turned on their heels and started to rush out, but before they did, Pepper asked Fox to stay just a while longer.

"Fox," Pepper said, "Truth be told, I expected the armada to pull a trick like this. We musn't underestimate our foes."

Fox remained silent as the General continued, "I've asked Beltino Toad to outfit your ship with an emergency dimension rift generator. It won't be as accurate as a real one, but it will get you away from here. If the worst should come, and the gate is destroyed, I want you and your team to escape from this place."

"But, General-!" Fox protested.

"No 'buts' Fox," Pepper replied, "This is my order. If I cannot save our people, I can at least provide you with a means of escape. If we fail, it will be up to you and your team to offer as much support as possible."

Fox lowered his vision a moment, then turned to salute General Pepper and say, "Understood."

With that, he hurried off to join his team mates and prepare for battle.

Beltino looked at General Pepper warily, "Do you think they'll really follow through with your orders."

The General remained stony silent for a little while, then answered, "I can't say..."

Fox sat there in the cockpit, reflecting on everything that transpired. It was ironic in a way; one and a half months ago, everything was normal: He and Krystal were planning on finally getting married, Falco and Katt were going steady, Slippy and Amanda had already had their wedding, and Lucy and Peppy were finally starting to connect as father and daughter. It seemed like there was nothing that could ruin things. *Heh. Shows what I know.*

It started with the arrival of the Haldberd, and the dire news it's crew bore. Once the warning of the Mushroom Empire came, all their plans were put on hold as everyone once again prepared for war. And now, Falco and Slippy had lost their loved ones, Fox's best friend from academy was confirmed dead, and their newest member, Dash Bowman, was missing in action. It seemed like the universe reached deep into their hearts and ripped out all the good in them. Truly, things couldn't get any worse.

But Fox had to remind himself not all was lost. His team was still mostly intact, and there was still hope that at least Dash was alive. And if things went well, they'd be able to escape and plan the day of their eventual comeback.

Fox then shook himself from his thoughts. Now wasn't the time to worry about things like that. The Mushroom Empire's Armada was on it's way, and he needed to be focused. He knew they were supposed to just hold them off, but any damage they could inflict would be worth their while.

Fox cued his mike, "All ships, report in."

"Greyhound squadron, standing by," Krystal reported in.

"Bulldog squadron, ready to roll," Falco said.

"Husky squadron, all set," Slippy said.

"All right, teams," Fox into his mike, "Our job to hold the armada long enough for the transports to escape. Not one ship is to get through our lines. Understood?"

"Don't worry," Krystal replied, "We can do anything."

"No problem," Falco said confidently.

"Those punks better watch out," Slippy added, "Cuz they're in our house now!"

What followed was a series of shouts and hollers of courage. Fox felt fortunate to know such brave souls.

Just then, the armada appeared out of hyper space before them. They outnumbered them two to one; of course, Fox never payed attention to numbers.

With that, he gave his orders: "This is it. Bulldog and Husky Squadrons hold the main lines; take down any ship that gets too close. Greyhound and Whitefang Squadrons on me; we hit 'em head on!"

He then surged his Arwing forward at full speed. The Greyhound and Whitefang Squadrons followed him. Several war cries echoed in Fox's ears. This was do or die time; no room for mistakes.

The battle progressed a straight four minutes. The fighters did their job and held the lines. Several rocketons were mixed in among the Cornerian fighters, but it was the Cornerians who were dealing the most damage this time. The enemy fighters were dropping left and right like flies, while the cruisers continued to recieve massive punishment from the offensive lines. The defensive lines also saw their fair share of action, as they continued to nail rocketon after rocketon, whitteling their numbers down significantly.

"Falco!" Fox heard Krystal cry out, "Watch out, behind you!"

"Shoot!" Falco cried.

Fox looked about from his ship and caught sight of Falco's arwing, dodging shots from three persuing rocketons.

"Hold on, Falco," Fox yelled.

He immediately changed course and lined himself up behind the three rocketons. Then, with fluid movement, he pulled the trigger and dispatched all three rocketons perfectly.

"Thanks, buddy," Falco called out.

"Star Fox Team!"

Fox recognized the voice as Beltino's. Beltino was with General Pepper in the space station, monitoring the battle progress.

"Go ahead," Fox replied.

"The evacuation fleet is ready. They're coming up now," Beltino said.

"Great," Fox said enthusiastically, "All right, we just gotta hold them here a little bit longer."

"So sorry, but your time is up," a new voice crackled in Fox's ears.

He recognized the voice. It was the same oily voice he'd heard before, during the Battle of Fichina.

"Oikonny!"

Only moments after this Oikonny's flag ship emerged into view from between the Mushroom Empire's own warships. Fox couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it before, considering the ship was colored red among a fleet of black ships.

"I should've known you'd join up with these creeps," Fox growled.

"Just playing for the winning side," Oikonny replied haughtily.

"Well don't think having you on their side is gonna change anything," Falco yelled defiantly.

"Poor little fools," Oikonny taunted, "How little you know of me."

The moment he said that, three ships materialized into vision by the interdimensional gate. These were Oikonny's stealth ships, and they had snuck passed the defensive lines and were now poised to destroy the gate.

"No!!" Fox cried, "Somebody stop them!"

"I'm on it!" Slippy yelled. He was the closest to the stealth ships, thus the only one capable of catching them in time.

Slippy's arwing broke from the defensive line and sped straight for the stealth ships, blasters blazing. As he did so, the stealth ships began opening their missile launchers, preparing to attack. Slippy activated the boosters and zoomed in on his targets. Suddenly, two more ships materialized in front of him, with several missiles aimed right at him.

"Whoa!" Slippy cried.

Unfortunately, his reaction was seconds too late. The moment he tried to avoid them, the stealth fighters fired their missiles, and they all sped towards Slippy.

"Slippy!" Fox heard Beltino cry.

But it was no good. The missiles blasted Slippy's arwing, and the ship exploded into flames. Fox averted his eyes, but could still hear Slippy's scream as his craft was engulfed by fire. Then, Slippy's communicator cut out to static. And at that same moment, the three other stealth ships also fired their missiles. The fragile frame of the warp gate was torn assunder.

"Sir!" Fox heard one of the other pilots yell, "The warp gate! It's gone!"

Fox began to feel his stomach turn. They'd bested him yet again. Only now, the consequences were far more dire. There would be no second chances after this one. Now, they had truly lost.

"Fox," General Pepper's voice barked through Fox's communicator, "You must flee. Now!"

"No General," Fox replied, "I can't..."

"You're no good to us if you're dead!" Pepper yelled fiercely, "You must run now!"

"You rotten ape!!" Fox heard Falco bellow through the communicator.

Fox looked up in time to see Falco's arwing blaze past him in a straight bee line towards Oikonny's ship.

"What?" Oikonny was now sounding fearful, "What are you-?"

"I'll make you pay for that! I'LL MAKE YOU PAY!!"

"Falco! Stop!" Krystal cried.

But it was too late. There would be no reasoning with him now.

"No! Stay back!!" Oikonny cried cowerdly.

Of course, no manner of pleading could save him now. It took mere seconds for Falco's ship to catch up with Oikonny's. And in an instant, Falco's arwing slammed head on into Oikonny's flag ship with explosive force. The resulting fireball engulfed both the arwing and Oikonny's ship, incinerating them both instantly.

Fox started looking frantically about, searching for Krystal's ship. He caught sight of her just a small distance away. He couldn't see her, but her erratic breathing in her communicator told him she was about ready to faint.

"All squadrons!" Fox yelled, "Fall back! Repeat, fall back!"

Immediately, all ships broke off from the enemy vessels and sped back to the station. There was nothing

more they could do; the Cornerian Fleet had lost.

"Krystal," Fox yelled, "You gotta get outta here!"

"No, Fox!" Krystal cried, "I'm not leaving you!"

"Krystal, please! I can't let you die here!" Fox pleaded with her.

"I said no, Fox!" Krystal replied stubbornly.

"I'm sorry," Fox said as he input a command into his computer, "but, there's no room for discussion."

He then activated the command and a signal was sent from his arwing into Krystal's. Immediately, her ship went into auto-pilot mode, and started towards a point in space away from the battle field.

"Fox!" Krystal cried, "Don't-!"

"I'm sorry," Fox said. And then he fired a special capsule from beneath his arwing, which flew to the spot Krystal was aimed at and activated the temporary worm hole.

"I don't know where it'll lead you," Fox said, choking back tears, "but you'll be safe; that's all that matters."

"Fox!" Krystal continued to cry tearfully as she wrestled with her controls. Desperately she ripped off her harness and looked towards Fox's arwing just to get a last glimpse of his face. But his ship was well beyond visual range by then, and it was too late to do anything.

For a few fleeting seconds, Fox could hear Krystal burst into tears as she rode in the arwing towards the worm hole. And then, her arwing slipped into the worm hole, and it shut behind her.

You're safe now, Fox thought to himself, That's all that matters.

"How sentimental."

The voice Fox now heard was a new one. One that seemed to reek of vileness beyond his comprehension. And at that very moment, a large black ship, the largest in the entire armada, had crept up in front him. Fox looked up at it and could feel death emanate in waves from it.

The cold voice spoke again, "I must say, you're quite an accomplished pilot aren't you?"

Fox remained silent, so the voice continued, "Let me make this simple: I'm offering you a choice. Either you can continue to fight me, and die, or you can join me, and enjoy luxury and power beyond your wildest imaginations."

"I guess this means you're that Mario guy, aren't you?" Fox asked coolly.

Mario chuckled slightly into the communicator and then said, "You'd be right. So, what is your decision."

"Thanks for the offer," Fox said defiantly, "But I think I'll take my chances," and with that he pressed the red button on his control and fired a red bomb at the intimidating ship. The bomb ripped through the ship like tin foil and caused it to lurch to one side.

That one's for you, Bill.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Fox broke to the ship's starboard (right) side and prepared to make a run for it.

But just then, another arwing appeared right in front of him. Fox immediately brought his ship to a halt and the two ships hovered there, staring at each other. Fox was struck dumb for a moment; Krystal had already been sent away, and there was no other Star Fox member that could be here...except...

"Dash!" Fox cried, "You're alive!"

"Yes," Dash replied.

"No time to chat," Fox said hurriedly, "We gotta-."

"Sorry, Fox," Dash interrupted, "but we aren't going anywhere."

Fox was silent for a moment. Then his eyes widened as a terrible realization sank in.

"Dash...you-."

"I'm fighting for peace now, Fox," Dash said as his arwing began charging a missile, "and you're in the way."

Dash then fired his missile, and Fox's ship was blown to pieces. Dash showed little emotion as he

watched the ship of his former comrade break apart.

General Pepper watched in utter horror as Dash's arwing fired its missile and destroyed Fox's arwing in an instant. It seemed to the general that all their hopes seemed shatter along with Fox's ship, leaving nothing but despair behind.

The entire command center on the station became deathly silent. The event seemed so unreal to them. Yet, there was no denying the facts: Fox McCloud was now dead.

"Orders, sir?" one of the soldiers asked softly.

Pepper stood there, silent for a moment, then said, "Have all units stand down. We're surrendering."

"Yes, sir."

General Pepper turned over to where Beltino was now standing, and saw the old frog crying his eyes out over the loss of his son, Slippy. Pepper himself felt like crying, but for some reason, the tears wouldn't flow. It seemed as though his tears dried up long ago. He simply stood there, staring at the spot where Fox's arwing once was.

Now...all is truly lost.

Back at Sauria, though the planet was completely evacuated, none of the crew of either the Halberd or of Great Fox were feeling high spirited. They'd just received a coded message from Corneria reporting the defeat of Star Fox team and the rest of the fleet. The news hit them like a ton of bricks.

Peppy and Lucy probably took the news hardest of all. Now, as far as they knew, they were the last of the Star Fox team. Daisy had joined them aboard the Great Fox, and was cradling her head in her hands.

"We shouldn't have come," she said somberly, "We should've stayed there. If they had the Halberd on their side-."

"That's enough, Princess!" Peppy snapped.

Daisy snapped her head up and glared at Peppy with blood-shot eyes. Peppy was reminded he wasn't the only one shedding tears.

"I'm sorry," he said with a softer tone, "It's just... We can't second guess ourselves. If you'd been there, you probably would've been killed with them."

Daisy lowered her head again as more tears poured down her face. Lucy then ran from the room, covering her face as she burst into tears. This news wasn't easy on any of them.

"I guess," Peppy continued, "All we can do now is move forward, and hope for the-."

Daisy interrupted him with a sarcastic chuckle, then said, "You know, I'm really starting to get tired of that word. 'Hope?' What's there left to hope for?"

Peppy stared at Daisy worriedly for a moment. She looked as though about ready to hang herself.

Peppy pushed the thought from his mind.

Just then, ROB 64, the Great Fox's robot operator, turned from his station and told Peppy, "Incoming message from Halberd."

Daisy hardly took notice, so Peppy said, "Put 'em through."

After ROB input a command into his console, the main screen flashed and revealed the face of a sandy-haired human with glasses. This was Otacon: one of the allies recruited by the Knights of Hope a while back. His computer skills were second to none, however, some considered him somewhat of a geek.

"What can I do for you, Otacon?" Peppy asked.

"Just wanted to give a little bit of good news," Otacon said half-cheerfully.

"What good news is that?" Peppy inquired.

"I analyzed the message we received," Otacon explained, "and found a tiny incrypted message inside it."

Peppy remained silent, but looked somewhat interested. Daisy also raised her head in curiosity. "It reads," Otacon said as he cleared his throat, "Star Fox member escapes through dimension jump." Daisy and Peppy both lept from their seats. "Are you sure it's legitamate?" Peppy asked. "I checked it out," Otacon replied, "It's clean." Peppy looked over to Daisy, who'd sat back down to think. Then she rose back up, her face more brighter than before, and said, "Tell Blade Knight to get ready for a dimension jump." "Yes, ma'am," Otacon said with a smile and a salute. When the picture cut out, Peppy turned to Daisy and asked, "I thought you got tired of 'hope.'" Daisy paused for a moment, then, after wiping her face dry, she beamed at Peppy and said, "I guess I lied." Peppy smiled warmly, *All she needed was some good news.*

The worm hole opened up to a point over another world and spit out Krystal's ship. At that point, the auto-pilot was shut off, and she had control of the ship again. But it didn't matter now; nothing mattered anymore.

Krystal burried her face into her hands. Now she was truly alone. Falco, Slippy, all of them were gone now. There was no one left. It was the second time in her life she found herself alone. The cold feeling of loss gripped her tightly like a large hand.

Just then, alarms started blaring within her cockpit. Krystal looked up and saw that her ship, after being thrown from the worm hole, was now hurtling towards the planet she was near, pulled in by it's gravitational force.

But she didn't care. Death seemed like a welcome escape from this horrific nightmare. In a way, it seemed like the only way she could be with her friends again. She closed her eyes, and let the image of Fox's face form in her mind. And then, she saw all their friends standing near them. All that was left was to go to them.

Krystal's arwing began to glow bright red as it hurtled toward the planet below. If Krystal had bothered to open her eyes, she would've been able to see the vast plains below her just as she cleared the cloud line. As her vessel began to pick up speed, the computer's emergency landing system kicked in, and took control of the vessel. Krystal didn't even bother; by now, she was sure it was too late. She relaxed her body within the shaking cockpit, and waited for the end.

The emergency landing system righted the aircraft just enough to avoid a nose-dive right into the ground, but it wasn't enough to avoid a crash. Krystal's arwing then slammed into the earth with explosive force, bounced up back into the air a short ways, then came back to ground as it skidded to a grinding halt.

The force of the impact had slammed Krystal's head against her console and knocked her out cold, leaving a deep gash on her forehead. Given the situation, left alone, she would have most certainly died. But she wasn't to die just yet, for at that moment, whether by coincidence or devine intervention, a lone rider had just bared witness to the calamity, and was riding towards the wreckage upon a scarlet steed to investigate.

9 - Destiny Calls

Krystal couldn't believe what she was now seeing. It was a wedding; her wedding. Everyone was there: Slippy, Amanda, Katt, Lucy, General Pepper, even Star Wolf had shown up (though more towards the back, barely noticeable). Falco was there, as the best man. And there, standing in a dashing tuxedo, was Fox himself. Never before had he ever looked more handsome. Slowly, Krystal walked forward. The whole scene was just perfect. All the while she drew closer and closer to her husband to be. And then... Krystal felt her eyes begin to flutter open. Soon, as her vision came back to her, she found she was someplace else. There was no wedding, her friends were gone, and she was alone. The pain came back to her in waves. The warm happiness was replaced by the cold, dull, ache in her heart. Krystal felt like she was dying at that very moment. She closed her eyes. She would've loved to welcome death; anything to take the pain away.

But then, a voice seemed to call to her from the darkness. She didn't see the face of the person calling, nor could she recognize the voice. All she could see was a shadowy figure in the dark. At first, she couldn't understand what he was saying, but as she drew nearer, the words became clear: "Don't give up. Please, hold on just a little while longer." It was then that the darkness lifted ever so slightly, and she could make out details of her strange visitor: a green garbed warrior, offering his hand to her. But just as she reached out for it, the figure began to fade from sight.

"Wait!" Krystal cried out. She bolted upright in her bed, reaching out. But the vision was gone. All that was left to her was the memory.

Just then, a sharp pain struck at Krystal's forehead. It wasn't until just now that she noticed her injury. It was at that same moment that she noticed the bandage wrapped around her forehead. She was saved. But by who? And to what end?

