**Coma Baby**

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**Summary**

Link couldn't be sure if he was always this way; was he even remotely the same person he was 100 years ago? He was quite sure the boy he'd been had died and come back a monster, a hollow shell of bitterness and rage, blunt in every aspect but the ones that made him a perfect killer. Who remained that could offer him the truth? It felt as though everyone that had truly known him took those answers with them, leaving his life a tattered patchwork of various endings. He saw no reason not to simply allow Hyrule to come to an end as well. There was only one person in his life that offered kindness and comfort, asking nothing in return, one person that could make him feel something, rather than nothing, one person who seemed to represent a beginning, rather than an ending.

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**Notes**

Hello, friends. If you're new to my stories, know that themes tend to get dark, so please be warned.
Chapter 1

//..Lately I can’t recognize you.
The doctors lied when they said they saved you.
You’re just the shell of the boy that you’ve been,
and you’re dying, I can feel it../

;

The sky was clear and the air was perhaps a bit too crisp for the Hero’s liking, but he was starting to prefer it to the hustle and bustle. He’d climbed a mountain to get away from everything and everyone, because of course he had, that’s what he did. As it turned out, the very peak of any given mountain was the perfect place to sort out the chaos constantly churning in his head.

Perhaps he’d woken up on the wrong side of the healing stasis chamber, because from the moment he’d emerged, wet and cold, without anything to his name but a ratty shirt and trousers, he’d been nothing short of incredibly pissed off. He was hiding things like ‘rage’, and ‘murderous frustration’ behind words like ‘courageous’, ‘warrior’, ‘champion’, ‘hero’.

He was almost convinced that his soul had simply been plucked from some kind of aggressive beast, like the numerous ones he’d mercilessly slaughtered so far, and grafted into a Hylian body, cooked for 100 years in a mysterious Sheikah oven, until he popped out, the end result, a bizarre killer souffle.

The thing about monsters was that they were so predictable. If he approached them, they picked up their weapons and fought him without an ounce of hesitation, or even the consideration that they may be outmatched, every single time. These so-called civilized folk lived alongside the Calamity for a hundred years while one woman restrained it, alone, and they just did.. Nothing.

Well, they did something. They did a wondrous job of putting their collective fingers in their ears and singing, la la la.. Seriously, hundreds, thousands of people, just living out their lives and waiting for one courageous and unexpectedly belligerent soul to come and ‘save them all’.

Maybe it was all just an elaborate prank? People so weak and apathetic didn’t deserve to survive, and that was the exact reason Link was just sitting on top of a mountain, thinking about his feelings and doing absolutely nothing to assist. Was it bad that he was finding the monsters more relatable? Did it make him a monster, too? Well, either way, it wasn’t like he would stop killing them. At this point he was killing for the sake of killing, and because it was oddly therapeutic in regards to his frustrations.

Plus, there was the mixture of amusement and annoyance when he left scores of tattered bodies in his wake, his weapons, clothes and hands covered in blood, and nobody ever looked at him like he was anything less than a true hero. Maybe these people were the deranged ones?

If this particular mountain hadn’t already been named, Link would call it ‘bullshit mountain’. Actually, just for his own personal reasons, he was going to pretend it was called Mount Bullshit, anyway, mostly because he was already half finished with the task of carving names of people that annoyed the living hell out of him into rocks, so that he could place those names right at the peak of the entire mountain of bullshit.

The first stone had been adorned with Hylia’s name, because honestly, what? What? Link was the only living person in all the land with the unexplainable motivation to actually solve the problems of the Goddess’s people, yet he was required to solve all these ‘cute’ puzzles scattered across the land in
order to receive Spirit Orbs that he had to use as currency to exchange for vitality. What?? The Goddess’s mortal incarnation had been holding back the calamity by herself for a hundred years, and the Goddess had the power to just bless Link with an insane amount of strength for the purpose of saving everything, and she didn’t think it was more logical to just.. Give it to him?

What???

With that stone placed at the peak, he was just finishing the last letter on the second carving. Mipha, Link’s so-called lost beloved, who fell in battle a hundred years ago. He supposed he could respect that she actually stood up and did something in the face of destruction, though she also paid the ultimate price for it.

The Hero breathed a sigh that was laden with regretful irritation as his shaking hands chiseled away at the stone. He had recalled a bit about his lost love, but those memories were little more than empty images in his mind, all thought and feelings lost to him. More often than not, he actually got an unusual sense that the memories weren’t even his. So not only was he a killer souffle, he was apparently half-baked, like his memories.

Maybe Mipha was so determined to be the very definition of a sacrificial lamb so that she could take Link’s heart down with her, leaving him the empty shell of bloody skill that he was. It was hypocritical as anything, because as much as Link hated the general populace for being helpless to solve major problems, nor their own personal, minor problems, why, why, why did Mipha have to be one of the ones to throw her life away?

She could have been here when Link awakened, to heal his heart and soul, to give him insight to these ambiguous flashes of recall, to assure him that there was more to him than anger and hatred. But no, all she was healing now were the bitemarks her brother left on him after sex that felt entirely meaningless.

Then, there was the cherry on top of the sundae, or the rock on top of Mount Bullshit, as it were. Mipha’s spirit was perfectly capable of actively guiding and speaking to the Hero as he worked to free the first of the four Divine Beasts, but she didn’t utter a single word of warning that Link was going to be attacked by the very entity that took her life.

She could have warned him, she could have shared any knowledge she acquired during the fight in which she was struck down, strategies, weaknesses, anything. But did she? Nope. The entity simply appeared unexpectedly, sharp implements and crushing blocks of ice flying at the small, angry Hylian, and while he dodged for his life, the spirit of his dead girlfriend could only be bothered to explain, ‘hey honey, this is the asshole that killed me. Avenge me, okay? Thanks.’

The Hero wanted, more than anything, to have the turmoil in his heart eased. As he’d stared at Mipha’s lovely immortalized features and he’d recalled her quietly courageous, graceful strength, he’d felt a tiny spark of warmth return to the void inside him. He had the naivety to think, just for a second, that her memory could be the salve to his aching, emotional wounds, if bittersweetly.

But it wasn’t even bittersweet, it was just bitter.

He left that damn Zora tunic behind inside of Vah Ruta, just so Mipha would know that, even if she had been alive, Link’s answer was ‘no’.

That might have been hasty at best, and stupid at worst, but for now, it made the Hylian Champion feel just a tiny bit better.

Link placed Mipha’s stone near Hylia’s, just a bit lower, in order to signify second place in this
imaginary competition of downright degrading dumbassery, and he set to work carving the ‘trophy’ for his third place ‘winner’.

He wasn’t going to carve ‘Prince Sidon’ because that was way too much effort, just like everything involved in dealing with that man. Actually, he could probably just carve the word ‘effort’ and it would work just as well. He decided to put ‘Sidon’, however.

Prince Sidon’s third place win was something of an unfair judgement, but Link had resolved to only carve the names of individuals. If he hadn’t, he may as well have carved ‘everyone’ onto a stone and been done with that.

The judgement was also unfair, simply because Link’s annoyance was at least half by his own fault. True, his feelings for Mipha had vanished into air as thin as that on top of Mount Bullshit, but whatever bizarre thing inside him that made him attracted to fish people was alive and well, of course.

And there was something incredibly wrong with being attracted to someone that frustrated him beyond the capabilities of everyone else put together into the amorphous lump of uselessness that they were.

First of all, the Prince’s energy was way off the scale of tolerability. Secondly, how was it even possible to be so positive amidst a time of uncertainty? The death of everything that existed could be right around the corner thanks to Link’s present inactivity, but this creature remained positive through it all, making Zora’s Domain even more warm and welcoming to the Hylian Champion, as if he wanted to assure Link never bothered leaving and fulfilling his duty and destiny.

Thirdly, it could be said that someone, somewhere, had perhaps written a manual for how a stereotypical ‘Prince Charming’ should behave, and Prince Sidon had thoroughly studied it and followed it to every, single letter. What kind of person made it their life’s mission to be so damn two dimensional?

Link had just finished the ‘o’ in ‘Sidon’, when a voice echoed against the rocky slope, into the vast, open air beyond the peak where he sat, as musical as a hymn praising the Goddess, beautifully sung from within one of the grand temples built in her name.

He didn’t even need to look up in order to know what grandiloquent bastard had actually followed him up a mountain, but he raised his ice blue gaze to observe the visual fancy feast making his presence known, anyway. There he was, appearing as his name was carved, like an unbelievably warm and joyous demon, the Prince.

He’d ascended more than half of the distance up Mount Bullshit by swimming up a waterfall, because of course he had. The rest of the mountain, he’d apparently climbed the old-fashioned way, if his dulled finger scales and his scuffed feet were any indication. His cheeks were flushed a dull violet, his fins still wet and shining in the sun, from water or maybe perspiration from the climb.

Only a Zora could overheat on top of a mountain. Nothing made sense, everything was dumb.

Yet, even so, as he approached, his golden eyes shined from his apparent sense of self-satisfaction, and he smiled in his charming way as his regal adornments fluttered in the gentle, mountain breeze. If only it were the right time of year for the trees to be in bloom on the mountain, because the Prince was missing the touch of elegance that could be provided by petals drifting past him where he stood.

Link thought perhaps he still had time to roll a boulder down the hill in order to squash that obnoxious Prince. Maybe? Yes?
Sidon managed to close the distance between himself and the Hylian before Link came to a concrete decision, and he stood completely straight and magnificent as he greeted Link, saying, “I thought you might like some company.”

A blank, blue stare was offered in response. Link had to bite his tongue, as usual, because honestly, who assumes that anyone who’d climbed a mountain all alone wants company? It was as though Sidon took the most logical conclusion, then intentionally did the opposite, just to be a smartass. Then again, maybe that was giving him too much credit.

“My friend,” Sidon filled the chill of the silence with the warm tone of his voice, “if you’re hungry, I brought plenty of food, as well.”

A spark of interest crossed Link’s otherwise subtle expression, and for a moment he was caught by surprise that the Prince actually had assumed something correctly. Well, it was hard to say no to free food, so it wasn’t a difficult conclusion to come to, right?

A laugh of gentle amusement and genuine affection came from the Zora Prince as he gave a nod to Link’s lack of answer, and said, “I thought as much,” reading the silence with a kind of ease that was almost supernatural. Link was expecting to learn that, like Mipha, Sidon possessed magical skills as well, most likely some kind of empathic sense. It would explain his ability to get along with every single person he encountered, ever.

As the Prince came down from the tower that was his height in order to sit next to Link, he pulled a pack from his back and produced a neatly sealed container of food, which he placed into Link’s hands.

Link was busying his mind with the amusing fact that the prince of a race of people he didn’t even belong to was bringing him lunch boxes like a housewife, when he caught Sidon’s attention by placing the stone he’d been chiseling aside.

He saw the words forming before Sidon even said anything. Those sharp, golden eyes followed Link’s hand, a curious gaze falling upon a stone with his own name, half-carved, then to the other two stones. “What is this?” he asked, the sound of his voice alone containing an entire smile. “A shrine of some kind?”

“You could say that,” Link responded, his own voice sounding hollow. “And what is this?” he asked, changing the subject to the food as he unwrapped it.

“Fish and rice,” the Zora Prince answered, “it’s fresh, I speared that fish myself this morning while you were still sleeping.”

“A Prince that hunts his own food? Got any more fanciful lies for me?” Link said quietly.

Sidon just chuckled warmly, and said, “Life would be much too dull if I doled my time away on royal duties and royal expectations. It’s more gratifying to defy preconceived notions of the person I should be.”

Link said nothing in reply, busied with the task of shoving food into his mouth. It was probably for the best, because the first thing that came to mind was, I wish I had that option.

So, like the maker of dull company that he was, Link maintained his silence as he ate, distantly wondering if this was some kind of surprise date? A romantic picnic? Was this Sidon’s idea of flirting or was it just more of his usual overly friendly, overly welcoming behavior? Was this his gratitude? An obligation to go out of his way to be thankful for the peace and security of his people?
Did he really just admire Link that much?

A quiet, doleful sigh was emitted from the Prince between one bite of his food and the next, and the unusual sound of it had Link swiftly turning to watch him, a questioning look coming over his face.

Something was wrong. The Zora Prince didn’t do sad, worried, melancholy or negative in any fashion, so something was really wrong. Maybe it was the dark, arching malice cloud of the calamity hanging over Hyrule Castle in the distance, threatening to destroy everything while Link sat around mooching all the hospitality manageable from the Zoras.

Maybe it was something worse than that, because despite how Link ignored his duties, as though he wanted the calamity to consume him, well, Sidon still believed in him, somehow. His faith was as vast and boundless as his enthusiasm.

However, despite the fact that something was troubling the Zora Prince, he didn’t bother placing those troubles onto Link’s shoulders, and instead continued to eat his food one measured, tidy bite at a time.

So, instead of just asking Link to solve whatever new problem he had, he baited the Hylian into asking, making it seem as though Link actually wanted to handle other people’s constant stream of problems. But no, Link wouldn’t fall into that obvious trap, and chose instead to stuff another bite of food into his face.

In the end, curiosity got the better of Link, and he ended up asking what was wrong, despite himself. He was going to have to carve his own name into a stone to place onto Mount Bullshit.

“Oh, it’s nothing for you to worry yourself over, my friend,” Sidon answered, oddly genuine for a fucking liar, and Link found himself rolling his eyes in annoyance.

“Yes it is,” Link said, placing the empty lunch box aside, “Tell me.”

“It’s that Lynel,” Sidon finally answered, as prompted, and Link gave his head a knowing nod, having successfully fished out the real meaning behind all the superficial friendliness. Still, it was a bit ironic, considering that he had a vague recollection of fighting a Lynel on Zora territory before, perhaps by request, perhaps by happenstance, some details utterly unsure.

His body ached in recall, bruised and broken from the fight he’d entered into at much too young an age, the hooves of the Lynel determinedly crushing his small form beneath, yet neither of the combatants understood why Link couldn’t die.

No, he was sure he did die, again and again, and maybe it was the goddess bringing him back each time? Or maybe it was Mipha, who happened upon the struggle, healing the small, angry Hylian that was making brash attempts to stand up to the monster. He couldn’t remember if she pitied him, admired him, or perhaps even feared him, should she turn her back. Link couldn’t force those details to resurface, no matter what he did.

“I can take care of it,” Link offered, resigned to the fact that he was little more than a receptacle for the pleas of others.

“What?” Sidon turned to look at the tiny Hylian, wide-eyed and perplexed. He was really overselling his ‘shock’ at Link taking on the request that was to follow, in any case. “Please, Link, not only have you already done so much for us-” he began.

Raising a hand to quiet the pretenses, Link gave his head a shake and repeated himself, his tone a bit more hard than last time, “I’ll take care of it.”
“You’re not listening,” the Prince stated in a way that managed to be pleasant, yet insistent, “that’s not even what I want.”

Link’s hand slowly dropped, his brow furrowing slightly in confusion. “Explain,” he said.

“We had been simply respecting his territory claim, but lately he’s been wandering closer to our domain. I learned this morning from the company I was spear fishing with, he actually appeared near one of our gathering sites by surprise, and shot several arrows at the gathering party, not actually hitting any of them, thankfully.”

“And you don’t want me to slay it?” Link uttered, confused.

The Zora sighed deeply and turned to gaze into valley far below his present perch, taking in the view that was just so very big, so infinite he couldn’t hope to see every single detail, despite how he seemingly wished it were so. “I find it odd that his arrows could have easily killed every person in the party, yet he missed each shot.”

“So its eyes are going,” Link commented, “it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I thought, perhaps,” Sidon started, his voice oddly hesitant, “perhaps he was only firing in warning? And if that were so, maybe he could be reasoned with?”

“No,” Link shook his head, barely letting the Prince finish uttering those foolish words, “you can’t reason with something that just kills for the sake of killing.”

“My people tried to convince me that Hylians couldn’t be trusted, and they were wrong. They thought Vah Ruta was a danger that should be destroyed, and they were wrong. I’m beginning to think that all of these judgements may possibly be wrong.”

“I bet the Princess has probably reasoned with the Calamity by now, too. They’re probably just having a nice tea party in Hyrule Castle right now.”

“Don’t be condescending,” Sidon said, his voice so calm it may have been a polite request. Somehow, he still had a smile on his face, reacting as though Link were just teasing him playfully. “Hmm, what do you think Mipha would have done were she still here to inherit the throne, and the responsibility that comes with that?”

“Trust me,” Link said, “she would do whatever was necessary to protect the people she cared about, first and foremost. Don’t give out undue mercy in her name.”

“I see,” Sidon gave his head a soft nod, though he still seemed oddly pensive, “I want you to know, I do value your insight, but I believe my path will be one I make for myself.”

“You’re not going to listen to me, are you?” Link asked.

The Prince stood, looking a bit revitalized from his meal and the short rest, and he offered Link a smile as he excused himself, saying, “I’ll see you when you return to our domain, my friend.”

Once Sidon was out of sight, Link picked up the stone he’d been carving that man’s name into and he let it fly from his hand, down the mountain with every ounce of rage in him, so it disappeared out of sight forever.
Chapter 2

The guards that stood before the entrance to the winding tower knew the Hylian Champion well enough by this point to stand aside as he passed by, ascending the structure that would ultimately lead to Prince Sidon’s quarters.

Link’s boots tapped quietly as he walked, an odd, rhythmic beat that had a strangely hypnotic effect on him, his mind fading and foggy, even as he carried himself constantly forward to his destination. Darkness had fallen over the shroud of mountains that hugged the Zora’s domain, the luminous stone-built structures casting a faint, blue light, like a mist.

It was a dreamworld, at least it felt like it. Link had felt the sensation of dreaming ever since he’d woken up from his century-long rest, which was likely an odd sensation to associate with waking. Nothing was real, and the Zora’s Domain at night only intensified the illusion. He hated that. He wanted to close his eyes and forget everything all over again. Of course, that would be easier if he simply neglected to wake up.

The upwardly spiraling corridor was at least dry; the Prince had seen to having the water flow to his walkways stopped, to accommodate the oft visiting champion. Link wasn’t yet a permanent fixture in Sidon’s quarters, choosing to sleep here and there, quiet meadows, placid beaches, in the shelter of the Sheikah Towers on rainy nights, and occasionally, Sidon’s own bed.

The Prince’s room was humble, despite belonging to royalty, and Link felt perhaps the Zora people just aimed to exist in less space than what Hylians typically did. The room was round, with windows providing magnificent views from every angle, and decor that was fine but not obscuring to the architectural details. There was a bed, so as far as Link was concerned, it was comfortable enough despite the Prince’s presence.

Actually, the Zora Prince was nowhere to be found as of yet. He rose with the sun each morning, yet somehow maintained his vibrant energy long into the night. More than likely, he was busy with some social effect, making it his business to maintain a close personal relationship with seemingly every subject in his quaint, beautiful kingdom.

Link didn’t know if he was disappointed or not to find Sidon absent. He didn’t know what to think, and maybe it was because of his current state of mental disarray, but he found himself craving the Prince’s presence, something oddly soothing about being in his proximity. He was like a herbal salve that numbed the pain, yet was reserved for only the critically ill, its properties debilitating and addictive on their own.

Without Sidon’s energy available to numb Link’s mind, the Hylian settled down on his bed, moving like an aching elder, brittle bones chipped and cracking with only a little skin to hold it all together. He took a deep breath, every part of him suffering from phantom pains, from wounds that did not exist, but the cool water mattress conforming to his weight soothed in its own quiet way. Link’s head reclined into the pillows and his mind was gone, for a little while.

Yet, the Hylian Champion’s dreams only served to remind him of his afternoon of deathly failures. He couldn’t allow Sidon to take on a goal so foolhardy as attempting to communicate with a Lynel, so Link resolved to just deal with the damn thing already, though he hadn’t wanted to be bothered.

The decision was hasty and rushed, like most of his decisions, and he was hardly prepared for a real fight, apart from believing his anger was enough to win the day.
When Link found the Lynel, he took a few moments to observe, to creep near enough to get the first blow in by surprise. As described, it had wandered down the mountain, and into a small valley that had been well-traveled by the Zora people, and was clearly marked off now.

Lynels lived in a permanent state of agitation as far as Link was concerned, and they were aggressive to such a degree, it looked exhausting. It must not have been, however, because they were always so full of energy when it came to a fight, which was just such a treat!

This one, though, it seemed more than just agitated and territorial. As Link watched the thing wander aimlessly back and forth, dragging its hooves and scraping at the ground until all the grass was upturned by obsessive furrows in the dirt, he began to believe something more was going on with this particular beast. It’s eyes were glazed, its mouth and chin stained with a wet, black ooze.

