

Thick mud clung to Ravio's pants as he shifted in the hunting blind. The metal support beams below him creaked at the slightest movement, loud enough to make him freeze.

He didn't remember the beams being this noisy.

By the time he finished assembling the blind, the sun had already started rising. Sweat soaked through his shirt, and he stripped off his duty belt and jacket. He didn't care if Links heard every bolt, snap, or muttered correction. He remembered the process being faster.

He remembered wrong.

Ravio eased his binoculars through the slit in the camouflaged tarp. He adjusted the focus dial until a shed with a sagging roof came into view. Snow dusted the shingles, and thick moss darkened underneath.

The view moved from shed to shed. Every roof sagged now. His fingers tightened around the binoculars until the focus blurred. He had built those sheds with Dad and Links.

Ravio corrected the focus and shifted back to the largest building—their old cabin. Lichen clung to the walls on the south side, but bare spots marked the front door, as if something had ripped the growth off. Scratches raked deep into the doorframe.

That was new.

Windows and doors, all broken. No evidence of repairs.

Conclusion: Links wasn't living here.

A broken rocking chair still swayed as a gust of wind pushed through. Ravio remembered that chair. He had been carving in it on the day their mine collapsed.

The day their father died.

He lowered his binoculars and shivered as a cold breeze pushed through the flap. His mind drifted and for a moment, the porch was under him again. The rocking chair swayed beneath his weight and cedar shavings curled down to his boots. He told his father to wear the jacket, the one Ravio made. His father shrugged and said he didn't want to ruin it in the dust. But Ravio insisted. It was meant to be used. Meant to get dirty.

Ravio was still carving when Links burst onto the porch carrying a pickaxe, his face coated in dust. Ravio smiled, thinking Links was going to tell him about something they had found, but Links just stood there staring. Silent.

Links had never looked at him like that. Never stood there quiet like that.

Ravio shouted his name.

Nothing.

The carving knife fell from Ravio's grip and hit the floorboards.

Ravio ran for the mine.

He stumbled to the collapsed entrance, coughing as dust settled in his lungs. The faint smell of explosives hung in the air. Ravio shoved toward a gap in the debris and crawled in until his shoulders squeezed against the rocks.

“Dad!”

Nothing.

He screamed again.

He clawed at the rubble until his fingers went numb. Every rock he moved sent another sliding down to take its place. More dust. More coughing. His calls grew weaker as the pileup got worse. He was yelling at a wall.

Ravio wiped his face with his arm. His sleeve came back darkened. He couldn't tell if it was blood or tears.

His throat choked around each hot burst of breath. He crawled out and ran to the only place he knew to get help.

The Mercantile Cafe.

Ravio watched as rescuers dug through the rubble. One boulder at a time. But it was too late.

They found the body.

Not enough information to know if Dad died from suffocation, the blast, or the cave-in.

But he died alone.

And Ravio never saw Links again.

Too many questions and no answers.

Ravio blinked and shook his head. The rocking chair had already stopped moving, and morning birdcalls cut through the silence.

Nothing left here. Just another dead end. So why would Links come back?

There had to be more clues. Keep looking. It'd be subtle.

Ravio swept across the homestead with his binoculars again. He didn't notice it at first. Then came a dull crack.

Ravio lowered the binoculars and turned his head, listening. There it was again.

A branch snapped somewhere to his right—faint, but clear if you were listening for it.

There. By the massive tree.

Without breaking his gaze, he raised the binoculars and locked on. Ravio's chest beat so hard, he couldn't keep his hands steady.

He almost missed it. A flash of animal hide flapped open, and a hand slipped out, catching it. In one quick motion, Links popped out. He stood there with his pack slung over his shoulder, arms stretched wide in a yawn.

Ravio froze, watching Links's face. He looked older. Much leaner.

Pressure built in Ravio's chest. He had forgotten to breathe.