Krystal decided to leave these questions on hold for the moment. For now, she was probably in good care. For what little good it mattered.

As she lay back down, Krystal looked about herself to find she was lying in an old, wooden, cot. Then, she looked around and took in the rest of the room: the walls were made of stone brick, and the building itself held up by wooden support beams. The roof was made of wooden planks, and the room was lit by a few torches. As she brought herself up, supported by her elbows, she noticed three tables pushed against the far wall, most likely to make room for her.

Then, as Krystal's vision traveled to the open doorway on her left side, she noticed a small pair of eyes staring at her. At first, she was startled and rose sharply, which caused the pair of eyes to dart back behind the doorway. Krystal remained upright, watching the doorway intently.

Then, the small eyes appeared again, this time followed by the rest of the face. Krystal then relaxed that it was just a child who was watching her. For a moment there, she half expected it to be some form of hideous troll.

As the boy emerged from his hiding spot, Krystal gave him a good look over. He was human like, a form of race Krystal had never seen until the moment the Haldberd arrived. He looked to be at least five to six years of age. His eyes were blue and his blonde hair combed neatly to each side. His clothes were rather plain, as if he were brought up under a humble environment.

The moment he came out he bowed his head and said, "Sis tae lan. Gordet lilyn ret ten."

Krystal did a double take. Then asked, "I'm sorry, what was that?"

The boy looked at her inquisitively, then asked, "Horkon...mela cop tek mai?"

Krystal was beginning to feel panicked, "I...I don't understand..."

The boy was also beginning to look a little awkward when another voice came from behind him.

"Oi! Colin!"

The boy turned immediately upon hearing the name. Krystal wasn't sure whether 'Colin' was actually his name or some word meaning 'boy'.

A middle aged woman walked into the doorway next. She wore fairly a lot of makeup and wore her hair in a high up pony tail. Her attire suggested she either was a cook or a bartender. What Krystal noticed most of all was her pointed ears; she thought this to be somewhat unusual, given that the boy's ears weren't pointed. Krystal decided to keep her assumptions to herself.

"Colin," the woman said to the boy in a scolding tone, "Meka to nor sep mek nela pasto con?"

"Shina met to mek nela pasto mai," the boy replied defensively.

The woman then turned to Krystal and said, "Colin me sackvi nek. Orbos coo neek neta."

Krystal was starting to feel herself blush.

The boy then started tugging on the woman's apron and whispered to her, "Shesta hostin Hylia nov toka mai."

"Hylia nov toka mai?" the woman asked in astonishment, to which the boy nodded in response.

The woman then turned to Krystal and bowed apologetically saying, "Sis tae lan."

Krystal was at least able to surmise that 'sis tae lan' was some form of apologizing. To which Krystal herself bowed and said, "It's no trouble." Although whether or not they understood her intent was something else.

The woman then placed a hand on her chest and said, "Telma," then placed a hand on the boy and said "Colin."

Krystal guessed that she was trying to introduce themselves, so she placed her own hand on her chest and said, "Krystal."

Both Telma and Colin nodded to show they understood. Telma then said slowly, "Koro mesa ni," while using a hand gesture she assumed meant wait. Then both of them left for a while, leaving Krystal alone. As she sat there, Krystal wanted to thank these people for their kindness, but couldn't think anything outside of speaking. Then, as she was looking down, she noticed her wrist communicator. It was then that she remembered that Slippy had added a universal translator to their communicators. It was almost amazing she forgot such a thing.

Krystal immediately tried switching it on, but the communicator simply beeped weakly then fizzled silent. This certainly posed a problem. But, she wasn't about to be deterred just yet. Pulling the communicator off her wrist, and pulling an emergency tool kit from her utility belt, she set to work at fixing her communicator. It wasn't a difficult piece of equipment, and surely easy to repair.

Just as she started her work, she heard a door open from the other room and two pairs of feet walk in.

Telma's voice called out happily, "Ilia! Link! Tobo sakta."

"Tobo sakta, Telma nin," a young woman's voice replied.

Next, Krystal could hear a young man's voice, "Telma nin, shesta domo con?"

"Shesta con et nia mei," Telma replied happily, "Nina siki tet na."

"Akat mi toka nen?" the young woman asked.

"Toka nendai, Hylia nov toka mai den," Telma said rather glumly.

"Zokka," the young man said, "Tota nema kai?"

"'Krystal' do tek," Telma said.

Krystal continued to work on her communicator while listening to their conversation; the damage was superficial, so it didn't take long to fix. From what she could tell, the young man seemed to be called Link and the young woman Ilia. They seemed concerned about Krystal, though she couldn't seem to get why. Krystal was just about putting the final touches on the repairs when Colin walked in with a bowl of soup.

"Soro kakinet?" Colin asked as Krystal slipped her communicator back on her wrist.

Then Colin placed the bowl on the small table next to her cot and began to speak again just as Krystal turned her translator on.

"Telma nin moro-the soup. It's very good; I'm sure you'll like it."

Krystal smiled. It was going to be nice being on speaking terms. Of course, Colin wasn't sure how to take her smile.

"Thank you," Krystal told Colin, in what seemed to him as his own language.

Colin became wide-eyed and said, "Whoa. You can speak Hylian?"

"Not exactly," Krystal replied, pointing to her communicator.

Colin looked at it for a moment, then said, "I see. It's your bracelet, right? It has magic powers?"

Krystal was a little taken back by this statement. It was probably ages since the last time she'd heard somebody refer to something as magic. But, she had to remind herself that this was probably a much more primitive culture; one with little understanding of her kind of technology.

"Yes," she replied, "magic."

Colin then went and called for the people in the other room, "Quick, quick! You have to see this!"

Telma, along with the two other people she was talking with ran in. The young woman, probably Ilia, was blonde with fair skin and plain clothing, like Colin. The young man, Link, was somewhat more peculiar than the others. His hair was blonde and had blue eyes, and his ears were more pointed as well, a trait she didn't see in Ilia. His outfit was also unusual: a green tunic and hat whose point drooped down in the back. But the more she looked at him, the more he started to seem familiar.

"What's wrong, honey?" Telma asked.

"Don't worry," Krystal said, "Everything's fine."

Telma and Ilia gasped suddenly and Link whispered to Telma, "I thought you said she couldn't speak Hylian."

"It's her bracelet," Colin told them, "it's magic."

"Magic?" Ilia asked Colin, then turned to Krystal and said, "So, you are a magician."

"Well, not really," Krystal replied bashfully, "Where I'm from, everyone has one of these."

"Well, honey," Telma said more joyfully, "it'll be great to know we'll be able to understand each other from now on."

"Yes. And thank you for saving me," Krystal said, bowing at the waist.

"You should really thank Link for that," Ilia said, patting Link on the shoulder, "He was the one who found you."

"Oh," Krystal took a look at Link, who had averted his vision at the last second. "Thank you," she said to Link.

"Could...you excuse us for just a moment?" Link asked Ilia and Telma softly.

Telma, after looking at Link for a short while, said, "Sure thing, honey," then motioned for Ilia and Colin to follow her.

After they had left, Link sat down on one end of the cot, and looked at Krystal, who was on the opposite side of the cot and had averted her vision.

"You okay?" Link asked.

Krystal was silent for a moment, then replied, "I'll live."

"That's not what I mean," Link said more insistently.

"Then what do you mean?" Krystal still looked down at the cold stone floor.

"Telma said you were talking in your sleep," Link said. His stare seemed to bore right into Krystal's soul.

Krystal remained silent, so Link continued, "I can't say that I understand the kind of pain you're going through, but no matter what, you can't just give up on living."

Krystal then turned to Link and said testily, "Who are you to presume you can tell me what to do?"

"Just a guy who knows to always hope for the better," Link replied calmly.

Krystal began to feel angry at him. She'd never heard such idiotic words from a more ignorant jerk in her life.

"You have no clue what you're talking about," Krystal told Link coldly.

Link had no answer to this, and simply got off the cot and walked out. Krystal looked after him; she couldn't imagine what gave him the gaul to try to give her that pep talk.

What does that jerk know. Krystal thought to herself resentfully. The more she thought about it, the more she started connecting her earlier vision with that same warrior, which only angered her even more.

She could hear Link whisper something to the others. Krystal didn't need to hear him to know what he was saying. Right now, she'd prefer it if they gave her space for now. So with that, she closed her eyes and tried to fall back to sleep, hoping Fox would be there in her dreams again.

Link stalked out the door to the tavern and closed the door behind him. All told, Link felt he had every right to be mad at her, though he chose not to show it. He had his own friend he had to say fairwell to, and not being able to see her at all was just as painful as whatever loss Krystal might have suffered; at least, that's how he felt. The only reason Link didn't snap back at her was because of his better judgement.

Link resolved to try again later; surely she wasn't as lost a cause as the others assumed she was. But just then, Link heard a strange music. It was played on a horn that Link was somewhat able to recognize.

Could it be...?

The moment he ran a good distance away from the entrance into a more open area, the music immediately cut off. Link held his ground and perked his ears, listening intently for the horn to start playing again.

And then, suddenly, Link was caught from behind by a sour note that sent goose-bumps all over his skin. He nearly jumped three feet into the air as he whirled around. Link then found himself facing a short, raggedy dressed imp, holding the very horn that was playing the strange music earlier. Link recognized him immediately.

"You're-! You're that Skull Kid from the Sacred Grove!" Link exclaimed as he tried to catch his breath.

"You catch on quick," Skull Kid replied, wearing the same smirk he always wore.

"And just what do you want?" Link demanded.

"Just to warn you," Skull Kid replied slyly.

Link eyed him warily; Link was never sure what to expect from him, "Warn me of what?"

"A new age of darkness approaches on swift wings," Skull Kid said jovially, flapping his hands as he danced around Link in a child-like manner.

Link remained silent for a moment, then asked "Ganon returns?"

Skull Kid immediately stopped and waved Link's question away as if it were a fly, "Psh! Hardly! He's nothing compared to what's coming."

"What is coming, then?" Link asked more anxiously.

"If you want to know more, I suggest asking your new friend," Skull Kid replied, pointing in the direction of Telma's Bar.

It took Link only a moment to surmise the meaning, "Krystal?"

"That's right," Skull Kid said, "Fox-lady there has faced the evil...and lost."

Link was beginning to feel more and more anxious about this news as Skull Kid continued, "And so, it will be up to you to stop the evil."

"What?" Link asked incredulously

"Of course," Skull Kid answered, "Orders from the Goddesses, after all."

Link stumbled backwards until he bumped against the wall, then slid down to his feet. "I don't have much

of choice in this, do I?" he asked glumly as he eyed his left hand.

"Maaaaaybe," Skull Kid said, then blew his horn right into Link's face. The horn began spouting small dead leaves, which blinded Link for a short while. After Link opened his eyes again, Skull Kid was gone; in his place was a long, slender package.

Link picked it up gingerly, then pulled back the cloth wrapping to discover that the item was actually the legendary weapon of the Hero: The Master Sword.

Link took a deep sigh, and rose to his feet. The day had finally come; as they said it would. Not long after Link had departed from Ordon Village and begun roaming the plains of Hyrule, he'd recieved a vision from the four guardian spirits of Hyrule. In the vision, they'd told him to be on his guard and to not stray from the path, for a time would come when the Hero's strength would be needed again.

And now, that time had come. Link felt resentful of the symbol engraved into his hand. He'd never asked to be a hero; the only reason he took the job the first time was to save his friends. Link never wanted to make a career of it, and if it were up to him, he'd give the position up outright. But then he thought about his friends; not just the ones he made in Ordon Village, but all the people he'd met during his quest. He remembered that it was only because of his courage that his world was spared from darkness. There was no one else.

I guess, Link thought to himself, I just hope for the best...

10 - A New Battle

Mario stared out the window into the blackness of space. It was amazing how many stars there were in the great expanse of space. Of course, looking at them this close was different from looking at them from the ground. Mario closed his eyes, and let his mind wander.

He thought back to a long time ago. To a time years away, when things were simpler. Mario and Peach were lying in a patch of flowers, looking up at the night sky. Peach always enjoyed the quietness of watching the stars. And, of course, whatever she enjoyed, Mario enjoyed as well. That particular night, Mario was planning something special. He'd thought about this for months. They'd been together for so long, he felt that now was time to do it.

Of course, timing was everything. All Mario needed was the right moment. So far, they'd spent 15 minutes watching stars, and while Peach was becoming more and more relaxed, Mario was practically a nervous wreck, as he fingered his little present for Peach inside his pocket.

"Did you hear?" Peach then suddenly asked.
Mario was startled slightly, then replied, "Hear what?"
"Russ T.'s getting married!" Peach said excitedly.

"Really," Mario said, sensing his moment quickly approaching, "It's funny you should mention marriage-."

"It's so romantic, isn't it?" Peach said, interrupting Mario, "Devoting oneself to someone who you adore more than any other person in the world."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Mario said, doing his best to hide his excitement.

"And just think," Peach continued, "soon they're gonna have children, raise a family, and...Oh, it's just so wonderful isn't it? I've always wondered what it would be like to have children. Don't you think it'd be wonderful?"

At this point, whatever excitement Mario may have developed had disappeared in an puff of smoke.

Children? Family? These were concepts Mario had never considered until that moment.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Peach said, and then turned to Mario expectedly and asked "You wanted to tell me something?"

Mario then started to feel panic; however ready he felt before, he was most certainly not ready now.

"Um...you...you look especially beautiful tonight."
Peach's starry eyes then lost their glitter, and Mario thought he caught a hint of disappointment in her smile.

"Oh. Well...thank you," she said, and then she laid back down to watch the stars.

Mario opened his eyes again as he brought himself back from the painful memory. It was the hardest thing he had to live with in his entire life. He could've proposed; he *should've* proposed. Why didn't he?

Mario, of course, knew the answer: he was afraid. Afraid of change, of commitment, of being a parent. Being of such small mindedness, it was a wonder why they stayed together for as long as they did. Their relationship may have been well known, but it progressed nowhere. It was in flux, and was only skin deep. At the time, that was how Mario would've preferred it, but it always seemed like Peach wanted something more. Mario regretted knowing so little then, compared to how much he knew now.

Mario was then forced from his thoughts by the sound of his doors opening. He turned in his chair to face his two top generals. The first one was a tall skinny man who wore a black styled outfit with a purple cap. The person beside him, Mario's second general, was shorter in stature, and more portly, with a yellow outfit and cap.

"Report," Mario said.

"Repairs on the Gauntlet are going along smoothly. She took a lotta damage on the port side, but we should have it ready by the end of the week," the tall man replied.

"And what of our rebel problem," Mario asked.

To this question, the tall man was less willing to answer readily, so the fat man spoke, "We're having a little...trouble with that one, but we should have it under control soon."

At this, Mario shot two energy bolts at them and blew them into the bulk-head behind them.

"Soon?" Mario asked incredulously, then said, "Soon has already come and gone. And so far, I'm still hounded to no end by those insidious Knights of Hope!"

The two generals simply sat there, afraid to get back up, while Mario continued, "What's more, I also have the displeasure of dealing with that Meta Knight fellow from the Pop Star Dimension! And to top it all off, we now have that group known as Star Wolf to contend with!" He punctuated his frustration by slamming his fist into his desk, smashing the surface of the glass section completely.

"Boss. Come on," The fat man said cautiously, "We're doing the best we can."

"Somehow, I seriously doubt it, Mister Wario," Mario snapped, "If you and Waluigi were truly doing your best, there wouldn't be anymore resistances for me to worry about, would there?"

Neither general had an answer to this, and so remained silent as they rose back to their feet.

"Maybe," Mario continued, "The reason you two are failing in your responsibilities is because the work load is too much for you..."

"Whoa, wait a minute, Boss-man," Wario responded defensively, "We can handle the responsibility junk! It's no problem, really!"

"Then, for your sakes," Mario said coldly, "You'd best try harder from now on."

Just then, a computerized chime sounded from an intercom on Mario's desk, and he pressed the intercom and barked, "What?"

"Dash Bowman, reporting, Sir," the voice responded calmly.

"What is it," Mario asked irritably.

"One of your fighter pilots was successful in scanning the small worm-hole the girl used to escape," Dash replied.

Mario's temper seemed to be tamed by this news, and he said, "Go on."

"After analyzing the frequency, we were able to trace it to it's exit point. We know which dimension she escaped to," Dash said.

Mario was silent after a while, then said into the intercom, "Send the information to me. I'll deal with her myself."

"As you wish, my King," Dash said, then the intercom cut off.

"As for you two," Mario said with an icy cold glare, "get to work on our rebel problems, or you will have to face most dire consequences."

"You got it, Boss!" Both Wario and Waluigi replied frightenly, and both bolted out the door in milliseconds.

Once Mario was alone again, he took another look out into the stars. And he was once again washed over with feelings of regret. If he'd only taken a chance, just maybe, his life would've turned out for the better. Of course, Mario reminded himself once again of his incompetence back then. And now, Peach was gone, and he was now truly alone.

That's why he needed to continue forward. Never again would evil arise to threaten the innocent; never again will people need to suffer. Mario would change everything. Everyone, once brought under one nation, will no longer think of waging war or causing pain. He would bring about the beginning of the age of peace; peace as according to him. At that moment, Mario cracked a smile as he thought about the perfect world he'd be building. Then, a toad soldier entered, carrying the message given to him by Dash.