Ultimately, all it meant was that it needed to be put out of its misery, and Link was the number one provider of sweet release, all across Hyrule. As he’d planned, he stole the first few blows, his sword unsheathed and slashing at the beast’s flank and legs with the hopes of severely hindering it’s gait.

The Lynel spun round at the sudden pain, its tail swishing as though it felt the sting of a courser bee, yet when it noticed the Hylian ducking in its shadow, it gave a bucking kick and drew its own weapon, stumbling over its injured hoof but righting itself with ease.

Link moved with similar ease, the motions of battle a predictable pulse that rushed through him. He ducked beneath the Lynel to escape its view, slashing the barrel of its undercarriage as he went, leaving gashed skin sagging and spilling blood that was much too dark, much too viscous.

A harsh roar of pain and rage was emitted from the beast as Link kept his feet moving, his small frame managing to stay just outside of the now angry creature’s sight. The power of the beast’s screams shook the Hylian, a weakening tremble in his muscles and a dizzying blow to his head, but he pushed through it. He could fight through weakness, exhaustion and pain, the perseverance in his blood a force that couldn’t be halted.

He could end this now, with relative ease, and with that goal in mind, he went in for a finishing blow. A quick bolt and a leap had Link mounting the beast, his thighs tightening for steadiness as he drew back his sword with the intent to put it through the back of the monster’s upper body.

But as the Lynel felt the Hylian’s weight at his back, his upper body ducked low, the rest of him giving a graceless buck that crumpled into his ruined back leg, dragging Link down and leaving the Lynel’s weight to land atop him.

Link let out a grunt as all the air escaped him, his small body snapping in various places as the Lynel’s heavy mass flailed on top of him. Both the beast and the Hylian still scrambled to get back to their feet despite all injury, the Lynel rolling and dragging itself up with one leg hanging, it’s wounds dripping black that had stained into Link’s tunic.

Link scooted himself back across the ground at quick as a fleeing lizard, holding his side as his ribs clicked and moved unnaturally inside, each breath a flaring pain as he gasped, his eyes desperately searching for the blade that had gotten lost from his grasp.

The blade in question laid between the hooves of the snarling Lynel that panted in resistance to the death that was sure to come, its black-stained tongue lolling from its gaping jaws as it stared its enemy down, almost as though it knew Link was partially disarmed.

Link boldly ran for his sword, and the Lynel reared as he came, flailing its front hooves at him, swinging a sword of its own, but Link deftly dodged the blows, rolling beneath the Lynel’s body,
and taking hold of his lost sword once again. Yet as he fled, the Lynel landed a kick to the back of
his shoulder, sending the Hylian down onto his face, his body rolling across the ground from the
force of the blow.

Even disoriented and broken, Link felt the ground shaking beneath the Lynel’s hooves as it ran for
him. His sword was knocked from his hand again and he reached for his bow, rolling onto his back
to let an arrow fly in the final seconds he had to land a strike on his enemy.

The arrow pierced the thin space between the fallen Hylian and the charging beast like a fatal flash of
light, meeting its mark despite Link’s torn limbs and trembling frame, and burrying itself in the eye of
the Lynel, which lunged with it’s sword as its body twisted and fell.

But as the beast fell, its own blow met its mark, the sword tearing through fabric, flesh and bone,
burying itself, at last, into the ground beneath the champion, creating a neat channel for his blood as
it escaped.

Link didn’t move, not just because he couldn’t, but he knew better than to bother. There was no
point in making a hopeless situation more painful than it needed to be. He laid still, his blood turning
hot as his skin grew cold, and he actually managed to acknowledge that the Lynel, too, was still
drawing breath. Of course a monster would still be clinging to life as it slipped through Link’s
fingers.

He just hoped, at this point, that it ended quickly.

The light passing over the surrounding cliffs turned from a soft halo at the mountaintops, to a hard,
white glare as everything else darkened. The quiet breeze fluttering the grasses around the
champion’s heavy body, from a whisper to a deafening ring, like a bell in the pitch of night, until
that, too, faded into the distance.

...Link...

..Link, wake up..

His body was heavy, his mind bleak and black without the spark of life. His gut curled around the
intruding blade, unknown parts severed and bleeding, and maybe he could turn to ash and be carried
away on the wind so that nobody had to find his body, pale and sunken in frightful places. Though,
maybe he wouldn’t mind reaching out with bloodstained fingertips and physically wiping that damn
smile off of Sidon’s pretty face.

But that macabre dream wasn’t to be, the whispers in Link’s mind persisting and nagging at him,
until he found himself sitting upright, disheveled and sore from injuries that he could still feel, but
that were gone.

The confused Hylian blinked, his eyes stinging as though from a long slumber and he fought to
move himself, pulling himself from the flattened depression his body left in the grass. His thoughts
echoed through a fog that descended over his mind, like his body bouncing from place to place the
last time he’d attempted to ride his horse through the Lost Woods.

‘Am I myself?’ he found himself thinking as he struggled to focus. He looked down at his hands, he
searched for his sword, yet it was not sheathed on his back, it was not dropped anywhere nearby, it
was just.. Gone.

‘Am I still me?’

The sword had disappeared, like it never existed.
He had a faint image in his mind of somebody else’s hands, of words describing his death, and he
looked around as though he could find the person responsible.

Was it the Goddess, Hylia?

He hated when this happened, when his life slipped away, a painful death descending over him, yet
he couldn’t be given peace, he couldn’t be given rest. He always woke up, unharmed, the phantom
pains of his death echoing through him, his thoughts little more than a pattern of words bubbling up
in a haze of nothingness.

Link.. Wake up..

“I am awake!” he screamed, his own voice shaking him as it reverberated from the surrounding
cliffs, leaving him clutching at his chest, his ribs solid though they still felt as though they were
clinking together like chimes in the wind.

The sound of hoof-beats rumbled across the ground like approaching thunder, only much faster than
gray clouds on the horizon. The vibrations quickly set the dazed Hero on edge, and as he reached yet
again for a sword that was no longer there, the Lynel appeared above him, leaping atop a risen ledge,
and growling as it glared down at the unarmed Hylian. It, like Link, was back to life and completely
uninjured.

With no option to fight, Link ran. He knew he could find safety off the side of the mountain, gliding
away from the reach of his enemies. The thundering hooves and enraged voice of Lynel followed
him and he forced his burning muscles to the limit, if only to get away cleanly.

Link made it to the ledge, he started to leap, his paraglider readied as land slipped from beneath his
feet, yet as he took off, the hoofed beast skidded to a halt in order to keep itself from toppling over
the side, and it swung its blade, striking Link across the back.

That was it- Link felt his muscles gouge, his spine severed, and the paraglider slipped from his grasp,
his body limp as he fell.

...Link... Wake up..

‘Twice,’ he thought, as he lifted his battered body up, tears stinging in his eyes and he bit back a
whine of pain that came with his movement. Afternoon had turned to evening, the sky darkened, the
air cold near the waters of the Zora’s Domain. The Hylian Champion limped his way back to safety,
his body moving on its own, all thought quiet and unreachable. Then he-

..Link, Wake Up..

The Hylian’s eyes shot wide as he jumped upright, gasping in pain and regret as he did, and
immediately he found himself curling back inward on himself. This time, he awakened on a bed and
it softly lapped at him until the waves caused by his quick movement subsided.

One breath at a time, Link felt as though he had to force himself to settle into his own skin, his mind,
body and soul a disjointed bit of parts, mismatched to each other. When he was settled enough to
look up, he realized he was still resting in the Zora Prince’s room, and that very Zora was sitting
quietly nearby, eyes trained on Link in silent observation.

“I wasn’t expecting you tonight,” came the Prince’s smooth voice, his words those of gentle
observation, not inconvenience as one should expect, “is everything alright?”

He knew nothing was alright. He could see that not one single thing was alright, and yet, he left
room for Link to deny all of it. Or maybe he just didn’t want to hear it, despite how he questioned it.

The Hylian offered silence in reply, as was a habit of his. Was he still himself? Was he really here? He didn’t know. He wanted to tell somebody about what he was going through, but..

Dull, blue eyes peered in Sidon’s direction, and at Link’s gaze he offered a smile, like this particular smile had been tugged away and saved for the Hylian, alone. Link was so empty, that smile filled him with ease and turned his hollow bones warm again. He cursed himself for being so damn weak, his anger not enough to resist the comforts of sincere affections after two resurrections in one day.

“I brought a drink to share,” Sidon spoke with a gesture to the drink in question. Link’s eyes followed as directed, finding an empty glass and a tall, glass pitcher that contained a bubbling, golden liquid, “that is, if it suits your tastes, my friend. Now and again, I find myself questioning whether or not my choices are appropriate to the Hylian palate, but I believed this was an apt choice. Forgive me, if it turns out to not be so.”

Link reached out to the pitcher, his hands shaking as though his bones were bent and his skin was made of pins and needles. Seeing the smallest sign of weakness, Sidon strode over to his bedside, and poured the drink himself, offering it to Link.

Small sips were the best Link could manage, but the crisp, sweet chill of the drink settled comfortably in his twisted stomach, then began to warm him from within.

“It’s brewed from the apples we harvested from the mountaintop, before the Lynel settled in. This was the last of it,” said the Prince as he brought the chair he’d been using over to the bedside, “but you looked like you needed the pick-me-up.”

The small sips slowly turned into hearty gulps as numbing warmth spread through Link’s limbs, quieting the ghosts of injuries that had apparently not even happened. The Prince chuckled, finding himself proven right by the Hylian’s apparent thirst. When Link emptied the glass, he sat with it held between his hands as he caught his breath, his chest heaving with much more ease.

The Zora that sat by Link’s side reached out and slid the glass from Link’s hands, placing it back on the bedside table and refilling it for himself, decidedly sipping with more intent to savor.

“Can I ask you something?” Link spoke at last, his voice barely a whisper, the contents of his mind determined to remain a mystery.

“Of course,” Sidon said with a gentle nod of his head.

“Do you remember me? From 100 years ago?”

“Hmm,” the Zora Prince took a moment to think. The past was mental territory he tried not to wander into too often, apart from quiet moments he had to share with nobody but himself. He did recall Link’s presence, always in the company of Mipha and a handful of other Zora. The Hylian Champion stuck out by means of his race, but to the young Prince of that time, Link was a strong, tall boy, golden and glorious, and as quietly courageous as Mipha. “Faintly, I’m sorry to say. The memories of a young Zora with as short a span of attention as my own, at that time, aren’t very much to go on. I mean no offense, of course, but all I remember you as is the background to memories of Mipha. I apologize, that’s terribly rude of me to say.”

“No,” Link almost smiled, if bitterly, “I’m glad you answered honestly.”

Oddly, the apparent verbal blunder left Sidon lost for words for a few quiet moments, which Link certainly didn’t mind. It helped him focus and come back to himself, which was always difficult after
any resurrection, and especially so after more than one in a row.

“What are you working on?” Link asked, his gaze falling upon the desk Sidon had been at when the Hylian awakened. From what Link could tell, the Prince had gathered up a collection of materials, perhaps as though he’d been on an adventure of his own; Staminoka Bass leather, scalemail made of Zora steel, and various other bits and tools.

“Oh,” the Zora Prince turned to glance at the pile of materials resting under the luminous stone lamp, “I had been visiting with Master Dento to see to it that my weapons and armor were still in prime condition. Apparently my armor needs to be refitted, as I’ve grown taller since the last time I made use of it,”

“Taller, of course,” Link commented, stealing the glass that had been sitting idly in Sidon’s hands, “shouldn’t he be modifying the armor for you?”

“He is doing that, yes,” the Prince nodded his head, watching as Link stole his drink and hastily downed it, “but while I was there, the idea occurred to me, that I could craft a tunic like the one Mipha made for you, in case I ever wish to propose in the same manner. Or, as she had planned, I suppose.”

“I thought that was something Zora princesses did,” Link said, skeptical.

Sidon laughed in what appeared to be genuine amusement at Link’s reaction, then said, “What did I say about my feelings on preconceived notions about how I should behave?”

“You’re such a rebel,” Link muttered, strong enough now to place the glass on the bedside table himself, “would you happen to know if he has any extra weapons laying around? I lost mine.”

“Again?” the Prince seemed surprised at the rate Link went through weapons, “what of Mipha’s trident, may I ask?”

“I left it at my home in Hateno Village. I couldn’t bring myself to actually use it.”

“I see,” Sidon gave a nod, looking almost relieved at this news. “I mean, I’m sorry you haven’t gotten any use out of it, but if you’re happier keeping it tucked away, it pleases me as well. I’ll see to it that you receive something else.”

As the Prince spoke, Link stole a glance out one of the magnificent windows, ascertaining the moon’s position in the sky. It was far beyond midnight, and the Hylian felt suddenly confused that Sidon was able to maintain a fair degree of his usual vigor. “Aren’t you tired?”

“I am very tired, actually, but I wanted to see to it that you were taken care of, before I sought sleep for myself,” Sidon answered with a smile and a nod, content enough despite his tiredness. “I can sleep elsewhere, if you would prefer,” he offered, unsure if things between himself and the Hylian Champion were still awkward, given prior events to this night.

“No,” Link answered, “stay here.”

“And risk me rolling over on top of you?” the Prince joked, his words quick and light-hearted, if to cover a momentary hesitation he was feeling.

“I want you to speak to me, until I fall asleep, at least.” Link said, his voice becoming the usual hollow sound, his eyes empty as deep, blue water. Yet still, there was something vulnerable in him in this moment and the Prince couldn’t think to leave his dear friend in need.
Sidon agreed to sharing his bed and company with the Hylian Champion for another night, moving away only to cover the lamp and shut out all light but that of the moon, which rested atop the mountains. In the faint, secretive silver of the moon, Link laid himself against the Zora’s chest and allowed the soothing sound of the Prince’s voice to carry him somewhere much more peaceful than Hyrule.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Link wished he knew how to talk to Prince Sidon, or that the Prince knew how to listen. As often as they talked circles around one another, it was no wonder the Zora's presence had a dizziness effect on the Hylian Champion.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I'm pleased that so many of you are enjoying the story so far and it's hard to describe how ecstatic I become when I hear from any one of you. Just know that it has potential to rival Sidon's enthusiasm, truly. If any of you enjoy my work, and are interested, I also write original fiction! The novel which I'm presently working on is a modern fantasy story and I actually plan to publish it online for free. If this is of interest to you, definitely feel free to follow me elsewhere [I'm BanishedOne on Tumblr and Facebook as well.] or even contact me if you'd like further details. :) Enjoy the story, friends.

When morning came, it was always a faint, hazy time, singing frogs lending the stage back to singing birds. Link liked the mornings in the Zora’s Domain the very best, mostly because the shroud of mountains blocked out the glare of sunlight during the early hours, making it much easier to sleep through.

A couple of hours before noon, the light of the sun at last reached over the peaks, rousing Link from the slumber that had aided his mind in recovery from the mishaps of the previous day. When he opened his eyes, he laid staring at the ceiling for a few moments, deciding that he no longer felt as though he might slip out of his own body, which was helpful to behaving like a normal person.

He dragged himself up, aches having turned into general stiffness as the Hylian hobbled to collect his discarded tunic like a man of a hundred years- oh wait, that was right. His clothes were not as filth-covered as they might have been if he’d actually survived his fight with that Lynel, but he still thought it would be a good idea to rinse things off, along with himself.

Upperclass Zora bedchambers often had pools of water accessible nearby, and though Sidon hadn’t mentioned any specifics in regards to their uses, washing clothes and bathing were not at all considered acceptable ones. Of course, when Link had used Sidon’s own private cistern for just that, the Prince was still amicable about it.

After Link had taken care of making sure he was somewhat clean and presentable, rather than looking and smelling like a man straight out of the wild, he found himself meandering about the Zora’s Domain in search of that constantly busied Prince. This task could often be quite the challenge, because while the Prince could apparently locate Link up a random mountain, the Hylian
could almost never locate the Prince without at least an hour of searching.

Sometimes he was in the throne room, aiding in royal duties as was expected of an heir to the throne. Sometimes he could be found mingling with the merchant class folk, and even those Zora representing the class beneath that; a Prince of fairness and humility, or at least that was the image he was trying so very hard to maintain. Link was still convinced it was an act, because who could feasibly enjoy the company of that many different people without being dishonest?

On this particular day, the Hylian located his missing Prince at the lower level, apparently in the middle of an intense sparring session with a member of the guard Link wasn’t very familiar with. Link did not interrupt, mostly because he wasn’t very capable of doing so, given that the majority of the fighting was actually happening underwater.

It was an interesting spectacle, at the very least, and Link crouched low, watching as the two submerged bodies zipped in between pillars and around small areas of shallow water. In the quiet, humid shade of the chosen arena, it was oddly offsetting to watch such an intense, rapid exchange of blows between two clearly seasoned warriors, while the surroundings remained relatively soundless, apart from a subtle, constant dripping and the occasional gentle shift of water.

It was so fast and precise, from what Link could see of it when the water was still, yet it was calm and controlled in a way Link could hardly grasp. Every fight he’d ever been in, to his knowledge, was one to the death, with no room for measured blows. Every fight he could remember was chaotic and fast, every strike meant to be a killing blow, every mistake something that was paid for with blood, not critique.

When the two combatants dashed past where Link waited, he swore Sidon slowed ever so slightly, his head tilting to one side so the gleam of one golden eye was visible enough to know that he’d realized the Hylian was here, paying witness. He sped his pace again once he’d passed, a flash of red in the water, chasing the smaller figure which was apparently put on the defensive.

The beating of the other Zora’s fins seemed to slow as he was rushed upon by the Prince, as though boldly welcoming whatever strike may come as a result, and just as assured, Sidon leapt above the water, his body twisting and diving with his training weapon extended, to make the promised blow. But the other Zora spun out of the way of the attack, grabbing the training weapon and using the momentum of the blow itself to spin the Prince round onto his back and push him to the bottom, pinning him there.

This move signified Sidon’s apparent loss, and the two Zora swam apart as the session was finished, coming to the surface at one of the edges of the chosen arena, though not where Link was waiting. The two stood together, the other a fair, yellow color with golden eyes to match the hue of his complexion. They spoke quietly, and Link’s pointed ears bent forward ever so slightly, out of instinct.

‘Your moves are a bit hasty,’ the other was saying, ‘you come in to finish long before your opponent is weakened enough.’

By this time, Link had sat himself down all the way and curled his legs as he waited. The two Zora spoke further about the minor details of the fight, but Link tuned out, flicking his pointed ears back at the sound of Sidon speaking, his voice carrying a good bit further compared to his rather more tranquil friend. He seemed gracious enough, despite the his apparent shortcomings in this particular sparring session.

‘You need to get some on-land practice in,’ the golden Zora uttered in a quiet, concerned tone, and the Prince offered a smile, a nod, and a pat to the other’s shoulder, as reassurance. He then dove back
When Sidon approached, he slowed just before his head breached the surface, his eyes lifted to peer up at Link as though he were regarding him while he was still underwater, or studying him to be sure of who he was, despite how it was plainly obvious. Link hated this, even if it only was for a few seconds, because it tugged at something primal in his mind, insisting that creatures studying him from just below the surface of water were behaving in a way that was predatory and therefore dangerous.

Maybe, once upon a time, when everybody behaved like animals, Zoras actually ate Hylians? Was that possible?

Most likely, it was just Sidon’s way of measuring the speed he put into the kick of his fins as he erupted from the water and landed upon the solid surface where Link was sitting. Link dragged himself to his feet, lest he’d get lost from sight, like an ant in the grass.

“Come to judge my lackluster performance?” the Prince chuckled, his gill slits still open and beating as he transitioned back to breathing air.

Link shook his head, and said, “weapons.”

“Oh,” the prince looked momentarily embarrassed, his voice stolen for that instant, “of course. My apologies, I’m afraid I got caught up in things as I do and forgot to deliver the weapons I located to you. Not to worry, they are in Master Dento’s care, so you may find them there.”

Link nodded to this information, though his gaze flickered elsewhere as he got the feeling that the Prince was attempting to see him off quickly, though these attempts were veiled beneath mannerliness and thick coats of hospitality. It never failed—this damnable Zora was always so blatantly confusing, Link swore he did this on purpose. Whenever the Hylian sought space, Sidon’s company was inescapable, and when Link actually desired his presence, he was busy as anything.

There was a sneaking suspicion in Link’s mind that this had to do with the last two nights, particularly the previous one. The first time the two had shared a bed, what occurred between them was urgent and unhinged, the next morning dismissive and confusing, with neither of them terribly good at finding or talking about the deeper meaning behind things, and at least one of them seemingly avoiding it altogether.