Ravio leaned out more to get a better angle. Too far. He lost his balance, dropping his hand to catch himself. The binoculars slipped and fell to the forest floor with a soft thud. Ravio ducked back into the blind and held his breath. He clenched his fists.

He poked his head out, squinting at the giant tree, but Links was gone. Stupid. So stupid.

If Links vanished again, Ravio knew he wouldn't get a second chance. He bolted down the rope ladder and cut through the homestead toward the giant tree. He knew Links would be long gone, but maybe he could track him.

Ravio flew by the main cabin, but skidded to a stop. From inside, something faint scraped across the wooden floorboards.

Links hadn't run after all. He must have doubled back.

Another floorboard creaked from inside. Links was trapped.

Ravio tapped his hip with his hand. Empty.

He dropped his head then glanced back at the hunting blind. Too late to get his duty belt. He would catch Links now.

He crept through the front entrance. The stink of wet wood, mold, and animal droppings made his nostrils flare. Streaks of light poked through the broken windows.

His memory flickered with every shadow and shape. His hand instinctively reached for the flashlight at his belt, but there was nothing there. He shook his head.

The floorboards creaked with each step. There was no use walking quietly now. As his eyes adjusted, the damage came into focus. Plants pushed in from outside. Splintered furniture crowded the floors. Claw marks scarred the wood, and the stench grew as Ravio moved deeper in.

Then he heard slow breathing.

Coming from the corner.

Somewhere behind their old couch.

Ravio lowered himself, ready to pounce.

"Links! This is the police. Come out!"

The breathing stopped. It turned into a snort.

And then guttural growls.

Ravio's stomach dropped.

A bear rose like a shadow out of the dark, towering over Ravio with its paws raised. Ravio backed up. Only a broken couch stood between them.

The bear swiped at the couch and shoved it aside. Ravio's breathing came fast and shallow.

His hand moved to his belt. He gritted his teeth.

He turned to run, but his leg caught.

He crashed, landing face-first. He flipped over and saw the bear charging toward him.

Ravio raised his arms, covering his face.

Eyes shut. Waiting.

Let it be quick.

A sharp whistle cut through the growls and something heavy slapped the floor near him.

There was a shuffling sound and the growling stopped. Ravio kept waiting for a claw to strike, but nothing came.

A hand gripped his arm. Ravio flinched and yanked it away. His eyes opened to Links standing over him.

The bear had moved back into the corner, tearing into a fish.

Ravio sat up, staring. Links's hand extended to him. The other hand covered his necklace. Too dark to see.

"Links? How? It was about to kill me."

The bear turned to Ravio and huffed, deep and heavy. Ravio flinched and scooted away, eyes flicking between Links and the bear.

Links reached down and pulled him to his feet. They faced each other in silence. Ravio had prepared for this moment for years. His throat locked.

All forgotten.

Links moved toward the bear. From his bag, he pulled another fish and tossed it farther across the cabin. The bear snorted. Its paws hit the floorboards and lumbered after the fish.

The floorboard creaked; Ravio snapped his head back to where Links had been standing.

Ravio cursed. Links had slipped out.

"Links—"

The bear grunted at him. Ravio froze, then backed up slowly. If he didn't catch Links now, Ravio would never see him again.

His arm bumped the doorframe. He turned and ran outside.

But the homestead was empty.

"Wait!" Ravio shouted. "I know you can hear me."

Silence.

He lowered his voice.

"Thank you." The words came out broken.

The bushes shook behind him. Ravio's head snapped toward the noise.

Links stepped out from the brush. His face gave nothing away.

For a moment, neither of them moved, their eyes locked on each other.

Ravio finally took a step forward.

Links took one step back.

The only sounds were chirping birds.

Ravio tried another step.

Links reached up to his neck. His fingers wrapped around a figure, but it was too far away to see what it was.

Ravio sighed. "Where have you been living?" Ravio took a sharp breath and moved toward Links. "Have you been around here the whole time?" Ravio's voice softened as he stood in front of him.