A whole day had passed, and Link, with the help of some local rock beings, called Gorons, was able to retrieve Krystal's ship and hide it in some foliage near the town walls. That was fairly easy, but, when you considered his other mission, Link was starting to feel pushed to his limit. No matter what he said or how hard he tried, he could not get the now clamish Krystal to open up. Despite the urgency of the current situation, nothing seemed to stir her. All Krystal did was either sit in a corner brooding, or lie in her cot in a vain attempt to fall back to sleep. Link had never seen such depression before in his life.

Link was, at the moment, sitting at the bar, gulping down yet another glass of Ordon goat's milk. So far, the only change was Link's deteriorating patience.

"Ya know, honey," Telma chimed in, "you drink anymore of that milk, you're gonna use up my last barrel's worth."

"Sorry," Link replied as he rubbed the ridge of his nose, "I got a lot on my mind."

"Bet you five rupees I already know what you're thinking about," Telma replied.

Link thought about this for a bit, then said, "I'll pass. You more than likely do know."

"Look," Telma began, "If this whole 'save the universe' business is too much for you, let someone else take care of it. Why put yourself through all this hub-bub?"

"You don't understand," Link answered, "I gotta do this. This is my duty we're talking about."

"What duty?" Telma asked, "You think just because some wierdo spirit told you you're the 'Hero of Legend' you feel bound to go fight whatever evil shows up?"

Link didn't say anything, but pointed to his left hand.

"That little tatoo don't mean-,"

"You're not listening, Telma!" Link interrupted, "I have to do this!"

"No you don't!" Telma said angrily, "Hyrule is safe! There's no proof that this 'evil' is gonna come here!"

"And what if it doesn't?" Link continued, "How are we supposed to just sit here while the rest of the universe burns down all around us?"

"They'll find their champion!" Telma said, her tempers rising still, "You don't have to solve everyone's problems!"

Link stared at Telma for a short while, then said, "What's become of you? Only six months ago, you were more daring than this. More willing to stand up against the darkness growing all about our kingdom. You'd be the first to offer your aid, not just for precious little Hyrule, but for the Gorons and the Zoras as well! Has all this peace made you so afraid of darkness that you would turn a deaf ear to those who suffer?!"

Telma slammed her fist down at this and stared back at Link with tearful eyes.

"Get out," Telma whispered angrily, and turned to tend to a pile of dirty cups. Link stormed out of the bar, kicking a stool over to punctuate his frustration. Thankfully, there weren't any other customers in the bar. Telma knew all too well how awkward the scene would've been if she was seen arguing with a well renowned hero.

This didn't mean of course that the conversation went unheard, for their voices were enough to rouse Krystal from her sleep. She still laid there, only this time pondering Link's words.

After leaving the bar, Link took to his heels and made his way to the western gates; running as fast as he could until he reached Hyrule Field. This was probably the only place he'd ever felt at peace. True, the woods of Ordon Village provided just as much comfort, but there was an emptiness present in Hyrule field that was far more comforting. Link figured that maybe he preferred emptiness above all else. No past, no future; not even a present. Time seemed to stand still here. It was as if you could lie here forever, and you wouldn't have to worry about anything at all. How easy life would be.

Then again, Link thought to himself, there wouldn't be much point to living, would there?

Link, after crossing the bridge and the stone path, found a small patch of grass and planted himself down. It was about mid-day, and the sun shone brightly in the sky. It was amazing how warm the air was

here compared to the tiny goat pen in Ordon. At least here you could get a breeze that blew just the right way.

As Link sat there, he closed his eyes and let his mind go blank. He didn't want to think about Krystal, or his mission, and especially not the argument he just had. All he wanted to do was let all his trouble melt into nothingness.

As he lay there, Link soon lost track of all time. And it wasn't until he heard someone sit down next to him that he was brought back to reality.

Link's eyes flew open and he rose sharply, immediately reaching for his sword. But then, he relaxed his muscles when he saw who was next to him. Even still, he was surprised to see Krystal out and about.

"Sorry," Krystal said, "didn't mean to interrupt your meditating."

"It's no trouble," Link replied, then noticing how far the sun had sunk said, "Looks like I've been out longer than I intended."

"Time tends to fly when you're resting," Krystal said.

They sat in silence for a short while, then Link turned to Krystal and asked, "So, what made you come looking for me?"

Krystal continued her silence for a short while, then asked, "Have you always cared this much about others?"

Link was silent for a moment; this was another surprise to him, so he asked, "Why do you ask?"

Krystal didn't answer, so Link decided to answer first, "If you must know, it's part of what I've believed all my life. From the day I was born to the day I first became the Hero, the truth I've come to live by is to think of others, not of myself."

"Your parents must have raised you well," Krystal said as she gazed off at the sinking sun.

Link's vision sunk to the ground as he replied, "They would have...if I had any."

Krystal looked over at Link suddenly, startled by his reply. After a small pause, she said, "Sorry. I didn't-."

"It's no trouble," Link said flatly, "Besides, I didn't say I was alone."

Krystal looked at Link curiously for a moment, then Link continued, "It was thanks to the villagers of Ordon. They're all the family I've ever known."

"Sounds like you do this hero stuff for them," Krystal said, her vision returning to the horizon.

"Well, yes, but it's not just them," Link said, "It's all life."

Krystal wasn't sure how to reply to this, so Link continued, "You see, during my adventures, I met someone. A mysterious being of shadows. At first, she only helped me in an effort to exact her own vendetta against the one who brought about the calamity that threatened our world. She told me that she couldn't have cared less what happened to my world, so long as she completed her own ends. But then, something happened. We came under attack, and she was badly injured. I had no other course but to take her to the Princess of Hyrule, to see if she could save my friend. And when we arrived there, the

Princess offered her own power, her inner spirit, to save my friend. It was the first act of sacrifice my friend had ever seen, and we were both moved by her sacrifice. From that moment on, my friend no longer cared just about vengeance, but about the well being of both my world and her own. She actually began to care for others. And, you could say, some of her belief rubbed off onto me."

Krystal listened in silence while Link came to his conclusion, "Now I know, more than ever, that all life is precious; too precious to simply ignore. That's why I must stay on the path of the Hero: to protect all life from darkness."

Krystal continued to look at Link with intrigue and awe. Then, she lowered her head as tears began flowing down her face.

Noticing this, Link said with a start, "Did...my story offend you?"

"No," Krystal said, a smile now evident on her face, "It's just...at that moment, you sounded just like...Fox."

Link turned his sights to the horizon, which was starting to turn to a bright red, and said, "He must be an admirable fellow."

Krystal didn't respond at first, but then replied, "Yes...he is."

After that, they spent a time in silence, watching the horizon as the sun continued to set. The beautiful, warm, glow was comforting for both of them, and if they had the luxury, they could've spent the rest of the day, and maybe all night, sitting there.

However, destiny waits for no one, and just at that moment, both their destinies became interwoven as a strange portal flashed before them, partially blinding them. As both Link and Krystal's visions returned to them, they found that the portal had disappeared, and in its place stood the very embodiment of doom.

11 - A Shaken Spirit

When Mario stepped out of the portal, he was surprised for two reasons. First off, he wasn't expecting to find a world as archaic looking as this. Second, he wasn't exactly expecting an audience for his grand entry. Nevertheless, there were two spectators there, one of whom he was looking for, the other someone he hadn't met yet.

"Well, how nice to receive a welcoming committee," Mario said, an eerie calmness lacing his words.

Krystal and Link both leapt to their feet. Link wasn't sure about who Mario was, but remained on his guard none the less. Krystal, on the other hand knew full well who he was.

"You," Krystal said fiercely. That was apparently the only word she could muster at that moment.

"You know him?" Link asked, in Hylian.

Mario, of course, was surprised once again by this flavoring of a foreign language. But he didn't come completely unprepared, and activated his new toy: the wrist communicator/universal translator that he had obtained from Dash's equipment.

"Tell me, green warrior, can you understand me now?" Mario asked Link casually.

Now it was Link's turn to be surprised.

"He has the same magic you have," Link said, looking over to Krystal again.

"Yes," Krystal replied, "My home was conquered by the armada he leads."

"And you, my dear," Mario interjected, "are the one saved by that fool."

Krystal gasped suddenly, and fell silent.

Link, seeing her reaction was able to make the connection, so demanded, "You mean Fox? What did you do with him?"

"Nothing," Mario replied, "If you want someone to blame for his death, ask Mr. Bowman."

Krystal remained silent, but tears began to well up on her face. Link, on the other hand, wasn't able to fully grasp the whole situation.

"You see, Dash felt it was better to join my side," Mario continued, "rather than stay on yours. It was a wise decision on his part. It's a shame Fox wasn't as smart."

Krystal and Link both remained silent as Mario prattled on, "After saving you, he was actually foolish

enough to try to oppose me. Honestly, I can't imagine what fool notion he had that would've led him to believe he could actually change the inevitable. Ah, well. Just another-."

"You foul, wretched, bastard!!"

Link's outburst surprised Krystal, and only slightly annoyed Mario.

"Fox was a warrior! One who gave his life so that his people may be saved from you! I will not stand here silent while you soil his memory like that!!"

Krystal looked towards him, her eyes tear soaked from hearing about Fox's death. But seeing Link passionately defending Fox's honor like that filled her with a sense of gratitude. More and more, she began to see Fox's shining example radiating from Link's spirit. Mario, on the other hand, only saw it as more foolishness.

"It is unwise to provoke a being as powerful as I," Mario said, his agitation becoming most apparent.

"I will show you no mercy," Link replied, his hand gripped tightly on his sword.

"Fool," Mario said as he fired an energy bolt directly at Link. Link, however, reacted with equally fast speed, drawing the Master Sword out at lightning speeds and deflected the beam with it. Mario then closed his fist and the beam fizzled out.

"Very interesting," Mario said with genuine intrigue, "your blade is impressive to be sure, but how's your skill?" As he spoke, he clenched his fist and with a flash, a red and yellow hammer materialized into his hand. Link was unfazed, and pulled out his shield as he prepared for battle.

Then both fighters leapt towards each other at incredible speeds. Link's sword connected with Mario's hammer and the connection created a shockwave of explosive force. The blast knocked Krystal off her feet.

Link was then able to force Mario back a small ways and began swinging furiously at him. Mario met the assault and almost effortlessly blocked every swing with his hammer. After about 30 seconds of this, Link leapt backwards and then charged forward again, ready to perform a thrust attack. Mario took his stance, ready to counter it, but then Link made a last minute roll to the side, maneuvering to Mario's rear. Then, performing a small twirling strike, he managed to land a hit on Mario, who fell forwards from the blow. Link then leapt into the air, and aimed the tip of his blade downward, ready to make the final plunge. But Mario reacted too quickly, and jumped into a small wormhole that teleported him to a different spot on the battle field. After striking the ground, Link pulled his sword from the ground and turned to face Mario as he rose to his feet.

Mario felt the wound on his back. It wasn't severe, but it was the first time he'd ever been struck since acquiring his new powers. Seeing his own blood in his hands was disallusioning for him. It only incurred even more irritation at his new opponent.

"I'll make you regret that," Mario growled, to which Link responded, "Come and try then."

With that, Mario made his charge, brandishing his hammer, ready to bash Link's skull in. Link responded with a charge of his own. They flew at each other at incredible speed. Mario was the first to make a move, swinging his hammer horizontally. Link anticipated the move and leapt over him, performing a flipping strike, landing a blow on Mario's head.

Mario stumbled forward, somewhat dizzy from the blow. After shaking himself aware, he rebounded towards Link, ready to swing again. But just as he was about to strike Link, who'd only barely turned in time to face his opponent, Mario was hit in the side by an energy blast and was knocked off his feet.

Link stood there, dumbfounded for a moment, then looked over to his left, at which time he saw Krystal standing there with what seemed to him as a strange weapon in her hands. Mario rolled on the ground for a while, and then regained his footing to get a look at the one who attacked him.

Krystal stared at him with burning eyes, and her finger on the trigger.

"You've got more than one opponent in this fight."

Mario looked over at Krystal with growing irritation, only barely aware of the gash on his head.

"Seems to be getting a little too noisy here," Mario said, his left eye beginning to twitch slightly. He then fired another energy beam at Link. Link, being distracted, wasn't able to react in time, and was caught in the neck. He tried swinging his sword to deflect the beam again, but the beam maintained its intensity.

"Let's go someplace more private," Mario said, and after creating a wormhole, threw Link in. Krystal reacted too late; she let loose a powerful blast, but Mario countered with a miniature worm hole that absorbed the blast, and shot it back at her. She dodged the blast, and Mario used it as an opportunity to escape into the same wormhole Link was thrown in and disappeared.

Krystal rose to her feet and looked on in disbelief. In desperation she tried looking around to get some glimpse of her new friend. Then, she caught sight of the young lady, Ilia. The look of utter shock told her she'd just bared witness to the event. Krystal felt struck with guilt as she realized she would need to tell her about it.

But just as Krystal was about to walk over to Ilia, a distant sound of jet engines caught both their attention, and both Ilia and Krystal turned towards the sky in time to see a strange vessel descending from the clouds towards Hyrule.

A wormhole opened in the middle of Hyrule Field and spit Link out. Link rolled around dazed from the experience he'd just had. As he struggled to his feet, Mario popped out of the portal and stood a small ways away from him. Link got ready to launch another attack, but was stopped when Mario held up his hand and launched a fireball and knocked Link back a small ways.

"Enough. I didn't bring you here to continue fighting," Mario said.

Link wasn't quite ready to be so trusting, but held his attack anyway. Once it was clear Link wasn't about

to do anything, Mario became more relaxed and began to speak.

"You seem like quite the fighter. You have a lot of power."

"What does it matter to you?" Link asked harshly.

"It takes a lot of men to manage an empire," Mario replied calmly, "I could provide a good position for you in my armada."

Link felt disgusted at the thought, "What? You think I would abandon my convictions to serve your twisted ambitions?!"

"Tell me, you're the hero of this world, right?" Mario asked simply.

"Yes," Link answered cautiously.

"How is it you were able to protect your home for so long?"

Link replied right away, "Because of the power of light, of course!"

Mario chuckled lightly, "Light. And I suppose it was also because of your passion for justice and courageous spirit."

Link wasn't sure how to respond, so Mario continued, "That rubbish you call 'justice' is nothing more than a myth. You delude yourself by filling your head with such fantasies."

Link felt outraged, "What would you know-?!"

"I know enough to realize the truth." Mario interrupted.

"And what truth is that?" Link asked incredulously.

"The only thing that exists in the universe is power." Mario replied.

"You're the fool! Your belief is the myth!" Link shouted back.

"Really? Who's to say you're 'right' and I'm 'wrong'?"

Link was about to answer, but his voice left him. He'd never thought of this question before, and the answer couldn't come to him.

Seeing his silence, Mario continued, "Let me tell you something I've learned. In order for a government to establish itself, it must show it's capable of leading its people and caring for them. To show this, they must demonstrate that they're strong. Thus, if one is to enforce certain ideas, they must be powerful."

"You're wrong," Link said, though his voice was starting to sound unsure.

"You say I'm wrong, but all along you've been proving me right," Mario said.

"What?" Link asked incredulously.

"You can't deny it. You call your victories examples of good conquering evil, but they're nothing more than examples of you, a powerful fighter, conquering a weaker opponent."

Link was about to rebut, but Mario interjected again, "There is no point denying it. Even you are considering that what I've told you may just be true."

Link fell silent again, and Mario continued on, "What if I told you that I intend to create peace for the entire universe."

Link remained silent.

"By completing my empire, I'll have created what no other has ever dreamed capable: a utopia. Think of it, with one rule over all people, I can enforce the kind of peace your convictions could never defend on their own. You cannot deny that my way is the easiest path. Join me, and peace will reign in all the worlds; even this one."

Link felt his stomach turn queezy. It was the first time he'd ever felt unsure of himself. If what Mario said was true, then everything would be solved in a matter of days. He wouldn't need to be a hero anymore; all he'd have to do is help this Mario and peace would be set easily established. How easy life would be then.

Just as Mario finished, he created a new wormhole, and before he left, he turned to Link and said, "I will ignore this world for one week. At the end of that week, I will announce throughout my empire, and in this world as well, that I will give a momentous announcement that will affect the entire future of this universe. And you will be there, otherwise, I will tell your people that you abandoned them. Once you arrive, you will announce to the universe your decision. If you join me, then you will help me hunt down my enemies, and be praised as a hero. And, of course, your people will follow your example, and I will give them peaceful, prosperous lives. If you don't, I will have my army arrest you or destroy you; either way, you won't escape. And your people? I will ensure that they take no part in my dream. The choice is yours."

And with that, he strolled through his portal and disappeared. Link was left alone, confused and disallusioned. What should he do? Would he abandon all he believed in so his people could live safely, or would he stay true to the path and fight? The mission he was charged with only required him to save Hyrule, but then he remembered his words earlier, and he couldn't go against his pledge to protect the other worlds. Of course, if Mario's words to be trusted, he could accomplish both in no time. On the other hand, even Link had to admit that was a pretty big 'if'.

"Hero of Hyrule."

The voice caught Link of guard, and he spun around until he found her. A woman dressed in blue and wearing a golden crown was standing before him, glowing with an eerie radiance.

"Who are you?" Link asked frightenedly.

"I am Roselia; Guardian of galaxies," the woman replied.

"What do you want of me, spirit?" Link asked again.

"Do not except Mario's offer. His vision is one of darkness," Roselia told him.