“I wanted to speak with you,” Link uttered, his voice calm yet he tried very hard not to sound like the shell of a person that he truly was, “about last night.”

“You needn’t be concerned,” the Prince smiled, his eyes looking upon the Hylian Champion fondly, “I’ve said, your presence is of no trouble to me. I’m happy to play host any time you wish to visit.”

“I wasn’t quite myself,” Link said, knowing there was so much more to that statement than he could ever hope to explain.

“It was a moment of vulnerability,” Sidon spoke, his voice lowering to softer tone, “there’s no cause for explanations. I’m, in fact, greatly flattered that you trust me to guard you in those times, and raise you when you’ve fallen.”

A small smile found its way onto Link’s face; if only Sidon knew how true his own words were, and how many times Link had died in his arms during their struggle with Vah Ruta. It was certainly a jarring experience for the Hylian, who was used to pulling himself up after his numerous resurrections, all alone. He was sure the experience of those deaths changed him, the memories of each one a tangle in his already unsteady state of emotion, yet they never happened, and Prince
Sidon didn’t remember.

Link’s body was cold and drained in the icy water, the task set before him an impossible strain. The Zora tunic was entirely necessary to his mission, yet did nothing to protect nor insulate him, and as a result the Hylian was drained by the cold within minutes, much more quickly than he could tame the divine beast, which seemed more wretched than divine.

How many times had Link’s body failed him, his muscles locking up when no energy remained within so that he sank like a stone, only to be carried to the surface where the Prince uttered promises of protection while Link inevitably faded away? How many times had the Prince looked upon Link, every bit of that boundless faith washing away, along with any hope he held to save his people?

How many times had the Prince carried Link back to land and held him, speaking gently, saying, ‘Don’t worry, I’m here, I won’t let you down, I’ll always save you,’ his eyes shining with sorrow as the rain pelted them.

‘Why do you care so much?’ That was all Link could bring himself to wonder, until he remembered, oh yeah, because I’m their only hope for survival and guard from destruction.

That’s all he was to anyone.

“Link,” Sidon spoke in concern, a careful hand enveloping Link’s shoulder.

The touch brought Link out of the musings that had taken his mind with them, and he blinked the memories away, taking a deep breath to steady himself. His hands were shaking as they tended to when memories returned to him, yet it was an odd occurrence for simple recall of current memories to steal his awareness in this way.

“I’m alright,” Link said, his gaze meeting Sidon’s, to assure him that he had recovered from his sudden spell.

“You seem unwell,” the Prince spoke in concern, “if you need further rest, return to my quarters and stay as long as you need, please. As for myself, I have other matters to attend to- I’m to set out with a company of our guardsmen, in an effort to clear the road to our domain, as it’s become very treacherous for travelers since the last Blood Moon. I hope you didn’t need anything more?”

“The monsters camped along the route are surely still making use of electric attacks and arrows,” Link stated, quickly losing sight of the fact that he hadn’t said a single thing he’d meant to.

“We’ve made sufficient preparations, my friend. Have faith,” said Sidon, his smile full of vibrant confidence.

“I’ll accompany you, just to be sure,” Link said, reasons in mind other than actual concern for the Zoras, “it’s my favorite route for bolstering my supply of arrows.”

“Ahh,” the Prince laughed at the Hylian’s explanation, “so long as you feel up to the challenge, your assistance would certainly be appreciated, by my guardsmen and myself, of course.”

As highly regarded as he was, it would be an embarrassment for the Hylian Champion to appear unprepared before a large group of people. In truth, the concept of fighting in the company of other soldiers was now alien to the Hylian, and he actually had concerns over whether such a thing could effect his performance.
His method of battle was fast, fluid and tended toward fits of boundless fury, in which he reft his foes until naught was left but disembodied remnants, scattered about upon a blanket of sodden, red earth. That likely wasn’t the side he could safely show his Zora allies without them assuming he was mad.

And so, Link decided preparation would be the remedy for his methods that bounced between desperation and pure brutality. He outfitted in his rubber armor, while protective topaz earrings dangled from his ears just beneath a hood, for extra warmth. It wasn’t the most beautiful ensemble, but he hoped it remained effective.

After returning to the Zora’s domain, having warped to his personal cache of armor and supplies in order to make preparations, Link found the Prince standing before the statue of Mipha, his gaze upturned to rest upon her immortalized loveliness.

Something odd happened when Prince Sidon stood before the memorial to Mipha; it was as though his normally very sharp senses dulled and ventured elsewhere, making him easier to approach without his notice. Link never intended to take advantage of this, for he had no real reason to do so, yet as he came to stand near the Zora Prince, he overheard Sidon quietly speaking to Mipha as though she could hear and indeed, listened.

“...despite the numerous doubts and criticisms of others, I’d like to believe that, if you were here, my decisions would gain your approval. I promise that I do make an effort to do what I believe is right by you, dear sister and... I suppose I’ve gotten a bit long winded here. Nothing has changed at all, has it? But if it isn’t too much trouble to you, please do look after us where we venture. We aren’t unprepared, but your protection would serve us well.”

When at last the Prince’s words trailed off, and he actually turned to find the tiny shadow of a Hylian waiting in his flank, he visibly startled, his hand jumping to his chest as though to prevent his heart from leaping outward. That was, if Zora’s hearts were in their chests? Link wasn’t sure on that detail.

“Link, you weren’t listening to me rattle on were you?” he asked, a faint violet flush quickly becoming obvious in the pale complexion of his cheeks.

“It was a moment of vulnerability,” Link repeated the Prince’s phrasing from earlier, an impish gleam to his eyes while the corners of his mouth attempted a smile, and he looked up at the statue. Only two things came to mind now when he did; the same old bitterness, and the fact that he’d lied to the Prince about Mipha’s trident. Link had broken it in a fight as he did with many weapons, and he didn’t care to trade diamonds for its repair, when it was just another breakable weapon among many, as far as he was concerned. He picked up plenty for free, or else they were gifted to him, the savior of Hyrule and everything.

The Prince somewhat tittered at the Hylian’s teasing, his energy a bit subdued from his somber moment. “Indeed, you’re correct. We seem to be quite talented at catching each other in these moments.”

The Hylian’s chest expanded, then flattened again in a deep, contemplative sigh as he considered whether or not to speak the words on his tongue, in response. It was often in the greater interest for him to remain silent, but his words were beginning to feel spiteful beneath the neglect. He looked up into the Prince’s face as he spoke, wanting to watch the Zora’s features shift with his words, “You feel a deep sense of loss for your sister. I can’t remember enough to feel anything at all... I haven’t decided which one is more unfair.”

Their eyes remained locked as a silence fell over them. It was an accomplishment on its own to have silenced the Prince’s constant positivity, but even more so to witness a truly troubled expression cross his features.
What must he have thought? Link wished he could reach in and consume those thoughts. He certainly gave the Zora Prince ample time to voice whatever came to mind, yet nothing was said. So, instead, Link continued, “let me know if you figure it out, yourself.”
The Zoras march into battle with the Hylian Champion by their side. Surely nothing could best them with the odds tipped so far in their favor. At least, so long as nothing unexpected occurred.

A fair bit of distance fell between the Zora Prince and the Hylian Champion as the company of Zora warriors were mobilized. Link was uncertain if he’d caused the chasm with something as small as a few words, but he greatly doubted that assumption. It was just oddly difficult sometimes to consider that every event and occurrence didn’t actually revolve around him in one way or another.

Then again, he actually really appreciated being able to watch the Zora people taking action while he faded into the background, a footnote. Even if the Prince hadn’t spoken much to Link since they left the Zora’s Domain, Link’s mood tipped more toward something pleasant, which was so bizarre, it left him expecting the worst. He ignored that part, however. Nothing would ever get done if he just let the existential dread set in.

The more likely explanation for Sidon’s distant behavior was the fact that he was actually absorbed in maintaining an organized chain of command and seeing to the success and safety of the people under that command. That was a massive responsibility, especially considering that the Prince tended to put himself in danger before the people meant to serve him.

He was very likened to Mipha in this way and Link rather hoped that Sidon was just secretly so unsure of himself that he was emulating his sister, and would just grow out of it as he came more into his own.

The formation held by the Zora as they ventured out into the wilds was tightly secure and overtly cautious. The head of the formation was held by the Prince and a handful of archers, pikemen and warriors wielding swords. Though the Hylian Champion followed from only a short distance, he wasn’t entirely certain of what was going on up front, the method of their success eluding him.

From what Link could see, the entire company would be ordered to a halt just before coming into range of enemies. From there, the Prince would indicate the position of the monsters up ahead, and the archers would carefully continue forward to the positions indicated, killing off the enemies by means of masterful stealth. If their stealth was compromised, the archers fell back with the foolishly aggressive beasts giving chase right into the line of close-range soldiers, and their deaths.

After each success, the platoon continued onward, the duty of the middle guard being to quickly scavenge what they could from the bodies. Link had been placed into this group, presumably because he’d indicated his desire to collect arrows, and also possibly as defense against any monster that happened to be missed by the head of the group.

There was one other reason that became clearly obvious; the presence of the youngest member of the platoon, who made it very plain that he was sticking right at Link’s heels. The boy was incredibly young to be out on a dangerous mission, a child of no greater height than Link, himself. The young Zora wore the adornments of a healer, which made his purpose in this group clear, as well as Link’s unspoken one. The Hylian Champion was meant to guard the young healer; well, the boy was quiet
and tagged along behind Link without any trouble, so it was no inconvenience to him.

The rear of the group was similar to the front, minus the archers, and they followed closely behind the middle, just trying to maintain a sense of vigilance. Their job seemed simultaneously the most dull and the most stressful. Link noticed that the guardsman, Rivan, that often greeted him at the entryway to the Zora’s Domain was in the rear guard, but the Hylian Champion thought better of being a distraction.

However, as the platoon of Zora marched upon and killed hoard after hoard of Lizalfos without incident and twilight fell over the group as they neared what Link understood was their checkpoint to set camp, the lone Hylian decidedly fell back a bit in order to converse. The young healer followed him, of course, so Link was still doing his unofficial job no matter where he went.

“Oh, Link- I mean, Hylian Champion Link,” Rivan addressed the Hylian as he came near.

“I thought we were past these formalities,” Link responded, quiet and casual.

“I’m trying to live up to the expectations that come with my age,” said the Zora, trying to maintain a sense of seriousness. “Why are you all the way back here? It seems, with your skill, you’d be of more use up front.”

The Hylian Champion shrugged, saying, “Sidon seems to think the aid I’ve offered so far has been more than enough.”

“We’re all very grateful to you, of course. I’m sure the Prince just doesn’t want to burden you, as an ally, when we’re capable of solving most of our own troubles.”

“I wasn’t complaining.” Link commented, “I do kind of appreciate the easy-going position I have here. I’m only annoyed that I’m not close enough to the front to figure out the exact technique being used to hone in on the enemies.”

“Oh,” Rivan seemed almost confused at first, that Link didn’t understand what was going on up front. “Well, you know that we Zora are sensitive to electricity. It isn’t just because of our aquatic bodies, but because of our senses as well. We’re all quite sensitive to electrical fields and every living thing has a faint field surrounding them, even monsters. The Prince, however, is particularly sensitive, because of the shape of his head fins. He is using his abilities as a sensor up front to hone in on enemies and estimate the appropriate force necessary before approaching.”

“Hm,” Link idly nodded to the explanation, “that’s how he always manages to track me down.”

The guardsman laughed quietly, not wanting to seem off-task, lest he may face reprimand, though the Zora holding command over the rear guard had glanced over and seemingly come to the conclusion that Link was outside of his command. “I’m surprised you didn’t know that, actually.”

The platoon was given the orders to halt once more, though the Zora that Link had been chatting to looked to his commanding officer for further instruction, the order to stop apparently different than usual, something a bit more urgent. Link, alone, was out of the loop, the signals a mystery to him.

A tension fell over the entire group, each Zora drawing weapons to the ready. The Prince was standing especially tall up front, peering slowly around like a deer listening for the sound of a bowstring being drawn taut. From his body language, it was clear that he had sensed something that was cause enough to order the entire platoon into a defensive position as he reached more deeply into himself to confirm what his senses were telling him.

Then, the Prince left his position up front at a pace that was hurried enough to be concerning,
signaling for part of the front line to accompany him as he raced back toward the rear guard. When he made it to the back of the platoon, he ordered the commanding officer there to change position to the front, and the Zora that had been closely watching Link followed Sidon’s order without question.

The Zora that had been commanding the middle section, however, rushed after Sidon, the same golden Zora that Link had seen sparring with the Prince earlier, and he was saying, “can we not retreat to the river for cover?”

“It’s already too late for that,” Sidon said, a stern tone to his voice that felt odd and out-of-character as Link’s ears twitched forward to listen, “it’ll be on us before we can all make it to cover. If the rear guard is broken, order a retreat for the rest while we hold it off. Return to your position.”

Link took the Prince’s serious tone as the best signal he needed to draw his own weapon, a lightweight Zora blade he’d been provided earlier. The sound of the blade being drawn sang out as Link took it in hand, and Sidon’s golden gaze fell upon him as he did. “Link,” he said, the same hurried, authoritative sound to his voice as he addressed the Champion, “return to the center position.”

Sidon quickly moved past Link, clearly trusting that his command would be followed as he took control of the bolstered rear guard. The Zora Prince took his trident in hand and spoke out to the soldiers in his command, saying, “Stand ready to fight. Show the enemy no fear.”

No sooner than the Prince’s words were finished, a powerful stench permeated the area, a mixture of musky body odor to a hardly bearable degree, mixed with rotting carcasses. The Hylian Champion knew precisely what this meant and he spared a momentary glance at the young Zora still glued to his side. The boy appeared almost calm by comparison to the others and he peered up as Link regarded him, looking as though he was simply waiting for instruction.

Link was considering whether or not taking orders was in his capacity in the face of grave danger. The young healer was his only charge, and the responsibility to fight this battle didn’t fall to him at all but.. Honestly, fuck Sidon’s orders.

“Stay right next to me,” Link said as the ground began to quake, and the sound of a gigantic beast tearing its way through the trees to where the Zora warriors waited quickly grew in volume until the monster erupted from the cover of the forest and into the open.

A Hinox, quickened by the dusk that had fallen over the area, fully awake, alert and at its most dangerous. It did not slow even fractionally as it rushed out, charging the line of Zora that awaited, making grabs at them with its hands, its tongue lapping against its teeth as it hungrily chased whatever prey was to be its next meal.

The Zora were a fleet-footed people, leaping out of the way where needed, moving in to strike with just as much precision. Each of them dodged the Hinox’s hands with relative ease, only Sidon seeming to dodge back barely enough to avoid the beast, his trident sticking into one of the monster’s fingertips before his body arched and flipped beyond the Hinox’s reach.

The blow, though it angered the beast, did not dissuade it from its attack. A handful of pikemen fought it defensively from the front as it persisted, distracting it as a small group of Zora made to race around behind the monster, and an archer from a bit further back took aim and shot for the Hinox’s giant eye.

The strategy had clearly been discussed and thoroughly practiced beforehand, and while Link was impressed with the preparedness and skill, the tactic quickly fell through as the Hinox’s head followed the group circling him, and the arrow struck him in the side of the head, barely making a
scratch and bouncing away.

With a guttural bellow, the Hinox dove for the group that had moved in to attack its flank, managing to capture two of the Zora warriors, one held in each tightly squeezing hand.

‘No!’ Prince Sidon called out, his sharp teeth bared and he rushed at the beast, accompanied by a couple of the more courageous pikemen. Spears jabbed fiercely into the monster’s legs as the Prince jumped, bouncing upon the Hinox’s knee and landing atop the monster’s clenched fist, the blade at his hip being drawn to slice at the fingers holding one of the warriors in grave peril.

The blade was slung back and forth with a rapid, merciless intensity, so that by the time the Hinox screamed and released one of the Zora, the flesh of its finger was cut to the bone.

Both the Prince and the previously captured Zora fell as they were dropped, and they scrambled to their feet and away, though the Hinox did not immediately attack them again. Instead, it licked at its wounded hand, almost as though it were for the sake of tasting blood, not reducing the pain in any way.

Sidon tossed his blade to the warrior he’d saved, gathering his trident back up as he prepared to move in to free the other captured Zora using the same tactic. He rushed in, the same pikemen from before moving in at his sides and stabbing at the beast as Sidon leapt for the Hinox’s other hand.

As the Prince jumped from the beast’s knee, and up, the Hinox roared and swatted its empty hand to deflect the attacking Zora, striking Sidon down from the air and sending him flying back to the ground with enough force to have him rolling back to where the soldiers in the middle position waited on guard.

“Prince Sidon!” Link could hear them crying out in urgency. The Hylian Champion’s head turned to look back at where Sidon had fallen, seeing one of the soldiers picking him up from the ground as he clutched at his arm like it was badly injured.

“No, no, no!” the still captured Zora was screaming in terror, and Link turned back to look up at the beast before him. In Sidon’s absence, Bazz, Zora that Link recognized as the captain of the guard had taken command. At his order, the group of warriors still within the Hinox’s proximity seemed to be making another attempt at the previous tactic, the pikemen defending the archer as she launched a volley of arrows at the Hinox’s eye, despite how it had raised its arm to defend its single great weakness and it opened its jaws wide to bite down on the Zora in its grasp, silencing him.

The group of warriors circled the beast again, but it kicked and charged at them, attempting to crush them beneath its giant feet, and they jumped back, regrouping as their attempt failed once again. While the beast was distracted, Link was at last too impatient to remain idle, and he rushed in, aiming to circle the Hinox from its other side in order to attack it from behind.

The beast, of course, caught sight of the Hylian and the young Zora on Link’s tail, and slapped at the ground in attempts to capture them with its now empty hands. Link stopped just before the beast’s hand dropped, slamming the ground directly before him and narrowly missing. The young Zora bumped softly into the Hylian Champion as he came to a hasty halt and Link grabbed the boy by his arm, bolting in the direction they had come from. Once the boy was running again, Link let go of his arm and dashed directly between the Hinox’s legs, its hands still smashing the ground, causing it to shake beneath Link as the beast grabbed for him.

But Link avoided the monster’s attempts, rushing to the pillar that was one of the beast’s legs and slashing the tendon at its ankle. Just as hurriedly, the Hylian Champion ran toward the Hinox’s other leg, slashing it there as well so that the beast screamed and toppled to its knees.
Before Link even had a moment to clear out of the way, a powerful attack struck the Hinox from the front, and its body fell backward with the force of the blow. Stumbling as the ground shook and cracked beneath the beast’s weight, the Hylian toppled forward but he recovered before he hit the ground and rolled back to his feet, turning to find the Hinox still alive and flailing, a trident buried in its eye. Sidon’s shoulders and chest flexed as he forced the weapon in deeper, the bone at the back of the Hinox’s eye socket audibly cracking as it gave way.

The Prince, spattered in gore as blood rushed from the wounded Hinox, still immediately took notice of Link just nearby. His fierce golden eyes looked up, flickering here and there about Link’s vicinity, taking on a look of urgency as he looked back to the Hylian and said, “Where is the healer?”

Link spun round, finding that the Zora boy that had been on his heels the entire time had vanished. In the blur of battle, where the seconds faded together, Link had lost track of the boy for just a moment, and now couldn’t find him at all.

There was no answer Link could give, as he had none, but even if he had, there was also no time to speak as the Hinox, still not dead, began to violently flail, screaming in fury or maybe even terror, if monsters knew such a feeling.

The beast’s hand dove straight for the man standing upon its face, taking hold of the Prince where he stood. Link jumped and rushed toward the monster’s fist, which had tightened around Sidon, but within a single second, the Hinox simply pushed the captured Zora into his mouth. Sidon seemed to tuck his arms and legs inward, making himself as small as possible as he clenched his weapon to him, yet even so, the Hinox swallowed and he was gone.

“Let him go!” Link screamed uselessly as he buried his sword into the Hinox’s eye, swiping the blade furiously at the beast’s hand when it attempted to grab at him as well, cutting its fingers to the bone and flipping back to the ground. He buried his feet in the cracked soil where the Hinox’s head rested and he stabbed his sword into the top of its skull, near the base of it’s horn, drawing the blade back to him and repeating the blow until the damned thing laid still.

Link stood gasping when the Hinox’s last foul breath left its body, then the Hylian climbed back on top of the felled monster just in time to see the sharp end of a trident rupturing the thick hide and fatty tissue of the Hinox’s gut.

With as much caution as Link could muster despite his rush, he climbed down to where the spear was stabbing outward again and again, like the furious sting of a courser bee. The Hylian stumbled a bit on the pliant bulk of the Hinox, but even on his knees, he slashed his sword across the monster’s flesh, trying desperately to gouge it enough for the struggling Zora Prince to escape as he was clearly attempting to.