Links lowered his hand from his necklace. He stared, blinking a couple of times until he turned to walk away.

“Wait. Wait...” Ravio placed a hand on Links’s shoulder. “I didn’t blame you for what happened.”

Links’s shoulders twitched, but the hand remained.

“I blamed the mine.”

The hand dropped as Links turned to face Ravio.

Ravio touched his empty hip. No belt. No badge. “Just me.”

Links stared at Ravio. Then he raised his arm and pointed in the direction of the large spruce.

“That tree?”

Links waited.

“Show me,” Ravio said. “Please.”

Links looked toward the path, then up at the sun.

Ravio looked at his watch. “It’s only nine.” Their eyes met. “Kai and Ellie can wait.”

Links nodded and then motioned for him to follow.

The entrance to Links’s spruce home was camouflaged behind a bush, nearly impossible to spot.

Links placed his hand on the trunk and pressed. The bark shifted, revealing a flap of animal hide. Ravio gasped as a cavity opened in the tree trunk.

He crawled in after Links, almost tripping as his leg caught on something. Ravio breathed in while his eyes adjusted. The air smelled of ash, wood, and leather.

The trunk had been hollowed out, but rot had done most of the work. It was tall enough to stand in, but just wide enough for two people.

On one side, a narrow bed was lined with animal hides. Barely room enough for one person.

A small metal stove with a clay exhaust sat on the other side, a kettle resting on top. Dying embers still gave off heat.

No visible chimney from the outside.

Links must have set up an exhaust system to hide the smoke.

Ravio had missed it.

Shelves and ledges were carved into the side of the tree. Worn family photos lined one shelf. Wood carvings crowded another. A dull knife, two cups, a few utensils, and a stack of dried fish sat on the lowest shelf.

Ravio paused at the last item. An unfinished bear carving sat by itself at the end of the shelf. It was the carving Ravio had been whittling from the rocking chair on that terrible day.

He shut his eyes and turned away.

Ravio shook his head as he scanned the home again. Years gone, and Links had lived like this all this time.

Ravio picked up a photo. "You kept all these." His focus shifted to the front opening. "And you stayed."

Links nodded and moved to a wall of hanging animal hides and pushed them aside. He reached behind them, pulled out a jacket, and pressed it into Ravio's hands.

Ravio froze as he stared at the jacket.

The weight. The feel. All of it came back.

The one their father had been wearing during the mine collapse.

"I thought this was lost in the mine." Ravio pulled the jacket to his nose. It smelled faintly of smoke and wood. Almost unused.

"Did you go back?"

Links held his gaze and gave a slow nod. His fingers squeezed the gold nugget figure on his necklace.

Ravio held out the jacket to Links. He shook his head and pushed it back.

"Thank you." The words came out a little easier this time. He folded the jacket carefully and tucked it under his arm, the weight of it more than enough for now.

Links grabbed a wooden carving from the top shelf and handed it to Ravio. It was about the size of a coffee mug. Ravio turned it over in his hand. A bear.

"Is this the bear that almost killed me?" he asked, almost smiling.

Links nodded and smiled. He nudged the bear figure into Ravio's chest.

He rubbed his thumb on the bear's head. "I guess I'm keeping this one."

Ravio turned to the shelves crowded with carvings. There were dozens. Animals. People. Plants. A few shapes Ravio couldn't name.

He picked up one that looked like a bird and rubbed his thumb along the edges. "Ptarmigan?"

Links nodded and handed him a steaming cup.

Ravio sniffed, then took a sip. "Spruce tea."

He picked up another carving.

The bed creaked as Links sat down. Ravio looked at the entrance and then back at Links.

No one moved until Ravio finally cleared his throat.

"Show me this one," Ravio said, picking up the next carving.

He stopped. "No. Wait. I'll try to guess."

Links smiled and leaned back against the wall.

He stayed.