Link simply fell to his knees, dropping his sword and shield, "But...what if he's right? How am to know what is good or evil anymore?"

"Have faith. Your destiny is far greater than what he offers," Roselia answered.

Link raised his head, "What do you mean?"

Roselia didn't answer, but simply vanished before his eyes.

"Wait!" Link cried out, rising back to chase after her, "Come back! No!"

But it was too late. Link now found himself counfounded with more questions than before. The weight now placed on his shoulder's began to take it's toll on Link's spirit. Under this punishment, he collapsed back onto his hands and knees. This was Link's hardest ordeal yet.

12 - The Week to Come

It took Link hours to get back to Hyrule Castle. It was a large structure, so it was easy to find, however the spot where he was left was still a long distance away. It was only because of his horse, Epona, that it didn't take him until the next morning.

During the ride, Link felt his mind was flooded with meandering thoughts. Most were concerned with Mario's offer and Roselia's warning. Who should he believe? Which path should he choose? Link had never before questioned his convictions, following them blindly with no consideration to any other ideas. After what Mario had just told him, those convictions began to seem based on unproven beliefs. How was he to discern right from wrong now?

Another thing that bothered him was what Roselia had told him. What destiny had yet to befall him in the future? And how would it affect the rest of the universe? This question weighed far heavier on his shoulders than the first. Roselia had given him no explanations or reasonings; only that he should have faith, and stay true to his path: the path of the Hero.

If only there was some insight he could attain; some manner of vision that would tell him what to do. This decision was one that was too great for him to make alone. Link heaved a deep sigh as he let his head droop.

If only there was someone else. If only...

After Link's disappearance, the vessel that had made its descent into Hyrule was the vessel under the employ of the Knights of Hope. The Haldberd was at the moment well hidden among the clouds above Hyrule, and one of their smaller ships was sent down not only to carry an envoy to the rulers of Hyrule, but also in search of Krystal. The envoy included Princess Daisy, her first officer, Blade Knight, Kirby, her body guard, and their most recent recruit, Peppy Hare. Flying the vessel was a mercenary by the name of Samus Aran, who'd joined their group for reasons she chose not to share just yet.

Needless to say, both Peppy and Krystal were brought to tears when they saw each other. The reunion was welcome news for both of them. Of course, Peppy found it difficult to break the news about Fox to Krystal at first, but she told him she already knew, which lessened the burden. Then Krystal mentioned the arrival of Mario, thus insuing mixed feelings among Peppy and the rest of the group: gladness that she was able to escape unscathed, worriedness over Link's safety, and confusion as to why Mario had chosen to show up alone and not with his armada.

But these puzzles would have to wait. Princess Daisy requested that Ilia take her to the ruler of Hyrule, to which Ilia immediately agreed and took her straight away to Castle Hyrule. It should probably be noted that the universal translators that Slippy had invented was shared among other members of the Knights of Hope.

In a matter of minutes, they were brought to the throne room of Castle Hyrule, before the presence of the leader of Hyrule, Princess Zelda. Ilia immediately bowed down to her knees upon being announced; the others likewise followed her example.

The throne room was brilliantly decorated, the pillars carved from white marble, the floors of sparkling ebony, and a golden sculpture, depicting three goddesses and three golden triangles, the centerpiece of the room; the sculpture, along with the throne, was raised up to a slightly higher level to give the princess and the sculpture an impression of being of higher presence.

The Princess sat upon her throne, accompanied by one of her royal advisors. He stood tall and erect, just behind the Princess's throne.

"You are Ilia of Ordon Village, correct?" Princess Zelda asked, gently.

"I am, your Highness," Ilia replied with utmost humility and respect.

"What is your business here?" Princess Zelda asked.

"I bring you members of a group called the Knights of Hope," Ilia replied dutifully, "they wish to speak with her Majesty about some important issues."

Princess Zelda gazed upon the group, and then said, "You may approach."

Upon hearing this, Ilia, and the others, slowly rose to their feet and walked slowly and courtiesly towards the steps before Zelda's throne. Upon drawing closer to her, it was Princess Daisy who came forward and spoke to Princess Zelda.

"Your Majesty, I am Princess Daisy, leader of the Knights of Hope. I have come to your kingdom, bringing dire news."

Zelda was silent for a moment, then gave Daisy permission to continue. From there, Daisy told her everything about the Mushroom Empire, and the threat they presented to her Kingdom. When Daisy finished, Zelda kept her calm demeanor, but it was clear that the news was most disconcerting.

Zelda's advisor, Vissen, then stepped forward and asked, suspiciously, "What proof do you have of this threat?"

"I have none," Daisy replied after a short pause, to which Ilia added, "They seem like honorable people, your Majesty, and I gladly vouche for them."

Daisy felt comforted by this display of trust, but the Vissen wasn't as easily convinced, "The judgement of a commoner is not enough to form a case here."

"Then I shall vouche for them as well."

Everyone present were startled by the new voice. All eyes whirled around towards the entrance, and

there, standing with two escorts, was Link.

"Link!" Ilia cried, forgetting herself, and rushing towards him at full sprint. She then threw herself onto Link, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging tightly. Link hugged her back, knowing all too well how worried she must've been.

"It's okay, Ilia," Link whispered into her ear, "everything's all right."

"I'm just glad you're still alive," Ilia whispered back as she fought back tears.

After Ilia pulled herself away from him, Link gave one last comforting touch to Ilia's face, and then made his way towards the throne. He chanced a glance over to Krystal, who was looking equally relieved that he returned, to which he gave her a reassuring nod. He also seemed to notice Samus, who, for reasons beyond Link, seemed to be staring most intently at him, though he didn't know how he could tell when he considered that she was wearing a strange manner of armor that covered even her face.

"Mr. Link," Vissen asked testily, "how exactly is it that you come to believe these outsiders?"

Link replied, "This is because I have faced the leader of the Mushroom Empire himself."

Zelda let out a stunned gasp. Then Blade Knight came up to Link and asked, "Were you able to defeat him."

Link was silent a moment, then replied, "No, I could not defeat him. But he made his intentions quite clear to me, in that he intends to conquer all other worlds in the creation of his empire."

Princess Daisy spoke again, "And it is for this reason, your Highness, that we must act quickly before any evil befalls your people."

Zelda heard Daisy's words, but was more focused on Link. There were those among the citizens of Hyrule who knew of Zelda's uncanny ability to sense other's inner feelings. And right now, her instincts were picking up on the turmoil inside Link's heart.

"Link," Zelda spoke to Link, "I sense there is some detail you've not yet shared with us."

All eyes then turned to Link, who was beginning to feel Zelda's eyes burn deep into his soul. He hoped that maybe he didn't need to tell them of what had happened just yet, and that they could find out later on. However, at this point, there was no hiding it anymore.

"Yes," he admitted, "there is one other detail."

Link then went into length about the ultimatum Mario had made with him; about how Link would either join the Mushroom Empire, against the Knights of Hope, or refuse to join, thereby condemning Hyrule to suffer the Mushroom Empire's full wrath. This piece of news struck Daisy a shocking blow, as well as the rest of her group. Ilia clasped her hands to her mouth, holding in her outburst.

"What did you decide?" Zelda asked warily.

"I have not decided yet," Link replied woefully, "I've one week to declare my choice."

Zelda was silent for a moment, but then turned to Vissen and asked, "What say you, my advisor?"

"The choice is obvious, your majesty," Vissen replied, "we must side with the Mushroom Empire."

Ilia wasn't able to control her outburst this time, "What?!"

Vissen looked as though he hardly took notice, and justified his choice by saying: "The Mushroom Empire is a strong nation; one that vastly overshadows our little kingdom significantly. And you 'Knights of Hope' are nothing more than homeless rabbles with claims to no countries whatsoever. It would be more logical and beneficial for Hyrule to join the side more likely to win the war, in other words: Mushroom Empire."

"How could you say such a thing?!" Ilia shouted at him, "You would rather we side with a nation of plunderers?!"

"This decision would have all of Hyrule's citizenry in mind, the common folk included," Vissen answered rather testily.

"Or maybe your just having your own well being in mind!" Ilia shot back angrily.

"How dare you-!"

"Enough!!" Zelda shouted. Immediately, both Ilia and Vissen lowered their heads and became silent.

Zelda paused a moment to regain her composure, then directed her gaze to Daisy and asked, "Princess Daisy, what would you have me do?"

"I would most appreciate your help in our cause," Daisy replied, "but it is not my place to decide the actions of a kingdom. Whatever you decide, I will not oppose you."

Zelda nodded solemnly, seemingly pleased with Daisy's answer. Then after another moment of silence, she rose from her throne addressed everyone present, "Everything I do, every decision that I make, I make for the sake of the kingdom. And Vissen's words are true, that it would be favorable for Hyrule to side with the Mushroom Empire."

Vissen nodded in agreement at this, an oily smirk peeking out of the corner of his mouth.

"But we cannot ignore the lessons and values of our fore-fathers. To ignore those lessons, we would deny who we are; our identity as kingdom."

Vissens smirk quickly evaporated, while Ilia's smile became more evident.

"Unfortunately, the decision is not mine to make."

Everyone was immediately confused by this statement, but remained silent as Zelda continued, "The fate of Hyrule, as it has in the past, lies entirely up to the Hero's decision," she said as she indicated Link with a gesture of her hand.

Vissen was about to protest, but Zelda held up her hand to silent him and spoke to Link with an almost pleading tone, "Link, whatever decision you make, I will pledge our Kingdom's support to you. We will side with whomever you choose."

Link probably felt the most against this decision. It would've been easier for Zelda to decide; which ever side Zelda would've wanted, he would gladly follow suit. Now that Hyrule's future was now dependant on the decision he was to make, it became all the more difficult.

Daisy looked worriedly at Link, wondering if it was really wise to leave the decision in his hands. Peppy also picked up on Link's wavering spirit, and it concerned him no less than Daisy. Looking at Samus and Kirby, it was impossible to really discern what they were thinking.

"Princess," Link finally spoke, "please...don't make me choose..."

As he said this, both Krystal and Ilia exchanged worried looks. They felt they knew Link well enough to know that this was definitely not normal.

"Princess, please," Link continued to beg as he fought to maintain his composure, "I cannot accept this responsibility. I fear I'm not as capable as you believe."

"Whether or not," Zelda replied, "you are fit is irrelavent. Mario has extended his invitation to you, therefore, it is you who must make the decision."

"Your highness," Link began, but was cut off by Zelda, "Link, you must be strong! Hyrule needs your strength, now more than ever!"

"But-!" Link was about to respond when he noticed that the small, pink, creature, Kirby, had trotted it's way over to him. He stared at Link with a burning scowl. Then, without warning, he leapt up and gave Link a sharp slap to the face.

"Kirby!" Daisy shouted scoldingly, but Kirby didn't seem to be listening, and stormed out the hall, visibly upset.

"What was that about?" Daisy asked out loud, to which Samus replied, "I think it's obvious."

Link looked over to Samus, who also walked towards him. All that time, Link hadn't the slightest clue what she was about to do, although he did cover his other cheek, just in case. When Samus was almost toe-to-toe with Link, she stared right at him, and he stared back.

Finally, Samus spoke, "I guess you aren't the one."

With that, Samus turned on her heels and exited the hall in the same manner as Kirby. The situation had turned extremely awkward, so Zelda quickly took charge and said to Daisy, "If you wish, I can arrange

for rooms for you, if you wish to stay a while longer."

"Actually," Daisy answered humbly, "we could use some time to resupply and recuperate, if it's no trouble to her Majesty."

"No trouble at all," Zelda told her assuringly. Vissen, however, objected by saying, "Your Highness, I believe it would be more prudent for them to be on their way, wouldn't it? If we are to have the Mushroom Empire look favorably upon us-."

"Vissen, you will not speak of such things anymore!"

Zelda's harsh reply instantly silenced Vissen, who bowed down humbly and backed away a small ways.

"Guards," Zelda ordered the two soldiers near the entrance to the hall, "prepare rooms for our guests."

At this, the guards saluted by placing a fist on their chests, and then escorted what remained of Zelda's entourage, along with Krystal and Iliia, to guest quarters. Then Zelda rose from her throne and departed from the throne room, with Vissen close behind. That just left Link alone with nothing but his thoughts. If ever he felt like crying, that was the moment, and so he did.

The next three days seem to stretch on forever. Daisy's group spent the time recuperating, taking in all the comfort Hyrule had to offer. Seeing how light-hearted everyone had become, it was almost as if the war had come to a silent end, if only for a moment.

Daisy spent most of her time with Zelda, learning much about Hyrule's people and it's history. In return, Daisy shared with Zelda tales of her homeland, Mushroom Kingdom; of the days before Mario took over and it became the empire it was today. Somehow, those days seemed so distant to her.

Blade Knight rarely took time to relax, so he instead kept himself busy with their affairs. After sending supplies back to the Haldberd, he learned that the Gorons, the rock people of Death Mountain, and Zoras, the fish-like race from Zora's Domain, tended to separate themselves from the Hylians, thus were outside of their control. Immediately, he went over to both Goron and Zora Kingdoms to relay to them everything that had transpired until that point. Though both races felt inclined to join the Knights of Hope outright, but they also felt they had developed friendly ties with the Hylians, and were reluctant to jeopardize that friendship should the Hylians join the side opposite of them. Thus, their leaders said that they base their final decision on the Hylians' choice, meaning they would stay on the same side as the Hylians.

In the mean time, everyone mostly tried to keep themselves distracted. Chances to actually relax were slim to none, and even then such instances were fleeting. Everyone felt it was best to live it up now, lest it be the last chance they get.

But as happy and joyful as everyone one was, Link still remained aloof from the others. He mostly kept to himself, puttering around Hyrule field, no longer able to find comfort in the silence of those plains. His thoughts continued to rumble throughout his mind to the point his ears were with filled with thunder and

his head constantly ached. Restless days and sleepless nights began to take their toll on his will power, almost to the point of driving him mad.

On the third day, he spent the afternoon among an old ruin not far from the Hyrule Town. The ruin was the site of an old amphitheatre that fell out of use long ago. It was the perfect place to be alone, but he still found no comfort. He'd been wrestling with his decision for what seemed to him as an eternity now. He still had no answer in terms of what would've been best for Hyrule, nor did he find any comfort in the visitation he received from Roselia. All he could do is ponder everything he'd seen and heard until that point. To be honest, Link wasn't sure about how much more pondering he could withstand.

"Looks like you could use some company."

The voice caught Link completely off guard. He whirled around and caught sight of the person speaking to him. When he caught a glimpse of his new visitor, he felt, for the first time this week, somewhat comforted.

"Rusl!" Link exclaimed, "Your here?!"

"Been here since yesterday," Rusl replied frankly, "I would've said 'hi', but couldn't exactly find you."

Link fell silent for a moment as Rusl made his way towards Link and sat down next to him. Then Link replied, "I've been...doing some thinking."

"So Ilia tells me," Rusl said, taking a look at the setting sun, "all of Hyrule's future dependant on one man. Kinda silly, if you ask me."

Link then looked over to Rusl and asked, "What else has Ilia told you?"

It took a little while for Rusl to think about the right way to answer that question, after which he said, "She told me you're unsure with yourself, which doesn't sound like you at all."

"She just doesn't understand," Link said despairingly.

"Well, I'm your best friend, aren't I?" Rusl asked encouragingly, "Maybe you can help me understand?"

Link gave a good look at Rusl, who beamed back at as only a true friend could. So Link told him everything about the conversation he'd had with Mario before the ultimatum. About how Mario had seen history, and how he intended to create a peaceful utopia with his new empire.

After Link finished, Rusl leaned back on the stone behind him as he took in all Link had told him. Finally, he said, "That does sound like a lot to take in."

"I'm not sure what to believe anymore," Link said as his vision dropped to the ground, "how am I to say Mario's wrong?"

"Well," Rusl began as he set his sights on the sky above, "if you were to ask me, I'd say this Mario fellow was telling the truth, as he knew it."

Link remained silent upon hearing this, so Rusl continued on, "In a way, if you established only one ruler, then there'd be no need for war anymore. And if you enforce your laws strictly enough, you could well put an end to all forms of crime."

Link was about to respond, but Rusl just kept on going, "However, there will be some price to pay. For example, in order to make sure you stay leader of your empire, you must stifle out all things that might threaten your rule. This would include new ideas, new beliefs, new concepts; basically, you must establish yourself as the only source of knowledge for all the empire, and make sure no one questions it."

Link lost his voice, but Rusl's words were readily sinking into Link's heart, "Further more, if you absolutely, positively want to stop unwanted acts, you must enforce the harshest laws imaginable, such as torture and beatings for committing petty theft."

It was only then that Link finally got some words out, "Doesn't sound much like a paradise to me."

"Nope, it sure doesn't," Rusl said, noting a slight change in Link's tone, "now ask yourself this: why do we here in Hyrule have the peace we have now?"

"Well, that's obvious," Link replied sarcastically, his glumness starting to return to him, "because the great hero saved the day."

"Wrong," Rusl told him frankly. Link turned and looked at him, somewhat surprised, as Rusl continued, "I'm not talking about how you saved Hyrule; I'm talking about how you changed Hyrule."

Link wore a truly confused look on his face as he tried to comprehend Rusl's meaning. Seeing Link was unable to figure it out, Rusl began to explain it to him.

"It's like this," Rusl said, placing a hand on Link's shoulder, "During your travels, you've been practically all over Hyrule, right?"