Within moments, a handful of the Zora warriors hurried in to assist, some as nervously rushed as the Hylian, others a bit more cautious and calculating with their strikes as they all worked together to tear open the beast and free their Prince.

With the amount of blades available to aid, it was perhaps less than a minute before the Prince burst from the beast’s innards, covered in frothy blood and gasping like a Hylian newborn, cut from its mother in an emergency birth. In the arm Sidon had not been using to relentlessly stab his way out, the young healer was cradled, unconscious and in an uncertain condition.

The boy was passed off to another Zora once Prince Sidon walked free and even his trident was discarded once he no longer had need of it. At that very same point, the arm that had been wielding the trident fell at the Prince’s side and he clutched it, holding it still, as he had apparently suffered injury, or so Link was gathering as he simply watched the Prince walk away.
Link followed from a slight distance, an overwhelming uncertainty coming over him. He sheathed his sword, taking a deep breath and doing his best to let everything slide off of him as it usually did. Having people around him after a battle was even more chaotic and unsteadying than being on his own, and not even knowing what was going to happen next was different enough to be distinctly troubling.

All the Hylian managed to learn from following after the Zora Prince was that he planned for them to change course for the river and set camp there for the night. He issued these orders to the golden-skinned Zora that was in command of the center guard, and took what remained of the front guard ahead to scout the way.

Sidon didn’t so much as spare Link a backwards glance, despite his apparently sharp senses and the very likely reality that he knew Link had followed him. The Hylian decided to take that as a snub and returned to where the Hinox had fallen. Nobody else was taking the liberty to harvest the beasts disgusting parts, so Link busied himself with it. The Zora in the rear guard were regrouping or returning to their originally assigned position, with Bazz taking over command temporarily.

A handful of Zora worked to revive the young healer and were successful in this endeavor, as the boy sprang back to life once his lost breath was restored. For the first time all day, Link managed to hear the boy’s voice. He sat upright where he’d been revived, despite the ones around him telling him to lay still, and he began to scream, flailing his hands and flapping his head fins in apparent discomfort. From what Link gathered as he watched, the boy’s skin was burning all over from the acid of the Hinox’s stomach and those working to aid him rushed to produce their canteens of water to provide some relief. They carefully washed the boy’s skin and as they did he quieted once more.

It was not long before the previous Zora in charge returned from the front with new orders, and the entire company began to move once more. The Healer was certainly no longer tailing Link, not just because the Zoras likely didn’t trust the Hylian with the responsibility any longer, but he was also being carried by another, as his legs had been severely injured in his struggle. Somewhere along the way, however, he apparently recovered enough to begin using his healing powers and set to work attempting to restore his own mobility.

Now that was one gutsy kid, Link had to admit.

The sun had already set by the time the group of marching soldiers finally reached the river and dutifully began setting camp. Each person in the group either had orders to follow or otherwise knew something they were meant to be doing, and Link found himself wondering if he had ever been so disciplined. He assumed it was so, based on tales he’d heard about himself, but it was also hard to believe at times.

The Hylian settled in, waiting about as fires were built for security in the night and meal preparation. The group appeared well-supplied with rations that had been prepared ahead of the mission, though a few Zora took to the river with spears and brought fresh fish to cook over the flame. The smell of the food brought Link around and he rejoined the company of the other Zora, being granted a meal from a large, cast-iron pot without even asking for it. It consisted of a clump of bread and a dollop of stew with bit of meat carved from a fire roasted Hyrule Bass, and Link sat with a group of Zora, most of them quietly eating, with a couple softly talking among themselves.

Guard duties were assigned as most of the Zora finished their meals, or they were dismissed to the river to sleep. Link wandered down to the water to find an area with a gentler current lined with slumbering Zora that were dipped just beneath the surface, and he peered over them in curiosity. He believed that they were anchored somehow, but he couldn’t work out the exact details in the dim light of the moon. He did manage to see that Prince Sidon was nowhere among them.
The sound of footfalls caught Link’s attention, causing his pointed ears to twitch as it was apparent that whatever was approaching was attempting to do so stealthily. The Champion’s hand found and drew his sword out of instinct, yet when he spun round, he did so in enough time to see a young Zora duck behind a tree.

Link shook his head, putting his sword away and sighing in exasperation. Why was this kid still following him around? Slowly, he walked over and to the backside of the tree where the young Zora had hidden and he looked down on the boy, who in turn looked up but did not meet Link’s gaze.

“You’re back on your feet already,” Link observed plainly, receiving a nod of the head in reply.

Quietly, Link stood looking the boy over, noting that he seemed to have recovered despite his ordeal. The silence dragged on for several moments, then Link said, “I really let you down earlier. Sorry about that.”

The boy, though he clearly understood and acknowledged what was said to him, said nothing in return and didn’t even offer a nod or a shake of his head. Link found himself chuckling in wry amusement. ‘So that’s how that feels,’ he thought, then he spoke again, asking, “do you know where Prince Sidon is?”

To this, the boy nodded, his forefins bobbing softly with the movement of his head, then he started away, assumingly leading Link to the one he’d asked about- at least that would be the most obvious conclusion. If the boy just led Link around all night for no reason, Link might actually feed him to a Hinox on purpose a second time.

As it turned out, a small handful of upperclass warriors were all resting together, with a heavier guard looking after them as they slept. These Zora were nobility as well as very well-trained, well-educated warriors; the Zora equivalent of Hylian Knights. Prince Sidon was among this group, though he had yet to go into the water to sleep and was once again in the company of the gold-colored Zora.

The young Zora immediately walked to where Prince Sidon was situated, tapping him ever so slightly on the shoulder with one finger. The Prince’s attention was stolen by that simple touch, and turned from the golden Zora, to the young one at his side.

“Estuu?” Sidon said as he acknowledged the young healer, craning his neck slightly to see Link standing a bit away from the group, “and Link. Still following him around, are you Estuu?”

The healer’s mouth quirked slightly to form something of a smile, his eyes looking toward the campfire as he was spoken to. The soft glow brought out the rosy tones of his skin, making him appear almost as red as the Prince, though he was much closer to the color of the sky at sunset. He pointed at the Prince, tapping his own arm in order to communicate something Link wasn’t sure of.

“You’ve already used up too much energy healing yourself, for tonight,” Prince Sidon spoke to the boy, having somehow understood. Link just assumed there were previous conversations he had missed out on. “Rest for tonight, Estuu. I can wait until morning for healing.”

“I’ll take him to sleep, as he obviously won’t stay without supervision,” the gold Zora spoke, his voice much more strict than Sidon’s as he cast a disapproving stare in the young Zora’s direction.

As the other two showed themselves down to the river, Link came nearer to where the Prince remained, looking over him in the light of the flickering flame. The arm he’d been clutching when Link saw him last was splinted and bound, and if Link had to judge, he’d say Sidon looked uncomfortable, overall.
“I thought you would have found somewhere to rest yourself and settled in by now,” the Prince said, his gold eyes turning to Link once the Hylian was within a comfortable range of sight.

“You’re not asleep yet,” Link responded, sitting in front of a downed tree that rested nearby, leaning back against it and sprawling his legs out before himself.

“This is where I sleep for tonight,” the Zora Prince sighed, “in this condition, I can’t submerge to sleep, bandaged and covered in ointment as I am.”

“You’re as reckless as I am,” the Hylian said quietly, noticing areas of raw, blistered skin marring the Prince from head to toe, no doubt from the Hinox’s nasty gut.

At these words, the Prince’s normally vibrant expression set into something a shade more dull, his eyes hidden from view as his head lowered. “I don’t aim to be ‘reckless’,” he answered, “but Brivere says something similar; that I put myself at risk, that I value the lives of my warriors so highly, I refuse to let them do what they’re meant to do. If it were up to him, I would send my warriors to their deaths and simply wait to hear whether my choices were adequate enough to assure a victory, regardless of losses.”

“Brivere?” Link repeated, uncertain as to who this was.

“The warrior that was just tending to me,” Sidon explained, “the young healer, Estuu, is his brother.”

“Hm,” Link nodded in understanding, quietly studying Sidon as he contemplated the information. It was odd to see the Prince looking so defeated and unlike himself, a tightly wound bundle of self-doubt. As horrible as it made Link, he had to restrain the urge to pull out his Sheikah Slate and document the rarity of this occurrence.

Instead, Link debated his choice of response. On one hand, this Brivere was obviously a member of the aristocracy, and though his advice to Sidon made perfect sense, it also likely came from a place of self-importance and upperclass snobbery. Yes, send the peasants off to fight, because their lives aren’t as important as ours!

On the other hand, altruistic, self-sacrificing heroism was the very reason Mipha and all the other Champions were dead now and what good did that do? Link had already found himself hating Sidon’s habit of defending his people by putting himself personally at risk, though now he was also forced to consider what his motivations were for wanting the Prince to stay out of danger. Was it selfishness? Could he really covet somebody that also irritated him so deeply?

It was clearly too much to ask for anything to make sense, his feelings most of all.

“Brivere is right,” Link finally decided on his answer, and though he thought it was clear and simple, as he uttered these words, Sidon’s head snapped up to cast a look of disbelief in the Hylian’s direction.

“You don’t really think that, do you?” the Prince asked, his voice confused and aghast. “How can you, as a Champion, believe such a thing?”

“That’s exactly why,” Link replied, “don’t idealize what I do. It’s not beautiful or glorious. It’s not even compassionate, it just is.”

In disbelief, Sidon let out a quiet titter, looking as though he thought he was being played. “No, if you didn’t care, you wouldn’t do all the things you do. You certainly wouldn’t have come to our aid, when you have so much on your shoulders already.”
“Don’t assume you know what drives me,” Link stated. He didn’t understand his own driving forces well enough to live up to the expectations of others. He wasn’t even presently making any effort to ‘bring peace to Hyrule’, as he was meant to, so he really didn’t want to pretend to be some kind of great Hero. “Your people don’t want another statue, they want their future King alive,” Link tried to reason, trying even harder to change the subject from himself to the Prince. His own life as a topic of conversation wasn’t defensible for very long.

“I see,” the Prince said, seeming to verbally back down from his virtues, or at least the conflict over them. He definitely appeared as though he wanted to say more and was actively trying to decide whether or not it was wise. “It’s just that, when you came and we.. No, nevermind. It’s not your responsibility to guide me so I won’t drop my difficulties on you.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t want to listen to me,” Link said, his tone both quietly calm and filled with fury. It made his gut twist in anger when the Prince painted deflections in pleasantries, more than anything because it made him feel like the bad person for being insistent.

Yet Sidon only chuckled, amicable and not even bothering to defend himself as his behavior was criticized. “I’m hopelessly stubborn, everybody knows it. It doesn’t surprise me that you’ve realized it as well, my friend.”

Giving in as he usually did, Link let out a sigh of defeat as he stood, prepared to take his leave and find elsewhere to rest. “You look like you’ve been picked apart enough for tonight, I guess. I’ll just find somewhere among the lowlier soldiers to sleep,” he commented, hiding true cynicism behind a joking facade.

“What?” The Prince spoke up in perplexed surprise, “Please, if you’re welcome in my chambers, you’re certainly welcome to share the ground I’m presently occupying.”

Stopping where he stood, Link turned to look upon the Prince with a confused expression of his own. Was it possible that they were simply playing a game to see which could confuse the other more? The Hylian Champion let his expression speak for itself as he lingered in silence, searching Sidon’s face for an answer to an unasked question. Maybe a lack of words spoke more clearly?

In the extended pause, the Zora Prince began to look unsure of himself, as though he had made some sort of cultural blunder he couldn’t comprehend. Was it rude to invite Hylians to sleep on the ground with you? “I’m sorry,” he said before anything else, a questioning tone to his voice, so he rather sounded as though his apology was a question, “it’s just that, you can’t sleep in the river with the others, so I assumed you would like to remain here?”

“I thought I would rest with the ones keeping guard,” Link explained, “just because they’re awake and alert doesn’t mean I can’t sleep.”

“Ah,” the Prince gave a nod and smiled as Link’s intentions were clarified. He seemed to accept this explanation as it was granted, yet his smile was half-hearted, even so. “I didn’t realize that was your preference. I suppose I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

Link hesitated as the Prince said his makeshift goodnights, his own thoughts and feelings much too unclear for him to guess at Sidon’s own. The Hylian nodded his head and began the walk back to the campfire where he’d been fed earlier, supposing the flame would provide the warmth he couldn’t expect elsewhere.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The young healer, Estuu, didn't seem to hold a grudge, despite how the Hylian Champion failed to protect him, so he continued to follow at Link's heels. It was just as well, because he was the only Zora who had any time for Link, as Prince Sidon and his people were preparing to attack a Bokoblin Fort.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Zoras throughout the camp got moving in the morning much more quickly than Link. The Hylian slept through the night as the guards around him changed shifts again and again, and not once did he stir.

Not even the smell of new wood added to the fires and breakfasts being prepared, nor the sound of more and more soldiers moving around him could bring him from his slumber.

Nobody among the Zora seemed to think they should bother the sleeping Hylian, so it was a surprise when they didn’t simply march off without him. Only once the young healer managed to locate Link and shake him into the waking world did Link realize how late it had gotten. By this point most of the fires had been extinguished and the platoon was getting ready to set out again.

Blearily, the Hylian looked up at the scarlet Zora, blinking away the faded images of his dreams as the clear light of reality came into view. “Hmm?” Link uttered as he was prodded and shaken, definitely the kind of person that awakened so slowly, it was a wonder something out in the wilds hadn’t chewed his legs off in his sleep.

“It’s you,” Link mumbled through a yawn, the usual static of annoyance buzzing in the back of his mind once he was awake enough to acknowledge his own existence and that of the Zora crouched in front of him, “aren’t you suppose to be healing the Prince?”

Estuu narrowed his yellow eyes as Link spoke, his expression confused and bewildered that Link should be asking him such a thing. Blinking, seemingly in the realization that Link was actually serious about this question, Estuu looked over his own shoulder, gesturing with his line of sight.

Following the young Zora’s quiet means of suggestion, Link glanced a bit into the distance to see the upperclass officers huddled in attention, near the towering Prince as Sidon spoke to them. It was an apparent discussion of the events of the previous day and of the day to come, in regards to strategy and movement; Link could tell because Prince Sidon gestured a lot when he was explaining strategy. This also meant that his injured arm was now fixed, presumably along with the burns on his skin.

“Oh, you’ve already done it,” Link said with a nod of understanding, getting to his feet and stretching. As he did, Estuu pointed toward the dying embers of the fire Link had been sleeping next to, and Link turned to look for whatever it was that the Zora was trying to show him.

By the fire, there was a wooden spear that had apparently been broken in half and jammed into the ground near the flame. Impaled upon the broken weapon was what appeared to be a rather crisp
voltfin trout, and Link looked back to Estuu to see the boy pointing at him.

“It’s for me?” Link asked, receiving a nod from the healer. He wasn’t entirely sure why the boy was still sticking around him, though he was beginning to get the notion that it wasn’t by order, but rather because the young Zora actually wanted to. He supposed he should be thankful, since he’d clearly missed breakfast.

Link was still pulling the sweet, smoky meat from the delicate bones when everybody began to fall in line and move out. He just assumed he was meant to be in the middle position again and casually followed along, still collecting arrows as he went. At the rate these Zoras were slaughtering Lizalfos, Link really would be supplied for the rest of his travels, right up until he fought the Calamity.

Well, if he fought it. He was still busy trying to decide if he thought Hyrule should just be allowed to fall. Would all these struggles finally cease if somebody just said no? And how long would it take the Hylian people to pull their fingers out of their ears? If they didn’t, they wouldn’t hear whatever tune it was that monsters marched to when they finally came to kill them all.

Link wondered if his thoughts had always been so dark. He wished he could recall as much. Every time he actually did remember something, it honestly seemed more like the story of Zelda’s life than his own, like the sole purpose of him remembering anything was so that he would take pity on the Princess and come relieve her of Calamity restraining duty.

Somebody would probably write a tale of his adventures one day, and the damn thing would be called ‘The Legend of Zelda’. That thought made him truly hate himself, but not more than he already hated everything else. Then again, the rise and fall of Princess Zelda might have been more interesting for a wider audience than his own emotional turmoil over aquatic men and women.

When the company made it out to where the river widened, the Zoras took to the water in order to clear out the veritable swamp of Octorocks. Link aided from the shore, watching closely for when one of the bothersome creatures bobbed to the surface to cough up a mass of partially digested fishbones and stones, all stuck together with gluey Octorock mucus. He was just glad they weren’t hocking that nasty crud at him for the time being, and he provided the Zoras cover to show his gratitude.

The numbers quickly diminished with how quickly the Zoras zipped through the water with brandished spears and precision that even Octorocks couldn’t match. Estuu, meanwhile, stayed right near the Hylian Champion, watching with interest as Link played a rather calm game of target practice with his bow.

“You know how to use a bow?” Link asked, glancing at the quiet boy by his side. Estuu offered a shake of his head, a doleful expression coming over his features as he did.

“What about a spear? Or a sword?” Link continued, curious and honestly a bit bored. His questions were continually met with the same answer, however, and he quickly became confused. He thought knowing how to use spears and bows were prerequisites to existence as a Zora.

“Why?” he asked, the space between his brows furrowed as he looked over the boy in consideration. He was young for this mission, yes, but he looked to be somewhere close to Mipha’s age when she was already selected to be the Zora Champion. What excuse did he have to be so behind?

At first Estuu sort of shrugged and Link couldn’t help but roll his eyes about it. Even the kid that didn’t talk was dismissive as hell. However, when Link didn’t say anything more, the boy shyly pointed at the adornments that marked him as aristocracy and Link just shook his head.
If he had to guess what Estuu meant by this, his wager would be that his older brother had convinced him that his place in society made him too good for these lowly skills. Either that, or Estuu was forced to focus on his skills as a healer and as a result had no time to learn other skills.

“What about Lady Mipha?” Link said, “she was a Princess, a skilled healer and a warrior of no small amount of skill. If she could be all that, so can you. Maybe you could even be the next Zora Champion.”

Link might have been pulling Estuu’s fins a bit, but the boy didn’t seem to catch that, and at Link’s words, his yellow eyes brightened in excitement. The Hylian Champion just chuckled, thinking he had finally ascertained the reasoning behind this kid following him around. “Alright, alright,” he said, placing his bow into the kid’s hands, “let’s see if you’re any good.”

If it was possible for a boy to be excited, nervous, overjoyed and completely silent all at once, Estuu managed to pull it off. His fingers twitched along the bow as his fingertips studied it and his fins started to happily flap.

“Okay, hold it here with your dominant hand,” Link explained, carefully aiding the young Zora by moving his hands and showing him how to stand properly, “keep your first finger out a bit, now nock the arrow to the string and start to aim before pulling the string back.”

Link indicated the target, pointing at an Octorock that was floating a bit away from everything else, for safety purposes. “Try to hit that one,” he said. It seemed close enough to be a simple shot, but far enough away that the Octorock wouldn’t locate them and fire back, in case the kid missed.

As the young Zora started to pull the string back, he gave a huff of difficulty and Link laughed and said, “Yeah, sorry this bow might be a bit heavy for you. If you can pull the string back at least this far,” he pretended to pull back the string of an invisible bow for demonstration, “you can let it fly.”

Estuu pulled the string back with all the might he could scavenge from his small frame, his arms shaking as he struggled to hold it long enough to be sure his aim was right. When he released the string, not only did the arrow fly way off target, but the string also slapped his forearm and he yelped in surprise.

“I forgot to warn you about that,” Link said, reaching out to inspect Estuu’s arm as a welt began to form. Despite the sting of pain the boy was surely feeling, he wasn’t particularly ready to give the bow back to the Hylian, so Link just shrugged and gave him another arrow. “You’re going to have a hard time keeping your arm out of the way pulling back a string that heavy. If we come across any Bokoblin archers, though, I promise I will lift a bow off of them. Theirs are much lighter.”

Estuu fired a few more arrows as Link watched patiently, just handing the boy another with each missed shot, like a squire to the worst Knight of all time. On the tenth arrow, Link chuckled, saying, “I’m going to toss you down there to gather all those arrows back up.”

As Estuu took aim at the same Octorock, which was now floating in a soup of arrows, Link noticed that Prince Sidon was on his way over to the Octorock they were presently shooting at. “Careful,” he said, gesturing to the Prince as he glided past just barely beneath the water, his topfin breaching the surface just enough to leave a slicing ripple in his wake.

Link realized as he watched that Brivere was swimming near the Prince’s flank and his lips tightened into something of a glower. “On second thought, I’ll give you a purple rupee if you hit your brother right in his tail fin,” he commented to Estuu, who actually chuckled at the suggestion.

When Estuu let the arrow fly, it finally struck the Octorock, causing the beast to violently rupture just
moments before the Prince and Brivere moved in to strike, startling both of them, as was clear from how they shot backward in the water. Link’s eyes widened as he witnessed the beauty of this event, his hand immediately slapping itself over his mouth to keep him from wailing with laughter.

Sidon and Brivere came in warily to investigate, which made everything that much more hilarious as Link watched them linger in a moment of nervous confusion. They found the deflated skin of the Octorock floating, still attached to the bulging mass of its eyeballs and still wiggling tentacles, an arrow pierced through its now flat-looking cranium, and they breached their heads above the water to have a look around, quickly spotting Link and Estuu, both with faces plastered with smug grins.

When Prince Sidon peered up to where Link stood, a smile clearly found its way to his face, whereas Brivere was either annoyed or else he just had a severe case of resting bitchy face. Link honestly found himself hoping the yellow Zora was feeling aggravated or threatened in some way, though he didn’t linger with that thought long enough to ask himself why.

“You’re definitely champion material,” Link said, giving the kid a playful nudge, “that was the best thing I’ve seen in a hundred years. Come on,” he said, walking toward where the other Zoras were gathering now that the water was clear, as it was looking like they would move again soon.

The fateful hour of twilight fell over the marching Zora once more, though thankfully it didn’t bring a Hinox this time. What it did bring was a full stop for the leaders to come together in discussion of how they wanted to dispatch a fort full of bokoblins and moblins.

Link drifted near enough to eavesdrop on the discussion, thinking that it was undue caution, despite the numbers. He felt that in the time it took these Zora to sort out plans and backup plans, and secondary backup plans, he could have just marched in and slaughtered the lot, if not for the kid that simply couldn’t be pried away from him.

Another thing that Link noticed as he listened in, was that the Prince was oddly quiet, like he was just there for the sake of appearances. It wasn’t that he said nothing in regards to the plans, just that his energy was lackluster and the victory to come didn’t feel like a glorious goal, just a goal that was to be met.

Perhaps it was just that the Hylian’s expectations for Sidon’s behavior was askew from how he truly behaved when matters of seriousness came up. Apparently it was by this same mistake that Link assumed he’d lost the Prince’s unquestionable belief in him the previous day, as Sidon had said nothing to indicate he was disappointed with Link after everything was said and done.

Then again, when did Link or Sidon say anything of any weight to one another? When did either of them manage to express what they truly thought or felt? Their friendship was just an intricate game of pretend.

When the details were comfortably sorted out, Link was entirely relieved. From what he’d caught, the archers would handle the bulk of the fighting from the water, using the darkening skies to their advantage. Once their numbers were slashed, the warriors would move in to overpower those that remained. It seemed fairly foolproof.

Still, Link couldn’t help the worry in the back of his mind as he watched the Prince walk away from the group looking drained, and he thought maybe, just maybe, if he tried speaking with Sidon, he may actually receive honesty or something solid in response.

Link asked Estuu for a bit of space, and surprisingly the boy fell back by a fair distance as the Hylian
Champion approached the Prince on the way to his position, which apparently was somewhere in the middle now.

“Sidon,” Link said as he came to the Zora Prince’s side, reaching out to touch his arm in order to gain his attention.

The towering Zora peered down to where Link stood, his overall appearance warming slightly just in acknowledging that Link was there. “Yes, my friend?” he answered, sounding as though he expected Link to have something truly important to say.

“Everything alright?” the Hylian asked.

“Yes,” Sidon answered, his tone falling flat enough to leave Link hovering in skeptical silence. When the Zora looked down again to see Link’s narrowed eyes and unconvinced expression, he laughed quietly and said, “It’s just too late at this point to suggest that I approach the fort from the water, with you on my back, exciting as that could have been.”

Link nodded in understanding, a small smile on his face. “We can’t hog all the glory every time.”

“Where should I expect you to be?” Sidon asked, causing Link’s ears to twitch in questioning; did he catch concern in there or was he imagining things?

The Hylian laughed slyly, commenting, “Oh good, you’re asking me where I’ll be, not telling me this time. You learn quickly.”

“So you did think I was ordering you about yesterday,” the Zora said as though an unasked question had been suddenly answered, “I was merely trying to keep you in a safe position. I thought it aligned with your desire to come along for scavenging purposes. I was wrong, apparently. You have my apologies.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Link brushed it off, his way of both casually accepting the apology while making it clear enough that it was a mistake not to be made again. “I’m going to take out the sentries that are out of range of the water and only get involved if necessary. From what I’ve seen, your warriors are efficient and you lead them well.”

The Zora’s head snapped to one side so quickly, his head fins slapped the back of his shoulder with audible force. At the sound of it, Link peered up to see Sidon’s eyes wide in excitement, his shining smile unable to stay hidden beneath the gloom that had attempted to fall over him. Link couldn’t help but smile gently in return as he playfully threw in, “I believe in you.”

The Zora Prince heaved a sigh, sounding as though the weight of the world had slid from his shoulders, and he gave the Hylian a nod and said, “Thank you, Link.”

The two broke off in their own directions and Link signaled for Estuu to catch back up with him as they continued toward the fort. For Link and the young healer, it was a comfortably quiet walk, with the Hylian turned inward to think.

Had he figured out the metaphorical key to Sidon’s lock? Was the Zora Prince really so starved for simple trust? Did everyone around him really doubt him at so many turns that a few simple words could shift his entire mood? It certainly seemed that way. Maybe everyone just aspired to keep compliments to a minimum, lest the Prince’s energy reach fever pitch.
Hello friends. How are we feeling about the story so far? I'm very happy to hear from the few of you that have commented, but I'm curious what the rest of you actually think, as well. How is the story pace? Are the chapters too short? Do you like how Link and Sidon are written? Let me know, guys!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

With a healthy hoard of Bokoblins under control of a strong, Hylian-built fort, Link and his Zora allies move in to prove their mettle. When straightforward battle plans turn much more complex, however, the Hylian Champion finds himself carrying the ultimate results of the night upon his shoulders.

Chapter Notes

Hello there friends! Firstly, I really want to thank you all once again for the inspiring comments. You all did really well to quiet concerns that I had, and offered really helpful advice, and I just appreciate it so much, and was delighted to hear from every one of you. You guys' support and enjoyment of this story means so much to me!

Secondly, I must apologize that this chapter is basically all action. (Unless there are those among you that enjoy those parts the most?) It was a bit difficult to get pumped out, but I hope it's a pleasant read, regardless. Sadly, the interaction is a bit minimal, but I promise the next chapter will be more about Link and Sidon interacting. Also- I redid the summary, what do you guys think?

Again, thank you all. Please enjoy and let me know what you think. :)

When the Zora archers took to the water to get into position, Link crouched and began toward the fort from the cover of thick, overgrown brush and trees that provided concealing shadow. He was instructing Estuu to stay low, while waiting to see Sidon move in, in preparation to give the archers a signal to attack. What happened, instead, was that guard captain Bazz was sent in to carry orders, while Sidon remained in a more distant position, alongside Brivere.

“They actually convinced him not to lead from the front,” Link whispered, realizing now what had truly been weighing on the Zora Prince’s mind. He found himself thinking, immediately after, ‘or did I convince him of that?’

Wanting to take out the sentries prior to the first attack, Link started toward the nearest guard tower, ducking at the base of it and sticking his hand out to keep Estuu in place as the Hylian began up the ladder, climbing up onto the platform and goring the bokoblin on his sword before the creature had a chance to utter a snort of realization, let alone blow the warning horn.

Laying the body down quietly, Link slid his sword out and sheathed it, then leaned over the side to signal for Estuu to follow. When the young Zora started up the ladder, Link busily pried the boko bow off of his first victim, and quickly passed it to Estuu when the boy made it to the top of the tower.

“This one should be easier for you,” the Hylian said, receiving a nod from Estuu. The young healer maintained a serious expression as Link took the bokoblin’s quiver as well, and placed it onto
Estuu’s back, shoring up the arrow supply a bit as he did.

“Alright, let’s go,” Link whispered, starting down the tower with Estuu right after him. From here, Link brandish his own bow, creeping along where stealth could be managed best. He nocked an arrow to his bowstring, but gestured for Estuu to take the first shot as they came within range of another sentry tower.

Estuu was a creature of immense focus as he aimed and pulled the bowstring back, letting the arrow fly only to fall a good bit short of the target. When the missed shot caught the attention of the bokoblin they had been aiming at, and it waddled over to peer in the direction of the noise, Link drew his own bowstring back, barely needing time to aim before his arrow pierced the night air, and the wary bokoblin’s head soon after.

It flopped over the side of the tower, to the ground and Link didn’t budge for a single moment, just in case its falling caught the attention of other sentries. One in the distance appeared to glance over its shoulder, but obviously thought little of the noise in the night.

“Don’t worry,” Link whispered reassuringly, “that one is weaker than the one you were using earlier. You just need to get a feel for it.”

The duo continued from one tower to the next, with Estuu getting slowly more accurate, until he finally managed to hit one of the sentries. His arrow pierced the creature’s body and it let out a scream of surprise and pain, which Link silenced less than a second later. Luckily, this was the last of the guards, which left the Zora clear to attack without immediately alerting the entire fort.

Link and Estuu climbed the sentry tower that was just a bit outside the fort that stretched across the river, and Link immediately sat down at the edge of the tower, his legs dangling over the side as he prepared to spectate. It was the first time Link managed to get a proper look at the fort, and he studied the clean construction of it, thinking it looked oddly sophisticated for something built by bokoblins. Actually, if he had to guess, he would say the bokoblins had simply moved in and converted it to a fort, whereas perhaps it used to be a Hylian trade port? It was the areas of sturdy-looking stone masonry that gave it away.

Estuu sat by Link’s side and the two watched as a line of top fins could be seen slicing through the water, the only visible sign that the Zora archers were making their move on the outermost walls. With clean, precise marksmanship, the group of archers circled the outer walls, dispatching the bokoblin guards without a one sounding the alarm, then the group entered into the fort through open gates in the lower areas of the walls, which were meant to control the water flow and the movement of goods in and out.

From the guard tower, Link had a reasonably good view inside the fort, but he used the scope of his Sheikah Slate to watch the action more closely. Estuu leaned in, in interest, and Link made an effort to hold the device close enough for the Zora boy to look as well.

The lowest level of the fort was the original stone, and the bokoblins had added wooden towers that stretched upward higher than the surrounding walls. Like most bokoblin construction, it looked like a mess of wood that was questionably stable.

At the lowest level, there was an obvious group of bokoblin and moblins eating, sleeping, and carrying on in an off-duty manner, while a small handful of the creatures walked the perimeter, seeming just relaxed enough to be easily taken by surprise. The group of Zora split up in order to take out each of the guards in a single, synchronized strike, their arrows whisking up from the inky depths in the darkness.
Coming back together, the group leapt from the water, rushing the group of bokoblins that were at rest, arrows flying and decimating the group, not even leaving the opportunity for them to pick up their weapons. The single surviving moblin offered a bit of struggle, but it was rapidly overwhelmed and brought down with relative ease.

“They’ll send in the warriors next and this will be over,” Link said, truly impressed with how well these Zora fought, individually and as a unit. He spared Estuu a sideways glance, noticing that the boy seemed entirely engrossed in the very one-sided battle.

Then, from the ground, the downed moblin let out a rasping cry that pierced the tranquil hum of the night, seeming to silence the crickets and peeping frogs. The sound was like that of a boar as an arrow struck its heart, but with a resonant rumble from the creature’s immense size. One of the Zora archers fired an additional arrow into the monster’s skull, hurried to silence its cries, and Link sat holding his breath as the night rang in deathly quiet once more.

A few moments of breathless, soundless tension passed, the Hylian’s heart squeezing as it pounded, and he watched the Zora archers slip quietly back into the cover of the water in the hopes that they would remain undiscovered. But then the wail of the warning horn echoed beyond the fort and across the waters, and a held breath slipped from Link in dismay.

The cry of the horn was followed by the soft clinking of chains, a rush of water other than that of the gentle river flow, and Link shook his head in dread as the gates the Zoras had used to enter were cranked shut, barriers rising up from the water to block them from retreating.

“This is not good,” Link uttered in a flat tone, his face wrinkling in worry, though he remained where he was, just to see what the Zoras would do as their stealth was compromised. He wanted, this time, to actually stand behind his words of faith, believing that these Zora could handle the situation, even as it all went wrong.

Bokoblins weren’t particularly strong; even the more strong and clever ones among them were nuisances at best, yet their power came from their numbers and this fort housed a particularly populated colony behind its strong, Hylian-built walls. At the sound of the horn, the colony was instantly battle-ready, hoards of them pouring down from the upper level without question or complaint, like ants whose mound had been disturbed.

The communication between the chain of command was broken as the Zora archers were captured within the fort, yet still Link waited to see what would happen. The crackle of electric arrows was audible, even from the guard tower, sparks arcing from the upper level of the fort as a bokoblin archer drew its bowstring and rained vengeful lightning from above. The submerged Zora had not even a chance to cry out before the water was electrified and the entire group was rendered unconscious or worse.

“You stay right here,” Link said sternly to Estuu, “your powers will be needed more than ever when this is over.” He hoped the boy actually listened to him, because he hadn’t time to say anything more as he leapt down from the tower, not even bothering to paraglide, but simply hitting the ground and bounding upstream to where the other Zoras were awaiting the signal from the archers to send in additional warriors, the signal that would never come.

The Hylian was small and dreadfully short-legged but those short legs carried him with such furious speed, the night air rushed and whipped against his face as though he were on the back of his horse. He scaled jagged areas along the riverside, running at the edge of rocky embankments and sliding down with the kind of grace that came with determination, his boots skidding against loose stone before he ran down the river bank and straight into the water.
Swimming in shoes and clothes was never ideal, but as always, he had no time to strip anything away and took to the river completely encumbered, fighting the current in a way that was noisy and nearly pointless. He made it to the middle of the rushing river, his legs flailing in furious haste to fight the force pushing him back, his mouth dipping below the waves every now and again, leaving him spitting water to breathe properly as he pushed himself onward.

Once he was near enough for the waiting Zoras to take notice, it was Sidon that came to him, dipping beneath the Hylian and surfacing just underneath him so that Link could cling to his shoulders.

“They’re captured,” Link panted, starved for air in his great rush, “the fort had working gates. The gates were shut on them, now they’re trapped and they’ve been hit with shock arrows,” he blurted all the details as quickly as he could.

“I knew it was taking too long,” Sidon hissed in frustration, turning in the water to look in the direction of the fort just downstream from their present position, “we have to get the reinforcements in somehow. If I have to lead them in myself, I-”

“No,” came the voice of Brivere as he surfaced just near the Prince, “if they’re using shock arrows, it’s much too dangerous for you to go in. We have plenty of forces, just give them orders and let them fight for you.”

Another small handful of Zoras swam over and breached the surface, forming a circle with Sidon and Brivere in order to quickly discuss what would be done next.

“What are their numbers like?” “How will our warriors get inside now?” “Who will go in to lead the reinforcements?” The questions came one right after another, all in great haste, each Zora seemingly as concerned for their soldiers in dire peril as Sidon, himself.

“They’ve shut all the gates, even the front entrance,” Link said, “you’ll have to climb the walls if you want to get in.”

“We’re not made for climbing, Hylian Champion,” one of the Zoras spoke in reply, shaking her head hopelessly.

“I can get up the wall, and drop rope that the warriors can use to pull themselves up,” Link suggested, sure that he still had some rope among his supplies, if the Zoras did not.

“You’re sure you want to rush in and put yourself at risk, again, for us?” Sidon said, turning his head slightly to glance back at the Hylian clinging to him.

“Don’t worry about me,” Link said, “boundless faith in me was much more encouraging.”

“If the Hylian Champion offers his aid, my lord, you should take it without question,” Brivere uttered in his calm, quiet tone, yellow eyes looking between the Prince and the soaked Hylian on his back.

“Allright,” Sidon gave a somewhat hesitant nod of his head, though his voice was sure as he spoke, “we need to make sure our line of communication isn’t cut off this time. Brivere, I want you to remain at the top of the wall with what archers we have left and try to take out their archers, namely the ones using shock arrows. Strata, I want you to stay just outside the wall, so that Brivere has a way to send word back to me. Kree, you lead the warriors, and stay out of the water. If they’re using electricity, you’ll only give them the advantage by fleeing into the water. Where is Betaal? Somebody find her, quickly.”

One of the Zoras in Sidon’s company gave a nod and ducked below the surface to swim back to
where the rest of the forces waited. Brivere and one other Zora also swam away, assumingly to rally
the remaining archers and get them into position.

“Link,” Sidon spoke, glancing back as he did, “how much force would you say is necessary at this
point? I can feel that they have numbers on their side. Are we enough?”

“One of your people is more than a match for a hundred of them. Still, send all that you can spare,”
the Hylian responded, unsure if his estimations were truly of any use. “It would be better to
overwhelm them than to send too small a force and make the fight more difficult than it needs to be.”

“Hnn,” Sidon nodded thoughtfully, using Link’s suggestion as he instructed the Zora he called Kree
in how many warriors to take over the wall.

“Don’t worry,” Link said, leaning forward so that his face bumped the Prince’s forefins, “I’ll get the
gates open and you can send everyone in to assist at that moment.”

“I trust you,” Sidon said with a nod as they were approached by another Zora that hadn’t been part
of the original huddle. She was clearly a seasoned warrior, her deep blue complexion marked with
the scars of battle and she looked to the Prince with a single eye, which gleamed with fighting spirit.

“How may I serve you, my lord,” she spoke in respect, her voice rough and serious.

“I want you to see the Hylian Champion to the fort, aid him in any way you can, then once he’s
inside, fight for him as you would for me. With your life, if necessary.” The Prince spoke in that
same authoritative tone Link had heard the previous day, the serious sound odd to Link’s ears as he
listened.

The warrior gave the Prince a toothy grin, similar to Sidon’s own yet it was almost sinister in a way
the Prince could never be. “It won’t be necessary, my lord.”

The female warrior, who Link was assuming was Betaal, paddled up next to the Prince in order for
Link to climb onto her back, instead. Link sank in the water a bit as he grabbed onto Betaal and she
swam away so rapidly that his grip on her shoulders nearly slipped as the water rushed against him,
dragging him backward.

Betaal fell in with Brivere and the others as they began downstream to the fort, though within a few
minutes, the warrior carrying Link glanced back at the Hylian and said, “Can you hold your breath?”

Link gave a nod of assurance and Betaal smiled at his determination, explaining, “I’m going to make
a jump at the wall, which should get you half of the way up. Just be sure you grab on in time.”

As the Hylian tightened his grip on the Zora, she let out a quiet chuckle and began to speed up, then
she audibly took a deep breath, if only to signal to Link that he should do the same. He followed suit
moments before the Zora submerged, diving to the sandy river bottom and speeding through the
water at a pace even Sidon hadn’t attempted with a Hylian clinging onto him.

Link closed his eyes tightly as the water rushed past him, stinging his face and threatening to invade
his lungs. He felt the Zora carrying him reorient so that she was aimed toward the surface, her legs
beating with such immense force that Link’s fingernails were probably cutting into her shoulder fins
as they shot toward the surface, breaking into the air above with a great splash and a rush of white,
frothy water.

The leap sent the small Hylian flying and he kicked off the Zora’s back in midair, extending the
wings of his paraglider to soften the impact as he fell toward the fort wall. Link grabbed at the bricks
as he hit the structure, the toes of his boots digging in, his dripping frame slipping slowly downward,
until his calloused fingers found furrows enough to grip and he began climbing upward.

Climbing with the same kind of fury he’d run back to the Zoras with, Link dragged himself up and up, clinging even when the footholds were minimal and he felt he was barely holding on. He just prayed it didn’t start to rain, because his wet hands and feet were troublesome enough.

When Link made it to the top of the fortification, he quickly searched for a good place to anchor and tie a rope, dragging steel crates over with the magnesis function on his sheikah slate before he dumped a few neatly wrapped lengths of rope from his supplies and tied them on. He did this one at a time, throwing the ropes hurriedly over the side of the wall as he did.

With his entire supply tied and thrown to the Zoras below, Link peered over the side, watching the warriors making their way up the walls. Most of the Zoras pulled themselves up on upper body strength alone, not even bracing their feet against the masonry for additional support. Brivere was the first to the top and he quickly set to work reaching down and pulling his fellows up. Betaal was next, making it on her own with ease and she immediately came to Link’s side, peering around to get an idea of the layout, or to otherwise remain alert.