Link nodded, so Rusl continued, "And during those travels, you've no doubt made new acquaintances, and of course, new friends, right?"

Link nodded again, still curious as to the point of all this. Finally Rusl asked, "Now, why do you think you have so many of them?"

Link was about to answer, but fell silent, because it wasn't until then that he finally understood. Rusl, seeing Link's face, asked him another question, "Was it because of your strength?"

"No," Link replied, his eyes beginning to grow brighter, "it was...because I helped them."

"Exactly," Rusl said, punctuating his words, "It wasn't your power that impressed them, but your courage and kindness; the simple fact that you were willing to stand up and fight for others when no one else could help them. And that, my friend, is the true mark of the hero."

Link slowly began to smile as Rusl continued on, "Thus, with this insight in mind, one can only assume that this peace we have is not because our leaders forced us to act peacefully, but because of a certain someone's positive influence. Am I right?"

Then, Link started doing something he'd never thought he'd ever do again: he started laughing. Laughing at himself, of course. The answer was so simple, and it was amazing to him that he didn't realize it until now.

"I can't believe how foolish I've been," Link said, now finding it hard to stop laughing.

"That's okay," Rusl said as he joined Link in his laughter, "you just needed a good kick in the head, that's all."

The two friends shared a good hardy laugh for the next five to seven minutes. Link probably had never felt this light hearted since his days back in Ordon Village. But, more importantly, he now felt more sure of his convictions than ever before. If his good nature could influence all of Hyrule to do the same as he did, perhaps all that was necessary for peace was setting a good example, one act of kindness at a time.

After enjoying the good laugh, Rusl said to Link, "Let's go. Telma's having a party at her bar tonight, and I have a feeling you could use some merriment."

"Yes, that sounds good," Link replied, "I have something to talk about with Telma, anyway."

13 - The Mark of Courage

The week soon ran its course, and the time everyone was waiting for had finally come. Sure enough, on the assigned day, one of Mario's black ships emerged from a wormhole over the skies of Hyrule, looking as menacing as ever. The Knights of Hope, however, had no need to worry just yet, since their ship was safely hidden from sight. The only ones with reason to sweat were the Hyrule citizens below, who awaited Link's final decision. Krystal had actually opted to stay with Link to help him should the need arise.[br]

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All eyes of Hyrule seemed to be focused on the heavens as the black ship hovered over them, casting a dark ominous shadow over their homes. To be sure, there were those who felt the urge to run, but all in all, the entire populace, the Gorons, the Zoras, and the denizens from the smaller villages throughout Hyrule, stood their ground, showing the same courage as their hero.[br]

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Just then, large, rectangular, metallic, plates were launched from the ship and descended towards Hyrule, one plate for each town or village. When they reached their destinations, each hovering with the flat side facing the crowds, the plates then began to project images for them to watch the events as they unfolded. To be sure, the people were amazed by this display of, what they saw as, magic.[br]

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The plates showed them Mario, the virtually unchallenged leader of the Mushroom Empire, descending towards Hyrule Castle Town on a giant platform, with three other figures: his three strongest fighters. First was a short, mammalian creature, with blue fur, and wearing white gloves and red shoes. The second was a much taller man, taller than even Mario, dressed in a blue suit and wearing a bright red helmet. The third was also non-human, like the first, with traits similar to that of a monkey. He was wearing a white jacket with black pants and boots. The denizens watched in fear and wonder as the four figures made their way down through the skies.[br]

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Back in the Mushroom Kingdom, the capital planet for the Mushroom Empire, the citizenry, a race consisting of beings called Toadstools, gave wild cheers as they watched their leader descend angelically towards the castle town below them. The decision that was to be made by the warrior named Link was widely televised throughout the Kingdom, and they were most sure that Link would be a wise fellow and join their beloved Mario in his mission to spread peace throughout the universe. Thousands of the onlookers kept buckets of confetti in their hands, ready to throw into the air at the moment Link and Mario shook hands.[br]

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The event was televised in the Pop Star Dimension as well, and many of the slaves of Pop Star were given a break to watch this supposedly momentous occasion. Meta Knight and his men, who was still on the run, were also able to catch the televised event. They all watched their miniature screen, some dreading the answer Link would give. Meta Knight, of showed no emotion, and simply sat there, patiently awaiting the moment of truth.[br]

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In the Lylat Dimension, the citizens of Corneria, who were all confined to their homes, were also given the opportunity to witness this event. Although none of the citizens said so, most Cornerians only saw this as further evidence of Mario's arrogance, and that this was probably meant to break their spirits. And even though some spirits were already broken, there were those who resolved to remain vigilant, and resist the Mushroom Empire in whatever way they could.[br]

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Meanwhile, from their hidden space station in an asteroid field at the far corner of the Lylat system, the Star Wolf team was also bearing witness to the event. Wolf O'Donnell, the leader of the group, laid back in his chair and watched along with his team-mates, Panther Caruso and Leon Powalski.[br]

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"Heh," Leon scoffed, "to think this entire kingdom left it's fate in the hands of that hairless ape-boy. It's laughable really."[br]

[br]

"Figures a reptile like yourself would miss the symbolic romantacism behind such an arrangement," Panther replied.[br]

[br]

"Then, I should be thankful for that reptilian heritage," Leon shot back as he took a swig from his can of beer.[br]

[br]

"Will you two butt-heads shut up, already?" Wolf barked in an annoyed tone as he raised the volume on the display, "I can barely hear with you guys yapping at each other."[br]

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Panther immediately became silent, but Leon couldn't help but shoot out one last remark, "You still pissed off that Fox got smoked?"[br]

[br]

Wolf said nothing, but glared back at Leon with his good eye, after which Leon said hardly a word. It was true, Fox's demise was hard for Wolf to bare. He felt that the relationship they shared was one of rivalry, and Wolf still had a score that went unsettled. Because of that, he now made it his personal mission to exact Fox's death and utterly destroy the ones who took his life; not so much for Fox's sake, but rather to prove, once and for all, who was the better pilot. But for now, he'd just settle for watching this televised announcement.[br]

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Let's see what this chicken boy says.[br]

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At the front of the western gates, Link, Princess Zelda, and Krystal waited without showing the smallest trace of fear in their eyes. Above them, Mario gazed down at them with such confidence that things would go exactly as planned. As shaken up as Link was when he left, Mario was sure that Link would come crawling to his side like the pitiful worm he saw him as.[br]

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As the platform finally reached the ground, Mario and his three retainers stepped off and planted themselves right in front of Link's group.[br]

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"Mr. Hero," Mario said, "I didn't think you'd arrive."[br]

[br]

"I think you'll find many surprises about Link," Zelda replied sternly.[br]

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"And who are you?" Mario asked Zelda rather condescendingly.[br]

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"I, sir, am Princess Zelda, Envoy to the Goddesses, and standing ruler of the Hyrule Kingdom," Zelda answered, now switching her efforts to controlling her anger.[br]

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"Perfect, then," Mario said gleefully, "you can officially declare your kingdom's alliance to the Mushroom Empire after your friend here is finished."[br]

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Zelda continued to fight the urge to lash out at him. This meeting alone gave more than enough reason to resist alliance with the Mushroom Empire, but she still had to remember that the decision was up to Link. That was her decree, and she wouldn't dare betray her faith in Link.[br]

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"Oh!" Mario exclaimed, "Where are my manners? Allow me to introduce my retainers."[br]

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He then gestured to the three fighters behind them and declared their names from left to right respectively, "These are Sonic, Captain Falcon, and Dash," then noticing Krystal added, "Dash, I believe you are acquainted with the young, fox maiden over there?"[br]

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Dash nodded solemnly as he looked at Krystal, while Krystal stared back. She didn't say much, but her feelings were evidently clear through her burning eyes.[br]

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"Nothing personal, Krystal," Dash said with hardly any emotion, "I'm fighting for peace now." [br]

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Krystal still said nothing, though her glare spoke volumes. [br]

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"Well, now that all that is out of the way," Mario said in a grandiose manner, "let us get down to the matter at hand." [br]

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The minute he said this, two turtle creatures on clouds, Lakitu, floated down, carrying two recording cameras on fishing poles. Link and Zelda were not knowledgeable about what exactly a recording camera was, but reasoned they were to be used to display the event for the rest of the kingdom, and ultimately, universe, to see. [br]

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Mario then turned to one of the cameras and began speaking to it, addressing the many viewers watching, "My good people. I welcome you all to this, our most celebrated occasion to date. Today, we will discern Hyrule's future, as we humbly offer to these peoples a chance to partake in our glorious utopia!" He finished this statement by throwing his hands into the air for dramatic flare. [br]

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Once Mario threw his hands up, the crowd at Mushroom Kingdom exploded into a roar of cheers as thousands of adoring subjects loudly and ecstatically cheered him on. [br]

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"But first," Mario continued, "we must hear the words of one man. I came to this man not long ago, offering my hand in friendship. Of course, he was suspicious of me, and openly displayed his hostility. However, I forgave his brutish behavior, and presented him with my offer: to partake in the creation of my new empire. And in return, I would grant his land the kind of peace and prosperity that a nation like his most surely deserves. And that is why we are gathered here today: to watch, as this brave and galant warrior, declares to you all, his final decision." [br]

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Once again, the citizens of Mushroom Kingdom roared with celebratory cheers. Of course, everywhere else was completely silent, as they awaited the words that would exit Link's mouth. This silence was no more apparent than on Hyrule. [br]

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Link, in the meanwhile, had to bite his tongue; never before had he heard such putrid lies from a forked and slimy tongue as Mario's. [br]

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"So," Mario turned to Link, "we will now hear your decision, Mr...Link, was it?"[br]
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Link nodded, and stepped forward, clearing his throat. Zelda looked on, clasping her hands together tightly as though she were praying. Krystal took a deep breath, and closed her eyes as she prepared for whatever came next.[br]
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The hush that followed echoed throughout all the universe; the Mushroom Kingdom, Hyrule Castle Town, Corneria, Pop Star; all watching were at the edge of their seats in anticipation.[br]
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"All my life," Link began, "I have fought...to protect this kingdom of Hyrule. Peace is a beautiful thing, and I would gladly give my life to ensure that the peace here in Hyrule is protected."[br]
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The hush became thunderously deafening, and Link swallowed hard as he continued to speak, "When Lord Mario...approached me with his offer, I cannot deny that I was tempted. An empire, with one rule, that would lead the entire universe in an age of prosperity; truly, it seemed like the kind of paradise Hyrule should have. It is, as Lord Mario told me, the easiest and simplest path to a utopia."[br]
[br]

Zelda and Krystal began to hang their heads, fearing the implication he seemed to be making. The rest of Hyrule did the same. In Mushroom Kingdom, excited chatterings began to permeate throughout the crowds, as several Toadstools grabbed handfuls of confetti and prepared to throw it high into the air. The rest of the universe exchanged exasperated sighs and disheartened moans.[br]
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Mario, of course, cracked a haughty smile, and was about extend his hand to welcome Link when he started up again, apparently not quite finished with what he was saying.[br]
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"It is the easy way, to be sure," Link's voice was steadily growing in strength, "but...it is not the right way!"[br]
[br]

Zelda's and Krystal's heads both shot back up as if lightning had zapped the back of their necks. Mario's smile became more hollow, as Link's words echoed in his ears. Everywhere else was hushed again.[br]
[br]

"You may believe this empire of yours will bring about peace, but I see your world differently. That dream that you call 'peace'...is nothing more than tyranny! There can be no good to be gained in letting you achieve your ends!"[br]
[br]

Mario's smile had already faded, and was replaced by an increasingly ugly scowl as Link continued on, "This past week, I have found the answer to what true peace is! It is compassion! It is kindness! It is

understanding! These are the values that true peace is built upon!!"[br]
[br]

Zelda and Krystal began to feel the flames of hope and courage burning in their chests, as Link's words continued to fuel their fiery hearts, "These are the same values that helped give birth to this kingdom, and the same values that I hold dear to my heart!! And it is these values that will create the peace and prosperity that I have dreamt of my entire life!!"[br]
[br]

Mario had now become so furious that he forgot himself, and neglected to cut the cameras off. Link's message was being broadcast for all to hear as he reached his climax, "And so, as the Hero of Legend, the Guardian of Hyrule, and the Warrior of Courage," he said as he unsheathed his sword and pointed it right at Mario, "I defy your empire, and vow to defeat you with everything that I am!!!"[br]
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Upon Link's finishing that sentence, all of Hyrule erupted into a thunderous malestrom of supporting yells and hollers. Never before had Hyrule known a more wonderous occasion. With their Hero's shining example, they now had the strength to stand up against anything, even the Mushroom Empire. And drawing on this strength, every living being in Hyrule, Goron, Zora, and Hylian alike, shouted their united defiance to the Mushroom Empire.[br]
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Princess Zelda couldn't help but smirk at Mario as she crossed her arms and told him, "I think we all know where Hyrule stands, *Mr. Mario*."[br]
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Hyrule wasn't the only one celebrating, of course. In Pop Star, the enslaved citizens all cried out in rebellion as Link's words continued to reverberate off the walls in their minds. What would follow would be a planet wide riot that would take days to control. Back in their hiding place, Meta Knight's men were ecstatic with the news, dancing all about and shouting hearty battle cries at the TV. Meta Knight remained silent, but one could still tell, he was just joyous as his men were.[br]
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In the Lylat system, more specifically, Corneria, the cheers echoed out the windows of the captive populace as the Cornerians openly celebrated Hyrule's ultimate defiance. It would take the soldiers here even longer to fully control them. Meanwhile, Wolf's team remained rather reserved, but were openly impressed with Link's speech.[br]
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"Wha'dya know?" Leon commented, "The kid's got balls after all."[br]
[br]

"Indeed," added Panther, "you hardly see courage such as his anymore."[br]
[br]

"I've seen it before," Wolf said. Both Panther and Leon exchanged glances; they both knew who Wolf was referring to.[br]

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Of course, while the rest of the universe celebrated, Mushroom Kingdom became deathly silent, shocked beyond words to what they just witnessed. Whomever happened to bring confetti that day simply dropped them to the ground and stared at the screen, jaw-dropped and bug-eyed. There were those who heard Link's words and saw it as nonsense, but there were also those who listened, and remembered. Compassion, kindness, and understanding; there were those who knew these values, and had heard them before. These were ideals held by their once beloved Princess Peach, and with her memory now in their minds, they began to question Mario's methods.[br]

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Mario had just halted transmission and sent the Lakitus away, but this was too late. With Link's message already transmitted all over his empire, damage control was going to be hectic at best. But that wasn't the least of his concerns. Now, the Knights of Hope had recruited a new ally; one that Mario had only recently learned to fear. This made his completion of his dream all the more difficult, but not impossible. All that was needed now was to kill Link, and stomp out the resistance of the Hylians, and soon. It was then that he gave a thought to the ship above them. It wasn't the gauntlet, but would surely be enough to destroy them.[br]

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"You made a drastic mistake, my friend," Mario said, working to regain his composure, "By siding against me, you have sealed your fate, and your doom has been assured."[br]

[br]

Link drew his shield and struck a defensive stance, "I think you'll find I'm most difficult to kill."[br]

[br]

Krystal and Zelda also prepared for battle, Zelda conjuring a golden bow and arrow set, and Krystal pulling out her blaster. Mario's group also assumed battle poses, ready to attack, but Mario instead held them back, simply saying, "Hold. There's no need to waste our energies."[br]

[br]

"But, sir-!" Dash tried to rebut, but Mario silenced him saying, "I certainly hope you aren't questioning my orders."[br]

[br]

Dash and the others stood down, and Mario turned his attention back to Link's group.[br]

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"You're crazy if you think you can take all of us on your own," Krystal said forcefully.[br]

[br]

"Silly girl," Mario replied calmly, "you forget what's hovering just above our-."[br]

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Mario wasn't able to finish his sentence, for at that moment, a giant explosion caught them all by surprise. At first, everyone ducked down out of instinct, then turned their heads upward in time to see the black ship lurch to the side as it's hull slowly turned ablaze. Mario was dumbstruck at first, but then surmised that the Haldberd had been in hiding.[br]

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Sure enough, not far from the black ship, the Haldberd materialized into sight as if from thin air. At the same time, two more figures became visible on the ground: one of them was Samus, the other was a man with black and grey camoflauged suit and black headband.[br]

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"I have to say, Snake," Samus said as she aimed the gun-pod on her right hand at Mario, "these cloaking devices are pretty handy." [br]

[br]

"Thought you'd like 'em," Snake replied, whipping out his own side arms and aiming right at Mario's head.[br]

[br]

Link wasn't sure of what exactly just happened, but he knew enough to remember that Samus was on their side, so it stood to reason that her companion was with them as well.[br]

[br]

"Looks like the odds are piling up against you," Link retorted.[br]

[br]

Indeed, no truer words were spoken. With their ship no longer available to them, Mario and his men were stuck between the Haldberd above them, and the five fighters in front of them.[br]

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"This isn't over yet, boy!" Mario roared at them, then threw a fireball to the ground, creating a smoke bomb effect that blinded their opponents and gave Mario's group the chance to escape via wormhole.[br]

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After the smoke cleared, everyone scanned the area, and were most aggravated that Mario escaped.[br]

[br]

"Damn!" Snake cursed, "Should've seen that comin'." [br]

[br]

"Do you think he left us for good?" Zelda asked hopefully.[br]

[br]