Curious to see what had happened to the archers, Link looked down toward the lower level inside the fort, finding that the bokoblins had indeed dragged most of the unconscious Zoras out of the water, tying them and stacking them like crates of supplies. Nearby, a small group of bokoblins were tossing piles of wood onto a fire, stoking it to the point of blazing, while one other was dutifully dragging a whetstone along the bladed edge of an axe normally meant for cutting wood.

“Savages,” Betaal growled, her teeth bared in a snarl that made her look almost equally as feral as the monsters below. She was clearly ready to strike, even if it meant doing so alone, so Link rest his hand on her arm momentarily, as if to ask her to calm herself.

The Zora that Link recognized as Kree had made it to the top of the wall by this point and was aiding Brivere in hoisting the warriors up. It was pitifully slow-going and the handful of Zora that were present had crouched, waiting for their numbers to be sufficient enough to strike. They were each on edge, and the Hylian could see and feel the tension as he kneeled among them, waiting for the signal with Betaal at his side, clutching her spear.

At last the wall was lined with Zoras, each of them ducked low to remain undiscovered, ready and willing to make all of bokoblin kind suffer. Brivere was pulling up the last of his small band of archers while the Zora leading the strike was detailing the plan to the warriors at her disposal. Link had pointed out two crumbling towers attached to the outermost wall, which housed spiral staircases leading to the lower level. They were planning to split into two groups, each descending a different staircase in order to attack from two opposing sides, surrounding the bokoblin hoard. They would protect the Zoras that had been taken prisoner and hold off the hoard until Link and Betaal got the gates open, at which point reinforcements would pour in.

Link marched alongside one group of warriors when at last they began to move, and they descended the spiral tower with quiet caution, the entire group led by a single lit torch. Kree had taken the splinter group down the adjacent tower, and the group Link was accompanying was instructed to wait until they could see her group moving in before leaving the tower themselves.

A few minutes of silent tension passed as Link’s group waited for Kree and her men to get into position. The Hylian pulled to the front with Betaal clearing the way for him where needed. He wanted to sneak a glance out from the bottom landing and he carefully peered from behind the tower archway to see Brivere and his archers spreading out along the guard wall, then Kree’s dark gray visage appeared out from the tower landing across the way.
Link gave a nod of acknowledgment as he spotted Kree, who was ready to lead her warriors into combat and he gestured to the Zoras at his back to let them know that the others were in position. He had no authority nor command, but they seemed to gather near him at his signal.

The next moment, Kree and her warriors flooded from the adjacent archway, a group of towering Zoras rushing the tiny, unsuspecting bokoblins, ferociously striking down multiple foes within the first moments of battle. The tiny savages’ bodies were impaled upon gleaming spears, the beasts still screaming and flailing as they were easily flung over the shoulders of the enraged Zora warriors and into the moats, disappearing haplessly into the murky water below.

When Link ran out, the group at his back followed at his heels, and they hit the bokoblin hoard just as hard as Kree’s group, perhaps even harder as the wicked beasts hadn’t expected an attack from their direction. It was only a few gruesome moments before the warning horns sounded again and more bokoblins and moblins began to flood down from the upper towers.

The Zora warriors decimated and cleared enough of the hoard that they managed to form a perimeter around their unconscious, captured fellows, fighting like devils in their defense. It could have been said that, if there were a deep, dark void where all the hatred and malice which created the Calamity was born and grew, these Zoras were about to show this hoard of monsters the door to it.

The bokoblins bombarded the group of Zoras in numbers that Link had never witnessed, tenacious, angry and just blindly stupid enough to believe that they could overpower these invading adversaries. Spears and clubs flew in such a flurry, there was no real way to be ready for every strike, because from every direction, there was always somebody willing to deliver the next blow.

For every ten bokoblins that fell, one Zora took a single blow. Here and there, it could be seen; a leg slashed by a spear wielded with graceless fury, an errant arrow piercing the muscle of a Zora’s headfins, a sword slicing the air and into a Zora’s back, though despite the injuries incurred, the Zoras only became more fierce as they bled.

Then came the most dreaded note in the song of battle reverberating through the walls of this withering fort in the form of the piercing crackle of lightning from above, the bokoblin archers taking aim at the warriors below as only more and more of them poured from the upper levels.

But as the bokoblin archers were illuminated by the sparking arrows knocked to their bowstrings, arrows from elsewhere struck them down before they could let their own shots fly. It was the Zora archers, led by Brivere, which the bokoblins would, no doubt, attempt to fell now that they realized they were there.

Arrows flew between the upper levels of wooden construction and the stone of the guard walls, a battle fought between Zora and bokoblin in the arena of bowmanship. As to be expected, the Zoras outclassed the horrid creatures in this skill as well, managing to keep any archer that dared to wield a shock arrow from living for very long. It wasn’t long before handfuls of bokoblins attempted to make a run for the spiral towers, in order to ascend the guard walls and assault the Zora archers on foot.

Yet Kree was always ahead of the command of her adversaries. She sent warriors to defend the two entrances to the upper walls, and she used ignited wood from the bokoblin’s blazing cookfire to set their sloppy, wooden construction ablaze. At that point, panicked bokoblins and moblins frantically began searching for somewhere to run, if only to escape the flame, yet there was no place for them to flee but right into the source of the fire and the waiting warriors out for their blood.

“There’re still so many,” Betaal growled, her arms flexing as she hauled multiple bokoblins here and there on the end of her spear, kicking the bodies that gathered around her feet to avoid tripping.
There hadn’t been one single moment when the tower Link needed to ascend hadn’t been filled beyond capacity with enemies. The bokoblins were protecting the mechanism that controlled the gates like it was their very last lifeline, because it was. As soon as that gate opened, the entirety of the Zora’s forces would pour into the fort and this battle would come to a quick end.

Link looked over his shoulder between measured swipes and flicks of the lightweight blade he was using. The group he’d come in with was fierce, and absolutely ferocious without any doubt, but their blood and sweat was visible, their limbs trembling from the constant onslaught and though they could likely fight on just like this for a good long while, they were beginning to tire.

The gates needed to be opened, and Link needed to begin his climb toward where the mechanism waited before he, himself, was too exhausted to handle the opposition he was sure to face.

“Hmph,” Link grunted with a determined nod of his head, then he broke away from the cover of the group of warriors, madly slashing his way through the thick wave of bokoblins that stood in his way. He would go around this veritable army, if only to save some of his strength.

The Hylian leapt and grabbed onto one of the wooden support beams to the tower he needed to ascend, climbing upward. The muscles of his arms burned from how exhaustion had already begun to set in and his hair clung to the damp of his forehead, though thankfully it stayed out of his eyes. The climb was slower than it should have been, and Link might have cursed himself for his recent idleness, if he didn’t need to save every breath.

From below, Betaal screamed at the Hylian for his recklessness, and for the fact that she’d been specifically ordered to guard him, which she couldn’t do if he climbed a tower and left her behind. Still, she wouldn’t let a foolish Hylian come between her and the orders given to her by the Prince and as impossible as it seemed, she began up the tower ramp, laying waste to the monsters that lined it as she went.

Link had climbed to the level just below the top of the tower, his chest heaving for breath, his fingers aching, his arms and shoulders shaking from the weight that hung upon them, when the gurgling growl of a moblin met his pointed ears. Those ears were all that could bear to move, twitching at the sound of the beast’s screeching roars as it lunged for him with a club in hand, ready to crush his skull and knock him from the tower.

The moblin’s club whistled through the air, but seemingly slipped from the beast’s hand the moment before it connected, toppling downward and rolling into the moat below. The moblin itself then slumped into the rail of the tower, its arms flopping bonelessly, its tongue hanging from its gaping maw. Link noted that in the moblin’s skull a single arrow had pierced through, the sharpened end visibly sticking out of the fallen creature, making it apparent how it had met its end.

Link craned his neck to look over his shoulder, catching sight of Brivere staring in his direction, his bow in hand and a smug expression on his face- clearly this was payback for the Octorock. The Hylian grimaced in the knowledge that someone had saved him, if only to be a smartass.

Pulling himself up, Link caught his breath for the few seconds of peace he was allowed, as he was soon after attacked by a handful of bokoblins. These bokoblins were all black and silver in skintone, and most likely the more elite troops which nested at the top of this tower. Just like the Zoras, they’d sent their ‘expendables’ in first, and Link wasn’t sure if that said something about these monsters or his Zora allies.

Link found himself backed into the rails for a few, frustrating moments, before he dodged around what would have been a final blow from a bokoblin spear, only to sever the small wretch in two, followed by taking the heads and limbs of several others. As his body tired, a bizarre, violent force
awakened from inside him, and suddenly he felt his hands shake, not from exhaustion, but from overwhelming strength.

Climbing the stairs to the top level of the tower, Link moved around blow after blow as though his enemies were captured in a strange vortex where time slowed for them, but not him. Each swing of his sword brought another monster to its end, sending bodies rolling down the stairs as he climbed, while painting the tower in a shade of murky red.

Bokoblins and lumbering moblins from lower areas of the tower began making their way back up to stop the Hylian from opening the gates, and the fight became a dance upon the unsteady stairs, each step up to dodge a strike from below, to counter an enemy that stood at higher ground, to avoid a death that could come at any moment.

The enemies stumbled, their strikes desperate and clumsy, whereas Link leapt up a few stairs at a time, impaling a silver bokoblin on his sword, grabbing the thing by its arm and hauling it down into an enraged moblin, forcing it to teeter backwards. As the moblin stumbled, Link jumped into the air, his boots landing against the beast’s chest, his sword buried in its head, and he flipped backward to land cleanly on the stairs once more.

Ascending a few more stairs in a confident stride, Link came to find the upper level guarded by three moblins and a handful of silver bokoblins. He flicked the blood from his sword in the direction of the monsters that stood opposing him, in clear threat, but they still came for him without second thought. The thing he really just loved so much about these beasts, was that they never fought one-on-one, in fact, ten against one seemed to be a favorite of theirs. Link moved with skipping haste on his feet, darting out of range of one blow to deliver another, slashing a bokoblin as it screamed at him in threat, leaving it sprawled beneath his feet, silenced. This cautious method of exchange was essentially his only option as he faced so many at once, aiming to dispatch the troublesome bokoblins before he moved on to seriously fighting the moblins.

For now, the lumbering moblins chased the Hylian around the tower in their slow gait, delivering long-reaching strikes that he still dodged or blocked with just enough time and space to leave him unscathed. The rush of air from a moblin club billowed past him, missing just narrowly enough to rustle the long hair that hung down in front of the Hylian’s ears, yet he felt no fear of the danger chasing so close.

Breath by breath, he swelled with power, rotating on one foot into the swing of his sword, gashing the abdomen of a bokoblin that had leapt in to strike, sending it flying backward. The Hylian shifted his weight onto his other foot, turning once more to slash two more bokoblin as they ran in to attack, then, with the momentum of his blow, he leapt aside just quickly enough to dodge the moblin’s club as it flew at him once more.

When all that remained were the three moblins, they stepped carelessly upon the bodies of their fallen tribesmen as they circled Link, looking as though they were calculating their next move despite being utterly brainless. The Hylian, too, took the moment of still to breathe and observe; one of the beasts already had a limp, which meant it would likely make the easiest kill.

The limping moblin gurgled through a snarl as Link measured it up, as though it could sense the Hylian’s focus on it and wouldn’t suffer the threat of being singled out. Of the three, it came in for Link first, it’s club studded with sharpened bone swinging directly for the Hylian’s head, which Link dodged easily enough, skipping backward on nimble feet.

Yet as Link moved backward, the two other moblins hurried in simultaneously at his sides, blocking him in as the limping one rushed forward once more, its club madly swinging from side to side. The
Hylian’s gaze flickered from right to left, measuring the space he had to move or dodge in the fraction of a second he had to consider his options. If he dodged to the side, the other two spear-wielding moblins were ready to strike him down, clearly expecting this to be what he tried, as it seemed his only means of escape, his back growing only nearer and nearer to the rail as he inched away from the frontal assault.

When the wood of the rail at last pressed into Link’s lower back, the moblin attacking him almost seemed as though it was wrinkling its long maw in a maddened smile of sorts. It raised its club above its head, ready to smash the tiny Hylian as it brought the weapon down with all manageable force.

In the last perceivable second, Link dropped to a crouch, his sword drawn back in vengeful fury as the moblin’s club struck the rail in his place, and became wedged there. The attacking beast barely had time to discern that his strike had missed before a Zora blade jabbed upward into the arm outstretched to grasp the club.

As the limping moblin wailed in pain and surprise, the Hylian stole whatever spare seconds he could, his legs unfurling and lifting him back to his feet with fluid quickness. He drew his blade back again and jabbed it hard into the moblin’s middle, puncturing his unguarded abdomen with ease before withdrawing the blade in just enough time to parry the strike of another moblin’s spear.

The limping moblin’s body crumpled, creating an opening, though an awkward one, but Link didn’t waste the opportunity. He scurried, stumbling across the fallen moblin’s frame in order to escape the pinned position he’d been in as one of the other monsters dropped its spear and began trying to dislodge the studded club from where it had gotten stuck. The other took another jab at the Hylian as Link ran, the sharpened spearhead catching him in the thigh, sending him rolling across the floor.

The moblins hissed and gurgled in triumph as they peered down on Link, seeming oddly victorious for beasts that had only managed to get one good hit in against a single adversary. The Hylian clenched his jaw in bitterness and pain as he forcefully dragged himself up, his wounded leg not cooperating as he wished. With his movement slowed, he barely managed to avoid the full brunt of the swinging club as it was newly wielded, yet even so a glancing blow from it still toppled him back to the sloppy planks of the floor, leaving him twisting in pain and lost breath.

“Nnn,” the Hylian Champion groaned, fully aware that he had to pull himself to his feet if he didn’t wish to die here. No matter how many times he resurrected, it never got any easier, but that aside, he wasn’t sure how dying and coming back would effect those fighting around him.

Link tried to move, tried to even catch his breath, but a flaring pain in his side prevented his every attempt. He moved a trembling hand to the wound and pressed against it, rolling out of the way as the spiked club smashed into the floor where he’d laid.

Dragging himself upright, Link struggled to keep one hand tightened on his blade as the other pressed against the sting between his ribs. A cough forced its way out of him, pain tearing through the muscles of his chest at just that tiny movement, and he spat blood upon the ground before his feet, blue eyes full of hateful flame as he stared down the moblins that closed in.

“Come on, then,” Link uttered, his voice raspy and weak, “come and kill me if you can. It doesn’t even matter, understand? I’ll come back as quickly as I fall, stronger than I was before, and then.. I’ll kill you and every other one like you.”

The moblins’ ears twitched at Link’s growled threats but the words did nothing to sway them. He took a deep, painful breath before he returned the hand clutching at his side to the hilt of his blade, his feet sliding apart as he readied himself. At least he would be able to tell Prince Sidon that he’d actually attempted to talk to the monsters waiting to kill him.
The moblin holding the club came in to attack first, its confidence clearly boosted from landing one hit on the Hylian, and Link ducked low as he rushed in as well, rolling through the space between the Moblin’s stubby legs, and slashing the backs of its calves to the point that it had no hope of getting back up.

As the sharp of the other moblin’s spear jabbed at the slippery Hylian, he proved that, like his Zora allies, he only became more tenacious as he bled. The spearhead grazed his arm, but that same arm reached out as he was wounded, grabbing the length of the spear and yanking it so that when Link raised his sword, the force of the moblin stumbling drove it right into the blade.

The final moblin’s dying cries shook the wooden frame of the tower, but Link violently yanked his sword free from the hull of the monster and let the beast fall before it even took its last breath, leaving it to bleed out in its own time. He was a man on a mission and couldn’t be bothered to give these wretched creatures any more of his time.

The Hylian approached the mechanism that controlled the gates; it was a large wheel with wooden levers for the sake of easy use, though injured as he was, Link still struggled through the effort of cranking the device, pushing himself with the lives of every Zora warrior down below as his motivation. Even so, with the gates half-open, the Zora reinforcements began flooding into the fort, so Link leaned into the wheel to hold it in place, placing one hand over the wound in his side as he tried to catch his breath.

This wound would probably kill him slowly, but he was willing to push himself, and live long enough to see his allies to victory. With that thought in mind, he began turning the wheel again, with it only growing heavier as it got close to the point where it could be locked into place, and Link strained to force it the rest of the way, his weight slumping atop the wheel once he heard it click and lock.

His clothes were torn and stained, his blood leaking down his side and he tried to prevent it by applying pressure to the wound. He knew the feeling of death easily enough to know it would come for him soon, but just as he had relaxed into that sense of resignation, a dull, teal light faintly illuminated one corner of the tower.

It was an effort just for Link to crane his neck and raise his head up enough for him to peer in the direction of the light. He could feel the warmth that radiated from it, a soothing glow on his cold skin, and his dull eyes vaguely reflected the image of Mipha hovering in ethereal grace, her visage turned to one side like she couldn’t bear to look at the tattered Champion.

“It’s been a little while,” Link uttered bitterly through the coppery tang on his tongue, “you didn’t come at all when I fought the Lynel, so I assumed you didn’t want to help me anymore.”

A quiet titter came from the fading Hylian as Mipha offered no response, nor did she move to aid him, perhaps deciding whether or not he even deserved her grace. “You’re still angry about last time,” Link said knowingly, his eyes too heavy to stay open, yet he still spoke as one would laying near a friend while drifting to sleep. “Consider what happened between your brother and I payback for the fact that you left me here alone.”

The decorative jewelry adorning the graceful Zora champion’s head clinked quietly, her movements causing soft, fluttering echoes as she at last turned to look at Link. The bleeding Hylian’s heavy lids raised just a crack to meet Mipha’s gaze, finding a look of pity deep in the golden still of her eyes. Was he really so pitiful, so loathsome? Had he fallen so far, as to bring such sorrow to the face of a dead woman? He despised just the idea, oddly thankful that his felled lover couldn’t speak, because that much he couldn’t bear. Link snarled like a beaten dog and spat, “Heal me or go, do anything,
but don’t stand there looking at me like that.”

Yet her woeful gaze persisted, even as she approached the bristled Hylian, no matter how bitterly he regarded her, no matter how hateful his glare, and she reached out to him, her dainty hands not quite solid, nor completely without sensation as they laid upon him.

Her healing warmth removed his pain, soothing his aching frame as he laid still beneath her touch. For a moment, a deeply buried glimmer of light in his heart shone brightly, fluttering in his chest as though to remind him of emotions that died with the boy he was 100 years ago. His hatred crumbled and cracked like rusted armor, and despite how vitality poured back into every exhausted muscle, he trembled like something small and delicate and helpless.

But it wasn’t long lost memories of Mipha that came to light in the back of his withered psyche. Instead, as the Zora Champion’s grace tore down the stubborn mental blockades that Link had so dutifully maintained, quiet thoughts of himself in the comfort of Sidon’s warm and doting presence whispered to him, as though Mipha had found some subtle way to utter these things, in secret.

Once the light of Mipha’s presence faded away, Link pushed himself upright once more, new life and strength permeating his being. It delivered the necessary results in just the right amount of time, because as the Hylian Champion straightened, another wave of moblins came for him, likely with the false, desperate hope that they could get the gates closed once more.

Link sighed as he raised his sword, the blade just an extension of his tired bones, the blood of these creatures the water needed to give life back to the world around him, so long as he could become just dark enough, himself, to allow the light to blind him as he chased it. Again and again, he would fight.

Only tonight these beasts weren’t allowed to meet the unstoppable force that was the Hylian Champion with a weapon in hand; three arrows simultaneously erupted from the right eye of each moblin and they fell in such wondrous unison, it was as though their deaths were a dance that had been coordinated and practiced to perfection.

In the space behind the monsters, Estuu became visible as they fell, bow in hand and that familiar fearless calm written on his face. The Hylian’s own expression wrinkled in confusion, but before he could even utter the phrase, ‘how did you get up here?’ Estuu lowered his bow and looked over the side of the tower rail.

Following the young Zora’s line of sight, Link, too, looked over the side, only to see a rope reaching from one of the stone guard walls where it was tied, straight across to the tower where Link had been fighting, with the end of the rope attached to an arrow that had obviously been shot into the wood of the tower.

“That was risky,” Link said, shaking his head as he did, still trying to grasp that Estuu had apparently thought up this plan and executed it successfully.

Heavy footfalls interrupted the pair, with both Link and Estuu drawing weapons as another presence rushed from the stairs to join them. It was no monster, but likely the closest thing to it among the Zora; Betaal stood at the top landing of the stairs, gasping for breath and looking like she’d torn her way through the void, only to find herself here.