"Doubt it," Samus replied, "Mario rarely gives up on a target after setting his sights on it." [br]

[br]

"It doesn't matter," Link said determinedly, "when he comes, we'll make our stand." [br]

[br]

"Jeez, kid, turn down the drama," Snake said incredulously, "I admire your courage, but there's no need to go all *kamikaze* on us." [br]

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"I think it'd be prudent to evacuate Hyrule before Mario comes back with reinforcements," Samus said. [br]

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"But escape to where?" Zelda asked. [br]

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"Don't worry," Krystal answered reassuringly, "the Knights of Hope were able to find a Dimensional Gap, where they were able to hide and plan their efforts. We've already evacuated one world; There'll be more than enough room to accomidate everyone in Hyrule." [br]

[br]

Zelda remained silent for a while, then said, "I must speak with Princess Daisy if we wish to plan this out well." [br]

[br]

*** [br]

[br]

You can imagine the surprise of the Gauntlet's bridge crew when a wormhole appeared and spit out Mario along with his three most powerful fighters. Wario was among those on the bridge, and so was the first to greet them, "Oh! Boss! I didn't expect you back 'til later. How come you-?" [br]

[br]

Capt. Falcon immediately grabbed his throat, cutting him off, "If you wish to keep your neck, you'd better not finish that question." [br]

[br]

Wario nodded frantically, to which Capt. Falcon dropped him to the floor. Mario, meanwhile, had taken his seat in the captain's chair, and barked at Wario, "Report!" [br]

[br]

Wario, still coughing and sputtering, replied hoarsly, "We're *cough* almost done with repairs on the Gauntlet. We also have thirty ships on standby." [br]

[br]

Mario then bellowed his orders, "Double the workload on the repairs! And contact fifteen of our strongest vessels and tell them to prepare for battle! We're going to take Hyrule by force!" [br]

14 - Fight to Survive

After their meeting, Zelda and Daisy immediately set forth the evacuation of Hyrule. Since Hyrule was less technologically savvy as the Knights of Hope, they had no flying vehicles to speak of, meaning loading everyone into the Haldberd, a vessel not made for ground landings, would be impossible. Fortunately, they had another option: the same method used on planet Sauria not too long ago.[br]
[br]

What they did was create temporary wormholes on the ground using specially made bombs that created localized explosions that worked in the same manner as the Haldberd's modified Hyper Cannon. It took some doing, but at least one agent was able to reach each village with one wormhole bomb to evacuate the people to the dimensional gap. Link, being one of the few people with full knowledge of Hyrule's ins and outs, provided Krystal and Samus with detailed instructions to find certain people and places that were out of the way of the major villages and towns. Finding them would prove difficult, but not impossible. So Krystal and Samus, in their own separate ships, set off for their assignments, carrying enough wormhole bombs for each location.[br]
[br]

In the meantime, Link was preparing himself for battle. No doubt Mario was going to make a quick return, and with Zelda, along with many of the other agents in Knights of Hope, preoccupied, he, along with what few soldiers Hyrule's royal guard could manage, were the only line of ground defense for Hyrule. Blade Knight commanded the Haldberd, which was hovering above Hyrule Castle Town, but Link knew well enough to know that one ship was really scraping the bottom of the barrel.[br]
[br]

Link was just tightening up his spare armor, a red and golden suit called the 'Hero's Tunic' when he heard Rusl call out, "Oi! Link!"[br]
[br]

Link turned to find Rusl walking towards him with a sword in hand, "Figured you could use some help."[br]
[br]

"You should be with your wife and children, you know," Link told Rusl.[br]
[br]

Rusl answered back, "The Mayor will watch after them for now; you're the one who needs me more."[br]
[br]

Link gave a warm smile; this wasn't the first time Rusl came to his rescue in a time of crisis. He couldn't

have asked for a more true friend.[br]

[br]

"It's gonna be a harsh fight," Link said, knowing full well this wouldn't scare Rusl off.[br]

[br]

"Please! This isn't the first fight we've been in, you know!"[br]

[br]

The voice came from behind Rusl, and Link peeked just over Rusl's shoulder, and saw two more of his friends running towards him. One was a tall, elderly man, well built and carrying a cannon on his shoulders, the other was a girl, about Link's height with white armor and a bow in her hand.[br]

[br]

"Auru? Ashei?" Link was pretty surprised. Rusl, who hadn't really turned to face them, wasn't.[br]

[br]

"You made good timing," Rusl called back.[br]

[br]

"We fight to protect Hyrule, remember?" Auru returned heartily.[br]

[br]

"Sorry Shad couldn't make it," Ashei added, "he's busy rescuing Hyrule's historical records."[br]

[br]

Link gave a light chuckle as he recalled Shad: the skinny man with large glasses and bulging forehead.

"That does sound like Shad," Link said, still keeping his spirits up. [br]

[br]

"So, about our enemy," Ashei immediately asked, "Are they really that powerful?"[br]

[br]

Link nodded grimly, "They have access to powers and mechanations the likes none of us have ever seen. We're in for the fight of our lives."[br]

[br]

Auru rubbed his chin for a moment, then he asked, "Do we have a chance?"[br]

[br]

Before Link could answer, a ringing cry echoed in the skies above them. Everyone there ducked down slightly, wincing at the sound, then looked upward to see a gargantuan bird, hovering above them. At first, Rusl, Auru, and Ashei readied their weapons, but then caught sight of a shining something hovering near the bird. A second look revealed to them that it was one of the Knights of Hope; the small, pink, one.[br]

[br]

[br]

"Hey," Rusl asked Link, "Isn't that the creature called Kirby?"[br]

[br]

Link strained his eyes a bit to get a better look, then replied, "Yeah, I think it is."[br]

[br]

"I certainly hope he's friends with that bird-monster up there," Ashei said, worriedly.[br]

[br]

For a while, it seemed like Kirby was talking to the mammoth bird. Then, after what the group took for a nodd, the bird spread it's wings and pirtched itself on the deck of the Haldberd. At first, Link and the others became a little worried, but after seeing that the bird wasn't descending onto the town, or making any threatening movements whatsoever, they surmised they had a new ally in the skies.[br]

[br]

"I'd say our chances just got a whole lot better," Rusl said, beaming at Auru, who smiled back confidently.[br]

[br]

Link looked to where Kirby was. He'd just flown lower to a point a small ways above Link's head. After staring at him for a short while, Kirby then gave Link a bright smile and waved. Link was comforted by the gesture, and waved back. Then, after pulling a small wand with a star at the end of it out of his mouth, Kirby flew into the skies to fly along side the giant bird.[br]

[br]

"A new friend?" Rusl asked.[br]

[br]

Link smiled and said, "I guess so."[br]

[br]

Link then looked at Rusl, Auru, and Ashei and said, "I'm counting on you guys. Let's show 'em what we can do."[br]

[br]

Ashei smiled confidently and said, "No problem!"[br]

[br]

***[br]

[br]

It didn't take long for Mario's armada to arrive. Sixteen ships, including the Gauntlet, appeared over Hyrule, nearly blocking out the sun. No sooner had they arrived then the rocketons descended from the black ships and Toadstool soldiers were warped down to the surface. And the biggest fight of Hyrule's history began.[br]

[br]

On the ground, the fighting was fierce and bloody. Arrows flew from the castle walls and rained down on

the toadstool soldiers, who continued to march forward, firing hundreds of thousands of energy blasts at the defending Hylian soldiers. The army was also hit with random cannon shots, courtesy of Auru[br]
[br]

But most of the intensity was on those in the front lines. Link, Rusl, and Ashei led the front line troops. Link and Rusl's blades danced among the chaos, striking down foe after foe, barely skipping a beat. Even though Ashei's specialty was archery, she still held her own on the front lines, feathering a great number of enemies. Despite the valiant efforts of their leaders, however, the other soldiers weren't having the same success; the large opposition was steadily taking it's toll on the Hylian soldiers.[br]
[br]

In the sky, the intensity was just as high. What few fighters were in the Haldberd's hangar bay were fighting for their lives against the rocketons, while the Haldberd herself sent a spray of continuous cannon fire towards the black ships. Kirby and Dyna Blade were also in the middle of the fray; Kirby flew at blinding speeds using his Star Rod to strike down rocketon after rocketon, while Dyna Blade flapped her shining wings furiously at the enemy ships, showering them with steel feathers that sliced into the hulls. So far, three black ships had fallen, but that still meant there were thirteen left to deal with.[br]
[br]

On board the Gauntlet, however, Mario was still not in a good mood. True the Gauntlet was still intact, but it was only just barely. Apparently, Wario's repairs were only temporary patch-ups, and the port side was already starting to come apart under the stress. To add to that strain, his remaining ships were beginning to show signs of crumbling under the mounting pressure of the opposition's attack. His ships had held up better than this against the Haldberd before, but they'd never before went up against Dyna Blade, and were fully understanding the monster-bird's real power.[br]
[br]

Mario wasn't happy about the situation on the ground either. They were making progress, but it was too slow, and the death toll for his side was becoming alarmingly higher with each passing second. Even if he did manage to capture Hyrule, he'd have an insufficient amount of men to hold it, and there'd be no time to get reinforcements here quick enough. He'd have taken a loss no matter what the outcome.[br]
[br]

But retreat was the last thing on his mind at the moment; Mario couldn't leave now, not after the insult he'd just been paid by Link. He wasn't about to leave until he had Link's head mounted on his wall. But despite his large attack force, that was starting to look less and less likely.[br]
[br]

"Dash!" Mario yelled, "What's the condition of our ground troops?!"[br]
[br]

There was a momentary pause, then Dash replied, "We've lost 26% of our army, and casualties are still climbing."[br]
[br]

Just then, the ship was rocked on it's port side by a sharp jolt. One of the Toadstool soldiers on the command deck then cried out, "We have hull breach!!"[br]

[br]

"Divert auxiliary power to the shields," Sonic called out.[br]

[br]

"Belay that order!!" Mario bellowed. All eyes turned worriedly to their leader as he continued to issue orders, "You will divert power the forward guns and focus our attack on the Haldberd! I intend to extinguish them once and for all!"[br]

[br]

Sonic was about to rebut when Mario cut him off with another order, "I also want all ships converged on the Gauntlet! They will provide us with the cover we need!"[br]

[br]

"Sir!" Sonic exclaimed, "That would be inadvisable! Our ships have taken heavy damage as it is! If we follow your plan, they'll surely-!"[br]

[br]

"I have given you an order!!" Mario answered fiercely, "Now, carry it out!!"[br]

[br]

The bridge crew was silent for a moment, but then Dash stepped forward and said solemnly, "You heard him."[br]

[br]

With that one toad input the appropriate command into the ship's computer while another toad transmitted Mario's orders to the other ships. Meanwhile, Mario stared out the viewing window, seething with rage as the battle continued all about him. A menacing scowl was etched into his face as he continued to dwell on the events that had happened up until now: the duel between him and Link, the announcement, and now this. It was as if fate, for some reason, decided to conspire against him. But he couldn't quit; not now, not after he'd come so far. The universe was still infected with evil, and he needed to purge it by any and all means. And if it meant destroying Link, so be it.[br]

I will cast him into the deepest fires of Hell if I have to!!![br]

[br]

***[br]

[br]

Back on the ground, Hyrule's defense was still holding on. By now, Ashei had exhausted her supply of arrows, and was now relying on her own sword, though her swordsmanship wasn't one to be compared with Link or Rusl. Still, she held her own, and continued to strike down enemy after enemy.[br]

[br]

Still, their situation was starting to look grim. They were only left with half of the amount of soldiers they started out with, and the enemy still showed no signs of slowing down. The only thing that was helping was the constant stream of arrows that halted the enemy's advance. What also helped was that the enemy soldiers seemed most focused on destroying Link, no doubt orders from their esteemed

commander. It didn't matter to Link; it just meant it was an opportunity to slow down the advance and take out as many soldiers as possible.[br]

[br]

"Rusl!" Link called out as he struck down two more soldiers, "How're you holding out?!"[br]

[br]

Rusl plunged his sword into another soldier as he replied, "I'll live, but this is far more fierce than I anticipated!"[br]

[br]

"What did you expect?" Ashei shouted as she twirled her blade about and struck down three more soldiers, "This is war, after all!"[br]

[br]

Link then performed a jumping slash that crashed into the ground and threw several toadstool soldiers off their feet. Afterwards he leapt back to his feet and fought on shouting, "Don't give up just yet! So long as we're alive, they have no chance of winning!"[br]

[br]

Both Rusl and Ashei nodded in affirmation and continued swinging their blades against the on-coming soldiers. Still, Link couldn't help but notice their motions beginning to slow as the fighting continued on. He couldn't blame them; the fatigue was getting to him as well as his arms began to ache from constant motion. But letting up meant forfeiting his life, and he wasn't resolved to die just yet; he punctuated this thought by performing a powerful spin attack that struck down a whole group of soldiers.[br]

[br]

***[br]

[br]

In the Haldberd, Zelda and Daisy observed the battle from the safety of the command deck. Of course, in a battle, 'safe' is a relative term. Rocketon fighters flew all about the Haldberd, firing countless projectiles at the solitary ship. So far, the few fighters on the Knights' side, along with Kirby, were able to fend them off for the most part, but no one knew how long that would last.[br]

[br]

Just then, one of the Waddle-dee sailors shouted something to Blade Knight, who nodded in acknowledgement.[br]

[br]

"What's happening?!" Daisy cried out.[br]

[br]

"The enemy ships are converging on the Gauntlet," Blade Knight replied, "looks like he's-!"[br]

[br]

Blade Knight was cut off by a strong jolt that rocked the ship hard. Otacon peered into his display screen, then called out, "The Gauntlet's focusing it's attack on us! Forward shields weakening!"[br]

[br]

Blade Knight hollered back, "Divert all shield power and compensate!"[br]

[br]

As Otacon nodded and carried out the order, Daisy reached for her communicator and called Peppy, who was helping with the evacuation in Hyrule Castle Town.[br]

[br]

"Peppy! Status!"[br]

[br]

Peppy's voice crackled over her communicator, "We're almost done down here! Give us another 7 minutes!"[br]

[br]

"Peppy, I don't think we have 7 minutes!!" Daisy cried back frantically. Then she felt Zelda's hand on her shoulder.[br]

[br]

"Don't worry," Zelda said, "Link will protect us."[br]

[br]

Daisy wasn't sure if this reassurance would be enough, but she nodded anyway. Hope wasn't something she was ready to give up just yet.[br]

[br]

"How's Dyna Blade?" Daisy called to Blade Knight.[br]

[br]

Blade Knight replied, "A few rocketons went after her, but I've already sent some of our fighters to help her!"[br]

[br]

"Okay!" Daisy yelled back. It was good to know Blade Knight was still keeping on top of things. But, she was starting to feel useless; when it came to fighting, Daisy rarely provided any help. She began contemplating what she might do to help as the fighting continued around her.[br]

[br]

***[br]

[br]

Back on the ground, the fighting was steadily becoming more and more desperate. It came to the point that Link, Rusl, and Ashei were now the only ones left in the front lines. They were heaving deep gasps as they continued to swing their swords about. The majority of the remaining enemy soldiers took up position near the castle walls and began lobbing shot after shot onto the defending soldiers, who retaliated with arrows and bombs.[br]

[br]

After a few more minutes of fighting, all three warriors broke off from their foes and pressed their backs against each other as the Toadstool soldiers began to swarm around them. They were surrounded now, with multiple guns pointed right at them. All three of them were on the borderline of exhaustion and starting to feel desperate as they stared down the several barrels of the blasters.[br]
[br]

"This isn't looking good," Rusl commented almost casually, which was amazing considering how tired he must've been. Ashei and Link didn't say anything; they were too busy catching their breath. But in their minds, both felt Rusl's words were severely underexagerated.[br]
[br]

It wasn't long before one of the soldiers finally spoke up, "The Mushroom Empire demands your surrender! Lay down your arms, and you will only be taken prisoner!"[br]
[br]

"So that your beloved leader can save us for a public execution?" Link asked, his voice dripping with contempt.[br]
[br]

"You will show proper respect to our king!!" Another soldier yelled angrily.[br]
[br]

"Yes," Ashei whispered hastily, "let's try to avoid getting our heads shot off prematurely."[br]
[br]

Link barely heard her words. Right now, his mind was racing like mad to find a solution. There had to be a way out of this; this couldn't be how things would end. Link had been in tight situations before, but this time the stakes were much higher. It wasn't just Hyrule depending on him this time; it was the entire universe now that needed him. Something in his gut told him he just couldn't die here...[br]
[br]

Just then, streams of laser blasts rained down on the ground soldiers. The sudden attack caused panic among the soldiers and they all scrambled about, looking about themselves deliriously as they tried to figure out what was happening. Link, Rusl, and Ashei were just as surprised, and were rooted to the spot, gripped by shock. Link then looked upwards and caught sight of Krystal's arwing fighter, along with Samus's ship, as they roared through the skies. It was as if some miraculous force gave them the speed to complete their tasks and return just in the knick of time. It was only then that he realized his opportunity was fleeting, and that there was no time to stand around.[br]
[br]

"Everybody make a break for the castle!!" Link hollered at the top of his lungs. His sudden outburst caught both his companions off guard, but got them running in the right direction.[br]
[br]

The three of them swung their blades swiftly and wildly about themselves as they surged forward through the sea of enemy soldiers. Soldiers continued to fall all around them as they surged their way

forward, praying beyond hope that they'd all make it to the castle gates in one piece.[br]
[br]

Soon, they finally broke through the last row of mushroom soldiers and continued running for their lives as they made for the castle gate. Bolt of energy began to zing past their ears as they drew ever closer to the gates, which were flung open by Auru.[br]
[br]

"Come on!" Auru called to them, and they pumped more air into their lungs as they forced their legs to pump even harder. Then, all three finally made it to safety as Auru slammed the doors shut behind them. As soon as the doors were shut, all three of them collapsed to the ground, heaving deep breaths of air. It was a while before Link was finally able to force some words out.[br]
[br]

"How...much longer...?"[br]
[br]

"We're just about finished," Auru replied as he hefted Link and Ashei to their feet; Rusl was helped up by another soldier, "The soldiers are the only ones left."[br]
[br]

"Okay, then," Link replied breathlessly, "I'd say it's time we left, too."[br]
[br]

"Couldn't agree with you more," a voice called out. It was Shad, just as Link remembered him. Seeing him in high spirits comforted Link's weary spirit.[br]
[br]

"There's one wormhole left, and I suggest we take it," Shad told Link hurriedly. Link nodded in response and Auru called what soldiers were still on the wall to retreat. Everyone immediately made a mad-dash for the town square. Their job was done; now it was time to run.[br]
[br]
***[br]
[br]

The crew of the Haldberd had just received Peppy's message and couldn't have been happier with the news. With all of Hyrule now safe in the Dimensional Gap, all that was left was to make a run for it themselves.[br]
[br]

"What's our status?" Daisy called to Blade Knight, who called back, "The wormhole generators at full power and Dyna Blade made it inside the hanger! We're ready to go!"[br]
[br]

"Get us out of here, then!" Daisy cried out. No sooner had she said this than one of the sailors acknowledged the order and initiated the wormhole generator. The beam shot out and the wormhole was opened.[br]

[br]
***[br]
[br]

These events, of course, didn't go unnoticed by the opposing forces on board the Gauntlet.[br]
[br]

"Sir!" one of the mushroom soldiers cried, "The enemy, sir! They're making a run for it!"[br]
[br]

"No!" Mario bellowed angrily, "Stop them, now!!"[br]
[br]

Unfortunately, Mario's order came too late, for the Haldberd, and the other ships, had already made it past the surrounding rocketons into the wormhole, which closed right after them, making a clean getaway.[br]
[br]

Mario didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. His seething was all the evidence the crew needed to ascertain their leader's frustration.[br]
[br]

"Um, sir?" another soldier meekly stated, "I'm getting reports from the ground troops. The city is deserted, sir..."[br]
[br]

Mario still said nothing, but one would've expected him to lash out at something at any moment. Fortunately for them, Dash was somewhat on top of the situation.[br]
[br]

"Sir," said calmly, "If I may be so bold, I may have an idea to turn this to our favor..."[br]

15 - Foreshadowing

After their arrival in the Dimensional Gap, the Hyrulians were made to live on the same planet as the dinosaur-like Saurians. The Saurians themselves were mostly hospitable to them, the exceptions being the Sharpclaw Tribe, Redeye Tribe, and the Shadowhunter Tribe, who mostly kept to themselves anyway. The rest of the Saurians, along with the other groups saved by the Knights of Hope, did their best to help the Hyrulians settle in. These other groups included the Bo-Bomb Tribe, a race of living, breathing, bombs, the Yoshi Tribe, who were also dinosaur-like creatures, Bu-bulbs, who consisted of sentient flowers, and the Chozo Tribe, who were a bird-like people. Each of these tribes inhabited a different planetary body, all connected by an ingenious form of interplanetary teleportation devices developed by the Haldberd's technicians.[br]

[br]

Link, in the meanwhile, did his best to familiarize himself with their new home. The planetary body they called 'home' was one of a hand-full of planets lost in a vast field of asteroids. At best, the planets served as shelters for the weary refugees, with no vegetation, and their ownly source of light being a lone, unimpressive, sun some distance away. The reason they were able to make a living on these planets was due to the plantlife provided by the Bu-bulb Tribe, and the amount of supplies each tribe and group was able to pool together, along with some 'borrowed' essentials from the Mushroom Empire's supply stations.[br]

[br]

Link was simply amazed by the wonders from the other worlds: flying vehicles and strange machinery from Corneria, exotic plants and creatures from the former Mushroom Kingdom, even an iron-wrought monstrosity that Snake called a 'Metal Gear.' Rather than horrified, Link was filled with a sort of child-like wonder as he beheld all these things. Link was always considered a somewhat trusting fellow, rarely showing any hostility toward other races, unless a reason made itself apparant to him. Seeing all these strange and amazing things made him wonder about what other worlds had to offer.[br]

[br]

What Link was most impressed by was how these different cultures were coming together. He never really thought much of it, but it was really a blessing that the different races of Hyrule were able to co-exist among each other. Now, here they were, mixing among other races, forming more ties of friendship. This gave Link a bright future to hope for, one where peace could exist. In the meantime, there was the threat towards that peace that needed to be dealt with. So long as Mario continued on his path of destruction, he didn't have the luxury to rest until he was stopped once and for all.[br]

[br]

Once that thought entered his head, Link took a deep sigh. It was the second time he'd been pulled into something he didn't want to be a part of. The first time, he'd been literally dragged into it. Now, here he

was again, heeding the call of the Hero and stepping forward to fight the good fight.[br]
[br]

He had nothing against doing good deeds; it's just that he rather preferred the more simpler life. Herding goats and running errands was plenty enough good as far as he was concerned. Never in a million years would he have imagined himself fighting monsters and saving people from tyrannic maniacs.[br]
[br]

These thoughts swirled around in his head as he looked up at the skies of this new world. The day had turned to night, but it wasn't any night that Link was accustomed to. Instead of twinkling stars and a pale moon hanging above them, there were clumps of meteors scattered over head, floating among wisps of blue clouds through the darkness. There would be no stars to gaze upon here; there wasn't enough space for them. Of course, stars were a small price to pay for staying alive and free, Link reasoned.[br]
[br]

His thoughts were then interrupted when a hand lightly came to rest on his shoulder. Link turned and saw that it was Krystal.[br]
[br]

"Oh," Link said, "how are you?"[br]
[br]

"Fine," Krystal said meekly.[br]
[br]

Immediately, Link could tell something was bothering her, and was about ask when Krystal said, "You should come with me. There's something you need to see..."[br]

[br]
***[br]
[br]

Krystal led Link to the bridge of the Haldberd, where Daisy, Peppy, and Blade Knight were waiting. What Krystal was referring to was a news feed that Otacon was able to intercept not too long ago. It was so urgent that involved not only Link, but Zelda and Vissen as well. And there was good reason. What the news feed was broadcasting was the burning remains of Hyrule Castle Town. The images were almost too much for them to bare.[br]
[br]

And not just Castle Town, by everywhere throughout Hyrule was destroyed. Whatever buildings were left standing were reduced to rubble. It was simply horrifying. Homes, businesses, temples of deep and rooted history; none were spared.[br]
[br]

And the worst of it was that Mario was placing the blame for the destruction on Link. In the broadcast, the news reporter repeated Mario's claims, that he supposedly was chased out of Hyrule by Link, who after the broadcast, made a gambit to claim Hyrule for himself, and that instead, he wound up destroying Hyrule and leaving it in ruins.[br]

[br]

This turn of events made Link absolutely furious. Not only was he now labeled a criminal, but Mario had also instigated the destruction of his beloved homeland. He couldn't imagine anything more infuriating than this.[br]

[br]

Zelda said nothing as she stared at the view screen, watching her homeland burn to ashes. Vissen, however, wouldn't keep quiet.[br]

[br]

"So," he began angrily, "this is our reward? We place our hopes in our beloved hero, and how are we repaid? Our homes are destroyed, and we are left with no country to call our own!"[br]

[br]

Vissen then turned to Link and furiously continued, "You've ruined everything you self-righteous blowhard! By siding us against the empire, you've turned us into a race of lowly refugees!! You-!"[br]

[br]

"That's enough, Vissen!!"[br]

[br]

Zelda's outburst greatly overpowered Vissen's complaints, and he stormed out fuming because of his loss of words.[br]

[br]

Link, on the other hand, couldn't help but feel like Vissen's words were justified. Link had been so confident in his decision up until he saw the consequences of that decision. Now, there was no home for Hyrule to return to once the war ended. The people he'd fought so hard to protect had just lost everything because they believed in him. This guilt would be one of the heaviest burdens Link would bear.[br]

[br]

[br]

"I'm sorry," Daisy said as she looked over to Zelda and Link, "If I'd known Mario would stoop so low as to do this..."[br]

[br]

"You had no way of knowing," Zelda replied as she fought back her own tears, "no one could have known."[br]

[br]

Link said nothing, but ran out after an uncomfortable silence. Krystal stared after him; she couldn't have imagined how much pain he must've been going through.[br]

[br]

Zelda then raised her own head and said, "If you'll excuse me, I need to address my people."[br]

[br]

Daisy nodded, and Zelda walked off, almost gliding across the floor in a mournful sort of way.[br]
[br]

Daisy then slumped into one of the empty chairs on the bridge as she allowed the tension to sink in.[br]
[br]

"I can't believe he'd go so far as to do this," Daisy said bitterly, referring to the telecast, "he's become a monster!"[br]
[br]

"All the more reason we need to continue fighting him," Peppy said encouragingly, "or else everyone will suffer."[br]
[br]

Daisy nodded in agreement, and all remaining sat in silence as the Mushroom Empire's newscast continued to play on the main viewer.[br]
[br]
[br]

Link went to his new quarters on the Haldberd. He just sat on his bed, taking great interest in the linolium carpet. All the while, he had been doing more thinking. He still remembered Rusl's counsel, and knew there would be no arguing their position on the morality of Mario's actions. But now, Link had begun to question the practicality of being 'moral.' All the good intentions and righteousness he believed in didn't stop what came to pass. Now that all of Hyrule had lost their homes, how would their feelings toward him be changed? Would they be as understanding and patient as Zelda, or would he be chastised by them the same way he was by Vissen?[br]
[br]

If they did curse his actions, Link would not argue with or blame them. He had asked every person in Hyrule to sacrifice everything without them even realizing it, just because he believed in truth and justice. He saved them, but at what cost?[br]
[br]

Just then, his door opened and a blonde woman in a blue jumpsuit walked in.[br]
[br]

"Who're you?" Link asked, somewhat startled.[br]
[br]

"Relax, it's me," the woman replied, "Samus."[br]
[br]

Link was a bit taken back. It was the first time he'd seen her without her armor on. Her voice was the same, so Link took some reassurance in that recognition.[br]
[br]

"I need you to follow me," Samus said.[br]

[br]

Link asked where they were going, to which Samus replied, "You'll see."[br]

[br]

Link became a little suspicious of this, but followed her anyway, mostly out of curiosity.[br]

[br]

[br]

The walk to their destination was mostly silent. Link's thoughts still dwelled on the recent news that he had learned of as their trip took them from the Haldberd, onto the planet surface. Link and Samus's walk then took them through the new Hyrulian settlement, where Link found the answer to one of his questions.[br]

[br]

As they walked on, Link raised his head looked at the faces of the people around him. Most of them averted their gaze, and those who did meet his eyes met them with malcontent and resentment. It was as he feared: they believed he had failed them, as much as he believed it himself.[br]

[br]

After passing through the settlement, Samus broke her silence and said, "Stop being such a dumbass."[br]

[br]

Link shot a glare at the back of her head as she continued, "All this crying over your lost country isn't going to fix anything."[br]

[br]

At this, Link was about to rebut when Samus cut him off by saying, "You're mourning the loss of buildings. Constructions of wood and stone. How foolish can you people be? You have any idea how lucky you are, compared to those who are still suffering?"[br]

[br]

To this, Link had no comeback. It was a hard lesson, but she had her point. Homes could be rebuilt, lives were much more fragile.[br]

[br]

After their talk, Samus and Link fell back into silence as they reached a warp panel, that took them to one of the other planets, where they came to another one of the settlements. This area was the new home of the Chozo, who had come from Samus's dimension. Compared to the other races, the Chozo were much more humble looking. They made their homes in makeshift tents and had little access to any modern conveniences. Despite that, however, they were an ingenious race, capable of creating technological marvels that even Peppy had to admit were beyond fantastic.[br]

[br]

This particular group had been found on a deserted planet in the far corners of the galaxy. Though they

held on to the knowledge of their ancestors, they were more attached to their traditions and religious beliefs. They seemed to Link more like ancient sage-like people he could relate to, as opposed to the other people he'd met.[br]

[br]

Samus eventually took him to the largest tent among them, and led him inside. There, he saw an extremely old Chozo, who seemed to be chanting something when they entered the tent. The elder Chozo looked up when he heard them enter, and both Link and Samus sat opposite him near the fire.[br]

[br]

"Elder," Samus said respectfully, "I've brought the warrior from your vision." [br]

[br]

Link looked at both the elder and Samus with a start. A vision? About him? And Link thought he'd had so many questions before.[br]

[br]

The elder looked at Samus, then at Link. He seemed to be studying Link for a few moments, then asked Link, "Show me your left hand." [br]

[br]

The request sent chills up his spine. There could've been only one reason he could think of as to why the Chozo would want to see his left hand. So, upon removing his gauntlet, he showed him his hand. There, on the back of his hand, was the mark of the goddess: the Triforce symbol. This was the mark that branded him as the Chosen Hero of Legends.[br]

[br]

Sure enough, upon seeing the marking, the Chozo elder said, "Yes, yes. The mark of the green garbed warrior. You've come to us at last." [br]

[br]

"At...last?" Link asked, sorely confused. [br]

[br]

"Yes," The elder replied, "You are the one to bring about salvation." [br]

[br]

"What are you talking about?" Link asked incredulously. [br]

[br]

The elder didn't answer, but instead pulled a small, glowing, green orb and offered it to Link, who was instinctively apprehensive at first, but, out of curiosity, received it anyway. [br]

[br]

As he held the orb in his hand, the eerie glow seemed almost hypnotizing. Link began to feel himself being drawn into the orb as the rest of his surroundings slowly faded into a swirl of colors. Then, Link's vision began to slowly fade to black. [br]

[br]
***[br]
[br]

When he opened his eyes again, Link was no longer inside the tent. He was standing the surface of the planet now. Link then tried to get his bearings, and looked around. All about him, a battle was raging between the Knights of Hope and the Mushroom Empire.[br]
[br]

At first, Link's response was one of fear, but then, he noticed something odd. He looked down at his hands, and in his right hand was a thin, blue, sword that he'd never laid eyes on before, and in his left were blue shards of some glass relic. He certainly didn't remember breaking anything, and he began to wonder what exactly had just happened.[br]
[br]

Then, as he looked up, straight ahead, he saw Mario, kneeling on the ground, and clutching his chest. At this point, Link realized what this was. It wasn't real; it probably hadn't even happened yet. Was this a vision on how to defeat Mario? If so, how did Link do it? These images so far hadn't told him anything yet.[br]
[br]

As Link tried to piece everything together, Link suddenly noticed a burning sensation in his left hand, that was steadily becoming hotter and hotter. He looked down at his hand to see that it was now beginning to glow, and the golden shine was growing brighter as the burning became hotter. He simply stared at his palm as the light continued to grow in intensity, and as he turned his hand to see the back, he was able to make out the completed Triforce symbol, which showed all three golden triangles shining, as opposed to the partial symbol, with one triangle, that was supposed to be there, when the light and the heat finally became too much to bear. He closed his eyes as the light and heat kept growing and growing until...[br]
[br]
***[br]
[br]

Link's eyes flew open as he finally came out of his vision. It was one of the most terrifying things he'd seen so far. The experience felt so real; Link could still feel the burning sensation in his hand. The experience was so exhausting, Link flopped onto the ground, panic stricken and short of breath. He laid there until Samus grabbed his arm and helped him upright. It wasn't until he was erect that he noticed he was still clutching the green orb, so tightly that it took him a while to loosen it from his grip.[br]
[br]

Link then looked hard at the Elder and asked, "What was that?!"[br]
[br]

The Elder was silent for a short while, then said, "It is your destiny."[br]

16 - Morality

Both Link and Samus exited the elder's tent, dead silent. The elder had just finished explaining all the details of the strange vision he'd just shown Link, and this new knowledge was not at all comforting to Link. Samus couldn't possibly fathom all that was going on in Link's head at the moment, but she knew well enough that this was a lot to take in all at once.[br]

[br]

"I don't believe it," Link finally said, "I can't believe it." [br]

[br]

"Believe or don't believe, it's the truth as we know it," Samus replied frankly. [br]

[br]

"You can't honestly be serious!" Link said to her as his temper began to rise, "Did you not hear what he said?!" [br]

[br]

"I heard it before you did," Samus said resolutely, "and even now, I still believe in what his vision has foretold." [br]

[br]

"But it's insanity!" Link burst out. [br]

[br]

"Link, you have to think about the bigger picture here!" Samus said in a more stronger tone, "This is the only way we can save the universe! It has to happen, and it will happen!" [br]

[br]

"At the expense of every living being here!?" Link yelled incredulously. [br]

[br]

Despite the outburst, many of the Chozo present seemed to pay him no attention. Samus, now becoming more and more agitated by Link's attitude, grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him to the side. [br]

[br]