Link lowered his weapon, whereas the formerly unshakable Estuu wore a nervous expression, not drawing the string of his bow back, yet not lowering it either. Betaal’s scowl deepened, shifting to a snarl and in the rapid flash of a single second, she swung the butt of her spear, knocking the bow from Estuu’s hand and drew her arm back, her fingers tightly bundled as she slammed her fist into
the young Zora’s face, knocking him back so violently that he damn near rolled off the side of the tower.

Within the very next second, Link ran between the two Zoras, a hand on the hilt of his sword in cautious warning. He was clueless as to what explanation could even be feasible, but he felt that maybe he’d seen this before? Terrified soldiers, fighting through hell, forgetting who was friend and who was foe, so desperate to survive that they couldn’t stop themselves from fighting. And yet, no-there was awareness in Betaal’s single eye, alongside a vengeful bitterness that the Hylian recognized with ease.

“Easy,” Link breathed, his tone light but serious enough, “he’s small and red, but not a bokoblin.”

“Hmph,” Betaal uttered, the snarl never once fading from her features, though she lowered her weapon, spitting upon the ground in distaste and wiping a smear of blood from her lip. “That boy is a monster hiding in the flesh of a Zora. Don’t be so easily fooled.”

“You’re injured,” the Hylian said, unsure what this warrior could possibly find threatening about one so young as Estuu, but even so, it wasn’t the time nor place for such things. “Perhaps he can change your mind, if you allow him to heal you.”

“Ha!” A sarcastically boisterous laugh came from Betaal, her sharp teeth gleaming as her bright red top fin flared in insult. “He’s done enough to me, in my lifetime, thanks!”

The warrior turned her back on the Champion, her tone returning to that of a growl as she spoke further. “The tower is cleared, Hylian Champion. You’re safe to come down and join our ranks.”

Only when Betaal started down the stairs did Estuu lift himself from where he laid flattened against the ground like a frightened fawn. The Hylian heaved a sigh of annoyance, sheathing his blade before he helped Estuu to his feet, placing a careful hand on the boy’s chin and turning his head in order to get a look at the bruise blooming violet upon the young one’s cheek. As Link’s fingers traced the mark to gently inspect, Estuu pulled away from the Hylian’s touch, moving his own hand to his cheek and cradling the painful bruise left behind.

When Link began down the tower as well, Estuu gathered up his bow and followed on the Hylian Champion’s heel in quiet dismay. As the pair went, Link looked upon the bodies left behind, the monsters that he, himself, had not killed. Bokoblins and moblins lined the stairs in such numbers, if was difficult for the two of them to make their way down while awkwardly stepping over the piles of felled monsters.

For every body left flayed by Link’s sword, there were handfuls in between, each exactly the same, neatly brought to their demise with a single arrow to their right eye. With each additional body, it became that much more clear, Estuu had lied about his skill with a bow.

But for what purpose?
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Battle always left plenty of things in its wake; destruction, death, chaos. However, even from beneath the shroud of darkness and mourning, there were moments of comfort and peace to be found.

Chapter Notes

Hello there, friends. Who among you would like another long chapter, just days after the last one? Haha, consider this a treat from me to all of you, for being so awesome and supportive. I think this chapter may give many of you some of the things you've been waiting for? Perhaps?

However, just as an additional warning, this chapter does manage to reach a new level of darkness/sadness/loss that I think other chapters might not have gone to? Just be warned, friendos. And strap in, because this chapter is a wild ride on a rollercoaster of feelings. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tired eyes beheld two things as Link and Estuu finally found themselves at the bottom of the tower, walking onto the wide, open space of stone that made up the lowest level of the fort. The first; a kind of disorder that only battle and warfare could leave any given place in.

More than one of the wooden bokoblin towers had toppled and virtually fallen apart, its support beams damaged just enough by the spreading flame to bring down the entire construction. It wasn’t as though bokoblin fortifications were particularly sturdy, however, so it wasn’t surprising.

The second most obvious thing to note; how dutifully and organized the victors were as they worked to put things back into order, or into an order they found acceptable. A small handful of Zoras now made an effort to put out any remaining fires, attempting to clear away the debris while salvaging what they could of the timbers. The fort still stank of smoke and viscera, leaving Link to hope the night air would carry some of that away with the battle’s conclusion.

Another small detail moved about the fort like mountain crows, collecting the corpses of the defeated monsters and piling them in one of the more poorly lit areas of the lower level, very near the moat where they would most likely be disposed of, after they were picked clean of valuable weapons, trinkets and ‘harvestable materials’.

Yet more Zora warriors did their best to turn their battlefield into a livable camp. They had already located a space that was, at least, not completely spattered with blood and gruesome remains which were now ground into the stone. In this area, they established what would be their place of rest and comfort, and many of the warriors with minor injuries had already gathered near the cookfire, nursing their wounds as they awaited a very late meal.
Others had gone to the freely flowing river water of the moats to ease their physical and mental strain. Many had stripped out of their armor and laid their weapons neatly aside as they dipped into the soothing current, sitting still and simply feeling the water move past them as it rinsed them clean.

The most grievously injured had been gathered as well, a bit away from the others, or as much as space permitted. The stone of the floor had been hastily lined with thin mats made of woven wool, and the injured were laid upon them, softly illuminated by low-burning torches set around strategically to provide enough visibility for the medics to work. Estuu stole a glance in the direction of the injured, a look of dread or discomfort crossing his youthful features for a moment before he looked away, his hands fidgeting for reasons Link could only guess at.

Chains could be heard rattling and shifting with force as the gates Link had struggled to open were cranked shut once again. The very gates that had caused these Zoras so much heartache now offered safety, though Link could only feel a subtle agitation at the fact that his goal had been such a finite one.

Link’s body, for as small as it was, felt heavy and sluggish as he walked, though he moved with purpose as he strode across the makeshift campsite. His exhaustion wasn’t just physical, but something much deeper, so thick and heavy that he could feel it lining the hollow trenches of his soul. A distant fear echoed up from that blackened void, just resonant enough to reach the blank slate of the Hylian’s thoughts, convincing him that his body was a shell that he may accidentally walk out of if he moved too quickly.

‘Am I still myself?’ He asked, not even needing to suffer a resurrection for this bizarre and faceless worry to question him again and again. He needed something to fill the empty spaces, to take away the silence, and he had never been so glad that Sidon was always so easy to spot in a crowd of his own.

As Link came near to where the Zora Prince stood, Estuu quietly ducked a bit further into the Hylian’s shadow, barely fitting as he was only about head shorter than Link, himself. Link didn’t bother to question the boy’s motives and maybe he would just accept that the silent mystery was what made their relationship tolerable.

Sidon, of course, was still headlong in his duty as these people’s leader, the officers and various others having gathered near him for direction, but he dolled out the orders with such concentrated ease, they slipped from his tongue as smooth as butter. He was speaking to a Zora, which Link had heard called by the name Strata prior to now, likely after the soft, smokey blue coloration of his skin.

The Prince was apparently agreeing to the notion that guard duty would be light, thanks to the sturdiness of the fort, and Strata was offering suggestions as to the best perimeters and rotation, all subject to Sidon’s approval beforehand. The Prince commented that Strata was free to chose whomever he wished to share in overseeing guard duty, as Bazz was injured and unavailable.

Another Zora moved in for advisement as Strata was appeased, seeking council in regards to those injured. They were either a medic, in training, or merely assisting, but regardless the Prince asked them to be sure the injured were arranged by the severity of their injuries for when Estuu was located.

Link somewhat peered over his shoulder at the boy taking shelter in his shadow, thinking perhaps Estuu would respond to a very clear indication that he was required. When he didn’t, Link cleared his throat audibly, the sound gaining Sidon’s momentary attention, and Link moved his head in gesture to indicate the boy standing near him.

“Brivere,” Sidon looked from Link, to other constant presence by his side, “Estuu is here.”
The pale, yellow Zora shifted his attention from what was happening directly before him, to where the Hylian stood, and more importantly, the healer. His freckled visage turned to the shrinking shadow that was his younger sibling and he took a few steps over to place his hand upon Estuu’s shoulder, saying, “Come, you’re desperately needed.”

The younger Zora let out a heavy sigh, though it wasn’t entirely clear if it was focused at his brother for ushering him away to work, or at Link for betraying him. The Hylian hoped the kid wasn’t expecting any mercy from him, because he wasn’t an ideal source, anyway, so that was his own grave mistake.

It was just as well, because once this matter was cleared up, Link found himself the only one left in Sidon’s company. The Prince was heaving a sigh, responsibility wearing on him in the late hours of the evening, but the tension in his frame was eased in feeling Link by his side. The Hylian almost smiled, seeing that he wasn’t the only one soothed and granted solace by the other’s simple presence.

Yet no sooner than when Sidon’s warm gaze fell upon the Hylian and he actually took the time to really look at him, did his eyes widen in observation of Link’s condition. The Prince stooped, nearly dropping to one knee as he inspected, barely restraining his horror. Link actually vehemently detested when Sidon, or anyone, bent lower to regard him, but he hadn’t the energy to put up much fuss.

“You’re absolutely covered in blood,” Sidon spoke in deep concern, golden eyes looking over every inch of the Hylian for sources of injury.

“I’m not hurt,” Link spoke simply, combing one hair through his mussed, blonde hair, suddenly a bit conscious of himself under such scrutiny. Still, when he felt the Prince’s gaze searching for his own, the Hylian granted the contact, finding it comfortable even so. Maybe he looked like the battered warrior everybody already expected him to be, so it probably didn’t matter so much.

But, looking Sidon in the face, seeing his expression torn between worry and confusion, Link uttered a word of elaboration, to still the Prince’s fussing. “Mipha,” Link spoke, as a reminder that he’d already explained to Sidon once before that his sister was a constant, looming presence.

A flash of recall passed over the Prince, of the awkward evening in which Link had been made to explain how and why his wounds often faded so quickly, but Sidon made haste to put that out of his mind, glad enough to see his dear friend unharmed. “Ahh, of course,” he said, a smile of relief pulling across his pale lips, “you’ve risked life and limb to aid us, yet again. I’m not certain what it is we did, or that I did, to gain such dedicated favor, but nonetheless, I’m grateful as ever for your aid. You are, to me, truly astounding, a warrior and hero beyond measure.”

Link shook his head in clear disagreement, but said nothing to argue. For once, he didn’t even want to be troubled with his own inner cynicism, instead letting his mind quiet. Outstretching his hand, the Hylian decidedly took advantage of having the Zora Prince bent so near, pressing his palm to one of Sidon’s forefins and tenderly tracing his hand along it, swearing that for a moment, Sidon moved ever so slightly into the touch.

Then, within the next moment, Link was given cause to drag his bitter aggravation back to light as another Zora approached, in need of Sidon’s attention. “My Lord,” he began, “I’m sorry to interrupt, but one of our warriors requires your presence. It’s very urgent, he can’t be made to wait.”

Sidon hesitantly drew away from the contact, coming to stand upright once more, his expression turning steely as he looked down upon the Zora that had come to fetch him, offering a solemn nod of his head in reply before he was lead away. Typically, Link didn’t interfere with Sidon as he was busied with his duties, thinking perhaps it wasn’t his place to do so and honestly, he didn’t even care.
that much. However, tonight was a different matter and as Sidon followed to where he was needed, Link walked quietly by his side.

The Prince gave a glance of acknowledgment in the Champion’s direction as he realized he was being followed. His demeanor had already shifted significantly, becoming quite serious, leaving Link unsure if he was welcome wherever Sidon was headed. It was likely just the Hylian being overly sensitive to the fact that the Prince didn’t actually spend every waking moment in joyful, exuberant bliss. Funny how he was initially annoyed by that behavior, yet now he found himself confused when it wasn’t the norm.

The Zora that had required Sidon to follow along, apparently, was one of the medics, which became clear as he approached the area where their injured laid, awaiting care.

The most critically injured among those needing care or healing were the archers that had been captured and fired upon, though from what Link could see as he observed, most of them were still unconscious and in otherwise uncertain condition. Remarkably, Estuu had already seen to many of them, not healing wounds so much as using his talents to bring them into a more stable condition.

“Brivere insisted that he was beyond the healer’s capabilities, that it would waste the majority of the healer’s energy to even try,” the medic was uttering in a quiet, reserved tone, though the Hylian’s sensitive ears pushed forward to listen instinctively. “I leave it to your judgement, my lord.”

“Understood,” Sidon said, nodding his head.

When the Prince was brought before the injured Zora, it was immediately apparent that his wounds were severe to a degree unmatched by any of the others. The warrior laid on his side upon the mat beneath him, the remains of his armor peeled away, his upturned side a difficult sight to look upon.

Sidon kneeled carefully in front of the injured Zora and as Link followed the Prince’s example, he immediately recognized the one laying broken before them as Rivan. The Prince inched himself nearer, until he was close enough to carefully lift and lay the barely conscious Zora’s head upon his knees, a gentle hand moving slowly along the length of his tail, to comfort him.

Rivan’s injuries were dire, and as Link looked over him, he found himself faintly troubled despite the fact that he couldn’t actually remember having known Rivan. The Zora’s breathing was labored and gasping, his frame rigid with the sheer amount of pain wracking him. His gills were destroyed on one side, the skin burned back until there was hardly anything left. Equally damaged was his chest, the skin and muscle scorched down near the bone around a single arrow wound, which likely punctured at least one of his lungs.

While Sidon comforted the injured warrior, his golden eyes seemed to peer off into some great, vast darkness just beyond his reach, moving faintly back and forth as though to find focus, until at last some great realization became plainly visible before him and he nodded knowingly. “When they fired the electric arrow, you swam into it, taking the brunt of the blow,” he spoke, his voice tremulous and soft. “Yes, you were thinking of your daughter, who was there with you.”

Rivan’s eyes opened as Sidon spoke, a faint questioning between the wrinkles of pain in his face and each desperate breath he took. Sidon nodded his head once more, saying, “She’s safe. You don’t need to worry.”

The injured Zora let out a raspy sound, as though he wished to speak but had no voice with which to say a single word, so instead he gave a desperate nod of his own, comforted more than anything to know his daughter was okay.
“Lay still,” Sidon said, if only to reassure the pained warrior that no response was needed, “there’s no need to move now, just lay still, my friend.”

Link’s attention shifted from Sidon to the medic as he crouched behind where Rivan laid, a small, curved blade in hand, poised and still upon his lap. Sidon looked up as the medic sat himself near, then his eyes moved back to Rivan, the hand stroking the other Zora’s tail carefully moving to grasp it from the underside as he spoke, his voice calm and soothing.

“Your actions were selfless and brave in the face of peril, your heart pure and full of love and compassion. You are a warrior and a spirit worthy of the deepest admiration, my friend. Because of you, your daughter and fellow warriors are safe. What you did for all of them was truly heroic.” Here, Sidon’s free hand reached for Rivan’s, and though the injured Zora’s grasp was weak, the Prince gave it a gentle squeeze, then looked to the medic and quietly nodded his head.

With Sidon’s gesture, the medic leaned in close with the blade in hand and the Prince pulled the injured Zora’s tail up slightly as the medic quickly shoved the blade into the back of the Rivan’s head, right near where his tail met the base of his skull. Rivan’s mouth gaped open and his body tensed as the blade was pushed in, but a moment later he fell still, one last breath escaping as his body went slack.

The medic pulled the knife free and dutifully wiped the blade, shaking his head dolefully before he raised a sympathetic gaze to the Prince, and quietly spoke, “My lord?”

“I need a moment, if you please,” Sidon spoke, his voice clear yet solemn. The medic merely nodded his head, moving along to further duties, as there was clearly much to be tended to.

Link’s eyes peered upon the lifeless form of Rivan as his head laid upon Sidon’s knees, and the Hylian tried hard to summon up a sliver of feeling from the depths of his vacant heart. It was sad that even a single Zora’s life had been wasted against the scum they’d cleared from the fort, but beyond that quiet melancholy, there was no sorrow to be found, just the same dull static. The Hylian thought, if anything, it frightened him that he could be so empty and closed off, watching a friend die right before him. There was also one other, more troubling thought; this was what people glorified, this is what people idealized, this was true heroism.

True heroes didn’t come back from death. Instead they selflessly gave their lives in what always seemed to be a single moment of danger, a split second to decide- do I care enough to die for somebody else? And that split second was always enough for them to know the answer. Those were heroes.

These people didn’t come back, these people were not what Link was, and he knew better than to believe he was any kind of hero.

He was something else.

It also occurred to him that Sidon must have been accustomed to uttering tender words of praise to soldiers as they died, meaning all the things he said to Link under similar circumstances had only been meant as dying comfort, and little else. He was foolish and naive to let it touch his heart and fill him with the illusion of warmth. It made for a good daily reminder, however, of how much he hated himself.

Link blinked, not wanting to turn himself entirely inward in this moment, and he looked to Sidon who was utterly still next to him, his eyes some place very distant. He didn’t look like a man that wanted his innermost ponderings cut short, and so Link didn’t speak, instead reaching out to lay his hand upon Sidon’s fingers, which were still holding onto Rivan’s hand.
“Link,” the Prince spoke quietly as the Hylian’s touch came to soothe him. “It’s alright. You don’t have to stay here for my sake. See to your own needs, please.”

“I am,” Link said, “I’m doing that right now.”

A quiet sound came from the Prince, a soft exhalation of breath at the Hylian’s words as he, at last, gently lowered Rivan’s body to the mat, letting the fallen Zora’s hand slip from his own with equal care. Still, he did not leave his warrior’s side, his jaw tightly clenched as he mourned, until eventually he turned his head away from where Link sat, bowing lower when he could no longer keep himself from tears of loss, or perhaps regret.

The Hylian remained, quiet and still, his hands drawing into his lap. He wasn’t sure what he could do to offer comfort, his own emotions merely blunt implements scattered across his psyche and the only instincts he possessed were for killing, not consoling. He felt fairly sure that Sidon merely wished to be alone, and yet.. Walking away didn’t seem right, either.

So Link didn’t know whether or not to be grateful when Brivere approached, kneeling across from Sidon and dipping his body low in a bow. The golden Zora said nothing for a quiet moment, as though to pay his solemn respects, or maybe he was simply waiting Sidon’s acknowledgment?

“Yes, Brivere,” the Prince uttered, his voice calm, his sorrows skillfully masked, though he did not dare raise his own visage to look at the Knight bowed before him, if it meant showing his tearful face.

“My lord, Estuu is still seeing to the injured as you indicated,” Brivere spoke in concise explanation. “Our fallen have also been gathered with care. How did you wish to handle this matter?”

Taking a long, slow breath, Sidon steeled himself once more, lifting a single hand up to brush the tears from his cheeks before he raised his head again. “There’s wood enough for a funeral pyre within this fort. See that it’s prepared by morning.”

Brivere gave a nod to the order given, but did not immediately rise. Slowly, he dared to lift his head and steal a glance at the Prince’s face, then he spoke, “My lord, may I say one thing?”

“Yes,” Sidon answered.

“Though I feel a deep loss for our fallen, I am glad you chose to take the position you did. Had you been with them, you may have perished as well,” Brivere said.

“Had you trusted his instincts, and allowed him to lead from the front, this wouldn’t have happened,” Link spoke up, giving voice to a flurry of meaningless emotions just as soon as they formed coherent words, not even thinking on what he was saying before it simply blurted from him.

Brivere turned his sharp, yellow eyes to stare upon the Hylian, a cold, calculating calm lining his features, mixed with subtle surprise at even hearing Link speak, let alone what he’d dared to say. “Hylian Champion,” he began, “with all due respect, my duty and intent is to see to the safety and well-being of my lord, Prince Sidon. If you would be so kind, please clarify your own motivations to me, as they seem unclear.”

“Quiet,” Sidon spoke sternly to cease the exchange before it turned to bickering, “Brivere, you’re dismissed.”

A storm of thought could be seen clearly as it formed in the ever-thinking depths of Brivere’s eyes and the tightly narrowed pupils of his yellow gaze flicked quietly between the Hylian and his Prince, though he dared not utter another word. Instead, he bowed his head low once more, seemingly even
lower than before as he hovered in this position a few moments too long, then stood and went back to his other duties.

“My friend,” Sidon’s voice quietly uttered once Brivere was no longer present, yet even so, Link felt unsure that he was the one being addressed, “if you have time for me, I would like to speak with you, but later.”

“Alright,” Link agreed, at last clambering to his feet to leave Sidon in peace as per what he believed the other wished, hesitant though he was.

Somewhere near the cookfire, which had developed into a fire for warmth and light as the night blackened further into early morning, a single, simple tent was put together for the sake of the tired Prince. It was strung together with rope and lightweight canvas and while more bedding was spared than the single woolen mat offered to the injured, it was still fairly sparse.