"Listen, you ignorant fart!" Samus whispered harshly, "This isn't just about saving lives, this is about an entire universe! If you can't grasp the concept that there have to be sacrifices to ensure the safety of billions, then you're a bigger shoot-head than I took you for!" [br]

[br]

"Would you rather I not care about the fact we went through all the trouble of saving these people for nothing?!" Link replied in equal harshness.[br]

[br]

"Do you have any clue as to who we're up against?!" Samus asked, her anger at its peak, "Mario's dabbled into a power far beyond anything any mortal world could combat! This is out of our hands now! It's time for fate to step in!"[br]

[br]

Link was about to retort when Samus cut him off and said, "Listen! Mario will find us! It's not a question of if, but when! At the rate Mario's going, he'll be able to traverse the interdimensional boundaries and warp to any dimension he'd want, including this one! With this thought in mind, would you rather he left this dimension dead or alive?!"[br]

[br]

Link wasn't able to come up with a retort for that, and so Samus continued, "If there is but one chance to end Mario's reign of evil, we have to take that chance! We can't allow Mario to escape, no matter what!"[br]

[br]

"You're talking about genocide!" Link replied stubbornly.[br]

[br]

"A few hundred thousands, compared to an infinite billions," Samus replied coldly.[br]

[br]

"I cannot accept that!" Link yelled at the top of his lungs.[br]

[br]

Samus responded with a mean right hook that knocked Link flat onto his back. And just as Link tried to pull himself onto his feet, Samus's knee came down and pinned his shoulder to the ground. Link was unable to force her off of him, as Samus continued scolding him, "Stop being so damn selfish! You can't have things go the way want them to this time!"[br]

[br]

Link stopped struggling, and glared at Samus as she went on, "You may not like it, but Mario's gone and made a mess of the entire universe, and it will be up to you to fix it! After the fall of the Mushroom Empire, the entire universe will fall into chaos and disarray, and you will need be the one to set everything right!"[br]

[br]

Link was silent at first, but then asked, "How can I be a leader if I'm no better than Mario?"[br]

[br]

Samus stared at him for a little while, then said, "You do what is needed. That doesn't always mean

doing things the right way."[br]

[br]

Link then averted his gaze. His problems now had become even more complicated. If this was the destiny Roselia was referring to, then he wanted no part of it.[br]

[br]

Why me?[br]

[br]

***[br]

[br]

Sonic walked briskly through the steel corridors of the space station on the Capital Planet. The armada had just returned to the Mushroom Kingdom, and plans to rebuild were already underway. In the meantime, all key officers, including Sonic, were given time off.[br]

[br]

Sonic, however, had one last assignment; he was to visit one of Mario's most respected scientists: Professor E. Gadd. E. Gadd was the lead scientist who helped lead the research team in developing the new transdimensional technology, along with a host of other new, and rather disturbing, inventions. And it was because of one of these frightening creations that Sonic was coming to visit him.[br]

[br]

E. Gadd's current project was cybernetic revitalization. In lamens terms, reviving dead bodies using cybernetic implants. As incredulous as it sounded at first, E. Gadd had used an unusual combination of his own mechanations and several components borrowed from the alternate dimensions, resulting in fully functioning limb and organ replacements, along with a resurrection process that involved an incredible amount of electricity, that revitalized any dead corpse, so long as the central nervous system, the brain and spinal cord, remained intact. So far, E. Gadd had five successful tests, and now Sonic was to check on his latest test subjects.[br]

[br]

Sonic reached E. Gadd's lab soon enough. The doors gave off a cold hiss as they slowly opened up. Upon entering the lab, Sonic gave a light shiver at the sudden drop in temperature. E. Gadd's lab was always kept cold, on his insistance that it was necessary to ensure that everything in the lab remained sterile. In Sonic's opinion, it was probably more because he liked watching people freeze to death.[br]

[br]

Sonic saw E. Gadd busily toiling away at a workstation straight ahead on a far side of the room. The table he was working on was simply littered with different components and spare parts. They looked, for the most part, completely untouched, as E. Gadd sat busily scribbling away on some different pieces of paper. Sonic pricked his ears, and was able to catch inaudible mumblings underneath the scientist's breath. Sonic thought he met his fair share of crackpot scientists in his day, but this guy took the cake.[br]

[br]

Sonic cleared his throat to announce his arrival. Immediately, the tiny scientist whirled in his seat in

surprise and nearly fell off. He calmed down just as quickly when he saw who it was.[br]
[br]

"Oh, Sonic! My apologies. Didn't hear you come in," E. Gadd said, in his unusually high pitched voice. He was a short, bent, old man, with a few strands of white hair on the top of his head and thick rimmed, coke bottle, glasses.[br]
[br]

Sonic really didn't enjoy dealing with this fellow, but in his case, it was unavoidable, "I needed to see your latest test subjects."[br]
[br]

"Oh, yes. Of course," E. Gadd nodded excitedly, "This way."[br]
[br]

E. Gadd gestured to another door on the right side of the room. It opened up to a long hallway, that was equally chilled, and Sonic followed E. Gadd as he trotted toward the end of the hallway.[br]
[br]

"Oh, you can't possibly imagine how exciting it's been for me these past three years," E. Gadd said halfway through their walk.[br]
[br]

"Really?" Sonic asked, trying his best to feign interest.[br]
[br]

"Why, yes! All the new opportunities, all the scientific advances we've made; it's all so incredible!" E. Gadd could barely contain his excitement. Sonic nodded silently.[br]
[br]

"I mean, we've obtained technology and scientific understanding that would've taken decades to discover in a span of three years!" E. Gadd threw his hands into the air as he spoke, "Never in all my years could I imagine such an achievement under our old leader!"[br]
[br]

"You mean Peach?" Sonic asked, now genuinely intrigued.[br]
[br]

"Yes," E. Gadd continued on, "You see, she was an absolute kind and benevolent ruler. Truly pure as pure can be. Unfortunately, her kind nature often got in the way of the pursuit of knowledge, mostly because of certain...morals. But, thanks to our great King Mario, such worries were pushed to the wayside, and the pursuit of scientific knowledge finally took off! Oh, when I think of all the amazing weapons and designs I thought I had to scrap because of Peach's objections now being brought to realization!"[br]
[br]

"And you're not bothered by the whole...morality issue?" asked Sonic, his fur prickling.[br]

[br]

"Of course not!" E. Gadd replied jovially, "I am a man of science! I realized a while back that the pursuit of science is much more important than worrying about silly nonsense like morality. What is morality other than a society's attempt to dissuade people from killing each other off? Sometimes, in the pursuit of knowledge, sacrifices are only natural. That is what science is, my boy."[br]

[br]

Sonic nodded, but deep inside, he felt his insides turn deathly cold. This was the same form of thinking that drove his former enemy, Dr. Robotnik. The mere thought of his old adversary chilled Sonic to the bone, and was almost grateful for the fact Mario was able to catch on to Robotnik's hidden agenda. Who knew what horrors he would have visited on the universe. Sonic then tried to push those thoughts out of his head, but the cold feeling still remained. He blamed the freezing air around him.[br]

[br]

They finally reached the doors to the "Resurrection Chamber," as E. Gadd had dubbed it. The room was fairly spacious, with an operating table at the center, some machines lined against one of the walls, and another wall decorated with various tools and parts. Across from the entrance, there was a holding cell, with a force field keeping five occupants trapped inside.[br]

[br]

The five individuals were E. Gadd's test subjects, who were successfully resurrected by his process. Two were from Sonic's world, the other three from the Lylat dimension. There was a bat woman leaning against the left wall, a black furred hedgehog in the left corner, a cat woman sitting in the opposite corner, a dog man sitting next to her, and the most recent test subject, Fox McCloud, sitting against the back wall.[br]

[br]

The bat woman and cat woman both looked perfectly normal, but the others had to have different limbs replaced in order to function properly. The black hedgehog got a new leg, the dog got new arms, and the left side of Fox's face and upper torso were now all metal.[br]

[br]

E. Gadd promptly lead Sonic to the holding chamber. Sonic took his time surveying the five individuals, while E. Gadd explained Fox's condition, "As you can see, Fox McCloud is now as lively and functional as he was before. Granted, I had my doubts when his body was brought in, given the severe tissue damage, but I'm happy to report that he now has a clean bill of-."[br]

[br]

At that moment, the cat leapt towards and slammed both her fists into the force field. It wasn't enough for her to break free, but it did startle E. Gadd quite a bit. Sonic remained stony quiet.[br]

[br]

"Save your strength, Katt," the dog said wearily.[br]

[br]

Katt didn't seem to hear, and continued pounding on the force field, angrily shouting at both Sonic and E.

Gadd, "Murderers! I'll get you for this! I'll get you!!"[br]
[br]

"Katt! Stop!" at this point, both Fox and the dog leapt to their feet to restrain her. This was more to keep her from hurting herself than anything. They all too well understood her anger, and probably wouldn't have stopped her under different circumstances.[br]
[br]

After the two finally wrestled her back onto the ground, with no help from their cell mates, Katt finally broke down crying, burying her face into the dog's sweater. Fox didn't say anything to her after that. He knew how much Falco had been mourning her supposed death. Now it was Katt's turn to mourn.[br]
[br]

Fox slumped back into his spot, and gave a thankful nod to the dog. The dog, Bill Grey, nodded back in acknowledgement. Then Fox stared back at the ground, as he fell back into his own thoughts. He still couldn't believe he found both Bill Grey and Katt Monroe alive in this prison, let alone the fact he'd been brought back from the grave himself. He could only imagine the look on the General and the other's faces when they saw Fox up and around.[br]
[br]

Then his thoughts went back to Krystal, as they often did. He'd put her through so much pain with his little trick. Dead or alive, he was sure she wouldn't forgive that stunt so easily. He just hoped she managed to survive, where ever it was she wound up.[br]
[br]

Then, he forced those thoughts out of his head as he looked back through the force field at their captors. So far, they'd backed a small ways away from the force field and began whispering to themselves. Fox could only assume it was about them, and he wasn't looking forward to finding out what other experiments they had in mind.[br]
[br]

It was that moment when Fox noticed the black hedgehog, named Shadow, staring hatedly at Sonic. Bill happened to mention the names of the other two cell mates, and what little information he managed to get out of them. Shadow, and his bat friend, Rouge, were two of the warriors who fought along side Sonic in a failed attempt to fight off the Mushroom Empire. Both Rouge and Shadow suffered death at the hands of Mario himself, but were apparently not so entirely damaged that they couldn't be resurrected. They appeared to know Sonic very well, but would rarely speak of him. Fox figured it was because of Sonic's betrayal, and was wise not to press the matter. Of course, these particular individuals did look a bit shady themselves, making him wonder why they didn't defect.[br]
[br]

It wasn't long before Sonic and E. Gadd finally broke from their talk and walked back to the cell. Sonic pulled a blaster from his side and pointed it at them. Bad news, just as Fox thought.[br]
[br]

"Another experiment?" Rouge asked in a soft and hateful tone.[br]
[br]

"Your last one," Sonic said frankly, "if your lucky."
[br]

"I'm not sure about this, Master Sonic," E. Gadd said worriedly, "The obedience chips should work, but only in theory. If something should happen, the test subject would die. I'd rather not risk losing a test subject just yet."
[br]

"Heaven forbid you should run out of toys to play with," Shadow muttered under his breath, his voice dripping with resentment.
[br]

"We're in the middle of a war," Sonic replied, "so long as we have death toles, we'll have other test subjects. Besides, the empire needs more warriors, and King Mario wants results now."
[br]

Sonic's reasoning was apparently enough for E. Gadd, as he prepared to lower the force field. Fox probably would've gotten ready to jump them both, since there were only two of them, but he had to remind himself of the last time he tried that, and the severe beating he and Shadow had gotten because of it. Sonic may not have looked it, but he had become much more powerful after joining the Mushroom Empire.
[br]

So, E. Gadd hobbled over to the control panel on the side and, with a shaky finger, punched in the code to deactivate the force field. The electronic whir from the force field died out instantly. As E. Gadd slowly backed towards Sonic, Fox slowly climbed to his feet, doing his best not to seem threatning...at least not yet.
[br]

"All right, then," E. Gadd said with a renewed sense of excitement, "I'll just need one of-."
[br]

What followed was a flash of blue fur as E. Gadd was swept off his feet and strapped onto his own operating table. The action was so fast, it took everyone else, even E. Gadd himself, at least 30 seconds to register what had just happened. Everyone looked around at each other, sharing the same confused look.
[br]

"M-Master Sonic!" E. Gadd managed to blurt out fearfully.
[br]

Fox was also trying to formulate his own question when Sonic hastily drew a cube from his pocket and said, "Quick! You don't have much time!"
[br]

He threw the cube to Fox, and then explained, "It's a wormhole generator. Just give it a squeeze, and

the wormhole will appear. I've already set the coordinates for another dimension. You need to find a way to hook up with the Knights of Hope."

[br]

"So this won't lead us to the Dimensional Gap," Fox said.

[br]

"Sorry, but it's safer this way. Also, you'll be able to warn the dimension you arrive at. This dimension's already on Mario's hit list."

[br]

"Why are you helping us?" Shadow stepped forward and asked suspiciously.

[br]

Sonic was silent at first, then replied, "I know I can't erase what I did, but now I think it's time to make up for that mistake."

[br]

The group looked at him with suspicious eyes. As far as they were concerned, he was still far from being worthy of their trust. Of course, Shadow never really trusted Sonic anyway.

[br]

Fox, however, understood well that there wasn't time to think about whose side was on. They seemed to have an opportunity to escape, and they had to take now or not at all. The latter wasn't at all appealing.

[br]

"Okay," Fox finally said, "we'll take you on your word, but if you're as true as you say, you'll come with us."

[br]

"Sorry, pal," Sonic replied frankly, "but I've gotta create a diversion for you guys. It'll be a while before they realize you're gone," he gave a thoughtful glance over at E. Gadd on the table.

[br]

Fox, seeing Sonic's point, nodded in response and gave the cube a squeeze. Immediately, a bolt of lightning shot out of the cube, and struck an invisible point in mid air. Then, a whirling vortex opened up, and their escape was assured.

[br]

"Alright," Fox said, "let's move out!"

[br]

Kat and Bill were the first to go through; they may not of trusted Sonic, but they did trust Fox's judgement, and were willing to follow his lead. Rouge went next; although not fully trusting of Sonic, she figured there could've been worse by staying behind. That just left Fox and Shadow left, and Shadow seemed to stare piercingly at Sonic.

[br]

"Don't think this has earned my forgiveness, Sonic," Shadow said harshly.[br]

[br]

Sonic stared back and said, "Just say 'thanks' and beat it, already." [br]

[br]

Shadow didn't give Sonic his thanks, but he did go through the portal, secretly vowing to take his vengeance on Sonic should it all turn out to be a trap. Fox was the last to go through, giving one last glance at Sonic, just to make sure there was no sign of deceit in him.[br]

[br]

After Fox went through, the portal closed, leaving Sonic and E. Gadd alone in the operating room.[br]

[br]

"Traitor!" E. Gadd finally blurted out, "Traitor!" [br]

[br]

"Sorry you feel that way," Sonic said emotionlessly, "but I do have a problem with your methods." [br]

[br]

With that, Sonic took his blaster and began shooting indiscriminately around the room, blowing up every exposed part and tool. No sooner had he started firing than alarms began blaring about the room, signaling the internal sensors were now aware of weapons fire in the room. Sonic was unfortunately caught off guard, not considering they would take such a precaution. At this, Sonic looked one last time at E. Gadd and said, "Hope you're not too attached to that lab of yours." [br]

[br]

Thus, Sonic sped off through the door. A one-track determination drove him forward as he sped through the corridor, into E. Gadd's main lab, and started blasting everything in sight. If nothing else, he could at least slow the demented scientist's progress on his projects for another year or so. [br]

[br]

Then, as alarms continued to blare throughout the station, Sonic burst out of the lab and bolted through more corridors as he searched for a communication station; The Knights of Hope had to be informed about this. All the while, Sonic was sure to cause as much destruction as possible. [br]

[br]

Tails, Amy, Knuckles...I'm sorry. [br]

[br]

*** [br]

[br]

Fox landed hard on his backside as he flew out of the portal. Fox always heard interdimensional travel was rough, but he never really expected anything like that. Bill came over to his side and helped him to his feet. [br]

[br]

"Well, that was fun," Fox said sarcastically as he felt his sore behind.[br]

[br]

"If we ever see Sonic again, you can slug him one for it," Bill replied.[br]

[br]

Fox chuckled slightly, then looked up to see where they landed. The scenery that met him wasn't very encouraging. They found themselves in the middle of a ruined city, completely devoid of all life. The buildings looked like they'd been abandoned for quite some time, and seemed to have suffered a large amount of damage.[br]

[br]

"What the heck?" Fox couldn't believe what he was seeing.[br]

[br]

"I know," Bill replied in agreement, "I'm not entirely sure what might've happened here." [br]

[br]

"A war?" Fox suggested, to which Bill answered, "I can't imagine any form of weapon strong enough to cause damage of this scale. I'm more willing to bet on natural disaster, myself." [br]

[br]

"You're probably right," Fox said. He looked around at the others. Kat and Rouge had chosen a flat piece of rubble to rest on, and Shadow was out in the middle of an abandoned road, staring out at the ruined cityscape.[br]

[br]

Fox then lowered his head and said to Bill, "Okay, you can say it." [br]

[br]

"Say what?" Bill asked.[br]

[br]

"We got screwed," Fox said.[br]