Still, it would offer some amount of comfort and privacy for a leader who couldn’t be allowed his natural state of submerged sleeping for yet another night. His duties dragged on, hour after hour, and even now, he needed to be readily available for any urgent matter, and it was just much easier to wake him from the confines of a tent than it was with him underwater.

While Link waited for the Prince’s call, he simply busied himself with sorting through the heap of dead monsters, gathering up a nice supply of horns, fangs and coveted organs while the beasts were still fresh. It was a thankless job, but that was really any job required of him.

After that gruesome chore, he stripped down to nothing and dropped himself into the moat to wash the blood that was caked on every inch of skin and in every crevice. Not that Link even cared, but despite the lack of privacy, the Zoras were entirely unfazed by the sight of stark-naked Hylian. It seemed that, no matter his difference of anatomy, there was not one single thing about nudity that turned their heads.

When Link was finally chilled to the bone by the cold water and aptly rinsed off, he dragged himself back up to the stone landing, the strength in his shoulders tightening beneath the tattered pale of his skin. A shiver ran through him as he dripped, wringing his hair over one shoulder and combing through it with his fingers. At least the temperature of the water had paralyzed the aches out of his muscles, for now.

Kneeling by the water’s edge, still bare skinned and hoping to dry out before he dressed, Link busied his hands by attempting to rinse off the clothes he’d been wearing before. They needed mending now, which just meant he’d go to the Great Fairy for magical aid, rather than an actual tailor. For the moment, he would settle for washing and wringing his damaged articles, then leaving them to dry thrown over a spear propped up on supply crates. If he was anything, he was resourceful.

While the Hylian was waiting out the process of drying himself and his dripping, blonde hair, he took an apple from his supplies and began feasting upon it somewhat desperately, unaware of how famished he’d become after so much fighting and stress. He needed a meal more filling, but not a soul remained to prepare food so late, and he was low on supplies. That served as a mental note for him to rummage through the various crates in the morning. Knowing bokoblins, there was probably a woven basket cage submerged somewhere in the moats, tied up by an inconspicuous rope. Hopefully, he could find a supply of fish within.

Link’s thoughts were interrupted by the patter of feet approaching from behind and he turned a glance over his shoulder to find Brivere waiting there. The Hylian’s hand fell upon the hilt of his
sword that sat sheathed by his side and he waited quietly for the Zora to say whatever it was he’d come along to say.

“The Prince sent me to let you know, you may join him in his tent, if it suits you,” the golden Zora spoke, his voice smooth and calm.

A nod of Link’s head was offered, if only to give Brivere whatever acknowledgment he needed to consider his message delivered, so he could leave. When the Zora did not go, however, Link glanced back again in annoyance.

“Take care, Hylian Champion, that you don’t mislead or confuse our Prince anymore than it seems you already have,” he managed to say, completely reserved as he spoke these words, nothing snide in his tone and no sneer to be found. Something about that managed to irritate Link that much more, and though his eyes turned from calm water to blue flame, he said nothing at all in return.

As the silence dragged on, Brivere turned and walked away, leaving Link to dress. He dragged his Champion’s tunic and a pair of trousers from his supplies, putting them on after his smallclothes, then he slid on his boots and placed his supply bag and weapons over one shoulder as he walked to the tent.

The small flicker of light from inside the shelter served to draw the Hylian in, his thoughts as dull and silent as a moth as he continued to the flame, pushing the door flap back and pausing there as though he actually needed further welcome. The hush in his mind was disconcerting, but he blamed it on the fact that he was tired. He didn’t even immediately raise his eyes to regard the Zora Prince, staring at the woven material lining the floor of the tent instead.

When Link did look up, he beheld the Prince, softly illuminated by the candlelight, the faint orange glowing against the deep red tones of his skin. Though a bundle of material rested at his back, he was slumped forward, the butts of his palms pressed against his closed eyes, his fingers rubbing at the point of his forehead. Of course he knew Link was there even so, and quietly spoke, “You can come in.”

As asked, the Hylian took a few steps inside letting the flap fall shut behind him. The tent was tall enough for Link to stand upright without his head being anywhere near the canvas of the ceiling, though it appeared it wouldn’t be quite so accommodating for the Prince, were he to stand. He would guess the dimensions were perfectly suitable to a Zora of average height.

The air of the tent was permeated with the lingering smell of food, and as Link’s eyes wandered, he realized the source of the scent was a plate that looked untouched off to the Prince’s side, resting upon a supply crate which was acting as a table along with the candle providing light and the various adornments that had been shed.

“You look tired,” Link commented, unsure what to say when Sidon said nothing at all.

“Hmm,” the Prince hummed to himself. “Aply put, I’m very tired.”

“Maybe you should just sleep,” said the Hylian, thinking at this rate, the conversation wasn’t bound to go anywhere, anyway.

“I will,” Sidon uttered, finally raising his face from his hands and sitting more straight, “but I must apologize first for earlier. You shouldn’t have been present, you didn’t need to see that. I’m to blame for not warning you beforehand, I’m truly sorry.”

“Rivan was a friend,” Link said, trying to find words to fill the void where there was nothing right to
say. “It meant something, being there for him, seeing him one last time. I don’t think he knew I was there, but I know.”

“Oh,” Sidon said in quiet realization as these details were explained, sympathetic as he spoke, “You knew him well, then?”

“Well,” Link raised his shoulders in a shrug, his brow furrowing sheepishly. If he’d known he’d be probed on his state of emotion, he would have skipped this conversation. “As well as I know anybody, really. More so, he seemed to remember a bit about me, which I was able to appreciate, somewhat.”

“I see,” Sidon nodded, his voice and expression so laced with pity that Link wanted to walk away. He didn’t want or need that. He looked away for a moment, just to be sure that the Prince’s features didn’t imprint permanently into his mind’s eye, sighing and shaking his head in mounting frustration.

“I thought about what you said to me,” Sidon began again, speaking slowly, his voice a strangely cautious sound, “..about Mipha, before we left my people’s domain. Please, if you’d like to sit with me, you know you’re welcome to.” He gestured to the bedding, to the space beside him, seeming to bid Link come over rather than simply offering.

The Hylian regarded the empty space in the bedding that he could occupy, considering the warmth and comfort offered, the likelihood of him simply nodding off next to the Prince if he bothered to lay himself down anywhere relatively nice, and the awkward morning that could follow. There was already too much confusion between them for him allowing more to be added on, yet as Sidon’s gesturing hand fell back to his side, Link couldn’t find enough motivation to actively resist.

All of Link’s supplies were placed aside and his boots taken off before he walked onto the soft, woolen bedding where he tucked himself comfortably into the space beside the Prince, sighing in contentment as he stretched his legs out.

“As I was saying,” the Prince looked over his Hylian company as he spoke, “it seems, even with all that’s happened over these last days, my mind still drifts back to things spoken between us. Your words always give me reason to ponder.”

Quiet, Link stared at the blankets as he listened, feeling the weight of the Prince’s golden eyes upon him, but saying nothing in return. He didn’t want to perform this verbal dance any longer. He could probably get more truth from the frustrating Zora by allowing his thoughts to come rushing out unhindered but even if Link had anything to say, what chance was there that he would be listened to?

Sidon cleared his throat, one hand idly moving to rub at his forehead again and then slowly drifting to the space beneath one forefin. “I apologize if my thoughts are disordered and chaotic, but to answer you simply- your situation is not one I envy. The loss of my sister, and her absence in my life is deeply troubling, it always has been. It’s difficult for me not to dwell on thoughts of what could have been, especially when times are trying and I feel lost, or like I’ve failed everyone. However, the memories I do possess, faded as they are, still give me comfort and even guidance. That is something I possess and you do not, not just in regards to Mipha, but surely everyone you once knew. I can’t even begin to comprehend that kind of emptiness, much as I’ve tried to grasp and hold it, feeling it for myself when I’m in your presence.. And I’m deeply sorry.”

The apologetic tone of the Prince’s every word left the Hylian’s skin crawling, and he shook his head bitterly, like a child refusing to swallow bitter medicine. “Don’t be,” he said, wanting to be firm but instead sounding hollow, “I don’t want pity. I don’t even know how to validate your feelings, much less respond.”
“You’re angry,” Sidon uttered, surprised and confused, unsure how it was that he always managed to drive Link right to the edge of his emotional limits. “I’m sorry, it wasn’t my intention to offend.”

“Stop that. I’m not a pie, you can’t just dig your fingers into me,” Link growled bitterly, gripping the bedding in frustration. “I knew there was more to your behavior than what was normal, I knew nobody could be that accommodating on pure instinct. You looked right into Rivan, and understood everything as clearly as you would if he’d told you why he let himself be struck by that arrow.”

“And suffered his pain to do so,” Sidon commented, turning solemn again at just the mention of Rivan. “But he deserved to be understood, to have his questions answered, to be shown mercy.”

“Is that what you think this is? Is that what you’re showing me, mercy?”

“I thought it was friendship,” the Prince replied, not even needing a second to consider his answer, a bittersweet smile upon his lips. “You’re not the only one whose frustrated. To me, everyone else seems emotionally ignorant, only ever feeling or understanding their own points of view, unwilling to even consider other possibilities.”

“I don’t even understand that much,” Link commented idly, his voice a dull and listless sound. His own motivations often escaped him, likely because he had no life of his own, merely a singular purpose for existence, a purpose he didn’t even have a choice in.

“That’s why you remain a mystery to me, my friend, much as I’ve tried to give you whatever it is that you need so desperately.” Sidon let out a tired, hesitant sigh, his thoughts seeming to come with difficulty, his focus muddled by exhaustion. “...I don’t want to make you believe that I question what you do, but...I’m embarrassed to confess, I have been feeling nothing but confusion and simply wish to understand.”

“You can’t just take the answers that you want?” Link said bitterly, the words hardly even a question so much as a statement.

“That would be incredibly rude of me.” Sidon shook his head, seeming to disbelieve that his friend could think him so thoughtless and intrusive. “Not to mention, I often fear what I may find.”

Link almost smiled at such a comment, yet it disturbed him all the same. The Zora Prince was right to fear the contents of Link’s sick little head, yet the fact that he was aware enough to be so nervous was troubling. Oddly, as much as Link had wanted to be listened to, and understood, now that the opportunity presented itself, he felt coming out from the shroud of mystery would leave him naked and vulnerable, like a body with no skin to cover the muscle beneath.

The Hylian raised his head from its downward stoop, craning his neck to peer into the face of the man next to him, his eyes intense and imploring as they searched Sidon’s own. Yet, vulnerable as Link felt under something as simple as eye contact, he must have seemed a creature of bitter cold and sharpened edges; the Prince seemed to flinch as though his first thought was to recoil, yet he resisted that instinct, returning the contact given.

“Will you even listen to me?” Link asked, still sure that nobody cared about him, even when they pretended it was so. “Will you really hear me, if I speak?”

“I would delight in it, in fact,” Sidon said with a nod and a sincere smile, his voice gentle and earnest despite his exhaustion, despite how he could be sleeping now rather than bothering with the troubled Hylian in his midst.

“I can’t promise any solid answers,” Link said, letting his gaze falter once more as he peered down at
the bedding, “...certainly not anything that would confuse you any less.”

Sidon offered a nod, an acceptance of Link’s terms. He had never been one to force any issue that was ultimately inconsequential, so as much as he wanted his own confusion remedied, he seemed willing to simply accept eternal uncertainty as reality, in the case that Link couldn’t provide answers or merely didn’t wish to. Link’s truths weren’t his to forcefully take, and he was okay with that.

“If you can,” the Prince began, seeming unsure as to how to word his question, “could you answer, to me, the question Brivere posed earlier? You told me yourself that you believed it would be best if I stayed out of danger, yet when I was commended for doing so, you expressed that I should have done the opposite. I’m having difficulty following your advisement, much as I admire you and indeed, look to you for guidance.”

Link let out a forceful exhale, a weak replacement for a laugh at the idea of being ‘looked to for guidance’. No sound immediately followed that initial one, however, and the Hylian was forced to actually reflect on his earlier outburst. The moments began to drag in the silence as he thought, unsure he could unearth any solid reason for his behavior, yet for once, Sidon didn’t immediately interrupt, choosing to patiently wait out the stretch of quiet for as long as he could.

When the Prince seemed to believe there would be no answer at all, he sighed in quiet resignation. “It’s alright, Link,” he uttered, making the move to simply set Link free from explanation of his contradictions.

“It didn’t feel right,” the Hylian softly spoke, an even softer smile tugging at his lips, “forcing you to accept ‘preconceived notions of how you should behave.’”

For a moment, Sidon’s mouth fell open in surprise at what he was hearing, but his expression quickly turned to a warm smile and he quietly chuckled at Link’s words. “You’ve spent far too much time with me if you’ve become trapped in the pitfall that is my own personal dilemma.. Leading in the way I see fit, and being myself, or simply trusting that those around me will always know better than I.”

“You’re a good leader,” Link spoke, his words not even intended to pull Sidon’s fins, “Just trust yourself. You don’t need the belief and approval of others to do that much.”

“Ahh, but it helps. It’s always easier to trust oneself when others trust you, as well.”

“Maybe you should find a middle ground. There’s plenty of area in between being swallowed by a Hinox and fighting entirely from the back.”

The Prince offered a smile at the comfortably light direction their conversation had taken, though the expression quickly faded from his face as his eyes looked over the Hylian by his side, taking on a look of somber questioning.

“It makes sense for Brivere to be so protective, as my Knight,” Sidon began, cautious yet curious, “...but I’m still trying to discern your reasons for behaving so protectively. May I ask? In the end, is it truly about Mipha? If you said yes, it surely wouldn’t surprise me. I’m used to being protected simply because she met her end in battle. I’m used to my value being measured by the fact that I am the only remaining heir to the throne. But, I thought your feelings were something different, and forgive me if I latched onto that idea too strongly, especially if it happens to be that I was mistaken.. But I would like to know the truth, if that is something you are willing to give me.”

“...yes,” Link replied, considering the answer more after he’d uttered it, noticing Sidon rather shrink from the corner of his eye. “No,” he spoke, changing his answer, then sighing in frustration. He was
too tired to both face himself and his feelings in the metaphorical mirror, as well as explain the tattered reflection. “Yes and no. I feel the same bitterness that your people do over Mipha’s death. It was pointless and a damn waste. That bitterness only compounded as I began to remember little things about her. I can recall some of our interactions, but no matter what, my own feelings never resurfaced, and that emptiness you mentioned before. It offers no comfort, as you said. It’s painful and angry, that’s all it is.”

“She died fighting to protect not just her people, but all of Hyrule,” came Sidon’s voice in melancholy reflection, “Mipha was strong and selfless and brave. She stood up for what she knew was right and she did it gladly.”

Link chuckled bitterly, shaking his head at these empty words, and the empty explanation they formed. “Do these kinds of pretty ideas comfort you? When you think about your sister’s life cut short, and the fact that it ultimately made no difference, does her strength and bravery make it better?”

Sidon’s expression turned confounded and hurt as Link spoke, so when the Hylian paused, he had no words to say in reply. That lack of a bright, inspiring answer left Link’s bitterness to boil into full anger, until he couldn’t prevent himself from spilling over. “When Rivan laid dying on your lap, did the words you spoke soften the blow? Did his heroism make his loss hurt less? Did it really make his death meaningful? When Dunma regains consciousness, and you tell her that her father sacrificed himself to save her and his fellow warriors, and that he died a hero, let me know if that explanation makes it better, or if the news still breaks her in the end.”

“Link, please..” The Prince at last piped up, “Your explanation is taken and understood. You don’t need to say any more.”

The bristled Hylian cautiously turned his head to get a clearer sideways glance at the Zora by his side, finding it odd that someone who could be as imposing as the Prince could suddenly look so sullen, so beaten down. The tinge of guilt that came with that notion served to tie and bridle Link’s fury, replacing it with the old, familiar, self-loathing. “I told you- pain, anger, bitterness. That’s all that’s left of me.”

“That’s how it feels to mourn, my friend. There’s nothing incorrect about the way you feel,” Sidon spoke slowly, gently, attempting to be far more understanding than Link deserved. “..When I was much younger, and the Calamity struck, it wasn’t until months had passed that I even began to grasp that Mipha would never be coming home. I couldn’t understand how something so unfair could just.. Happen. I was inconsolable and angry. I took my feelings out on others, and like many of my people, I fell in line with the idea of blaming Hylians because I needed someone to shoulder the burden of my anger. I only managed to find closure as time passed and my anger subsided just enough to allow me to logically realize that there was nobody that needed to be blamed, save for the Calamity. You’ve only just awakened to the news of all this senseless death, and you need time to mourn like anybody else.”

Link sighed, allowing his previous frustration to slide away. He wasn’t sure he was taking Sidon’s words to heart, but something in the Prince’s tone managed to soothe Link back to a state of calm. “..To finish answering your question, it also isn’t just about Mipha. I’m not protecting you because she died. The fact is, even the friends I had from 100 years ago, the ones that are still alive- I just don’t remember any of them so it feels no different than if they were dead.” Maybe it was more accurate for Link to say that he didn’t remember himself, and that he may as well have been the dead one, but he thought better of it. “The friendship I have with you is new, and I remember every part of it. I can’t help but want to protect that.”
Sidon smiled at this explanation and gave a satisfied nod. “Will you please stay with me tonight, then?”

Link paused, quietly thinking on the request as it was posed. “Are you offering to let me stay to be polite, or do you really want me here?”

“Is.. Is that why you were upset last night?” Sidon spoke in realization, sounding disappointed that something so trivial had come between them, despite his best efforts to respect and accommodate. The sound of a sigh slid from him, the kind of huff one may let out after setting down something of immense weight. “My friend, sensitive as I am, you are terribly hard to read. Please, don’t leave all the emotional labor for me. I’m much too afraid of failure to carry such an impossible burden.”

“If I’m so troublesome, you should just be honest, and ask me to leave,” Link quickly spoke in reply, teasing despite how his voice came out sounding entirely serious.

“I want you to stay,” Sidon said, gladly offering up the answer that he now knew his friend wished to hear, “that is, if you wish it as well.”

“Good,” the Hylian just nodded his head, “because I didn’t want to get up.”

Needing little more as reassurance, the Hylian Champion lowered his tired body down upon the soft warmth of the bedding, stretching as he got comfortable. Sidon watched Link as he settled in and closed his eyes, a certain look of fondness coming over the Zora’s features; Of course, Link did not manage to see this before the Prince blew out the candle, blanketing them in warm, comfortable darkness.

Sidon bundled and fluffed the roll of wool meant to support his head, lying down, adjusting, sitting up and lying down once more, fussing with the placement of the roll in order to get it just so. Link opened his eyes, peering in Sidon’s direction through the darkness, shifting his own arm underneath his head as he did. Once the Zora finally laid still, Link inched himself closer, laying his head on Sidon’s shoulder, the roughness of his scales catching and slightly tugging at pieces of the Hylian’s hair.

Yet, even so, small discomforts suddenly felt inconsequential compared to the comfort offered to each by the presence of the other, and both found sleep with quick, contented ease.

Chapter End Notes

Just out of curiosity; what are you guys’ opinions on smut? Don't take this to mean that I'm about to jump right into smut city, haha, but seriously! Juicy, detailed scenes? Light hints at sexual activity? Would any of you actually prefer warnings before sex scenes? I'm expecting varied answers but do let me know. Also, feel free to answer anonymously.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Zora warriors came together to mourn their fallen. The Hylian Champion remained at the Prince's side, offering his constant, quiet strength.

Chapter Notes

Here is the new chapter, my friends. I just wanted to let you all know, I will probably continue posting chapters around this length every Friday. Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Hylian Champion had never actually taken into account how uncomfortable it must have been for a Zora to sleep on their back, but considering the unique, beautiful and equally strange physical aspects of their bodies, it made sense.

On the occasions when Link slept next to Sidon, prior to this particular one, the Zora Prince always had a stack of pillows to keep his upper body and head in a supported and gently reclined position. The Hylian had just assumed it was a touch of royal prissiness, but considering how much Sidon shifted in his sleep while they slumbered in the shroud of his tent, it now seemed clear that it was physical necessity.

Thankfully, Link was not only a heavy sleeper, but during the instances when Sidon’s shifting disrupted his sleep, he had quite the talent for dozing right back off within seconds of stirring.

He also did a wonderful job at staying asleep when duty came calling. It had likely only been four or five hours before the sky began to lighten and another Zora entered the tent to awaken the Prince. At the sound of Brivere’s quiet voice, Sidon hauled himself upright, stretching and curling his tail stiffly to the right then the left, working out whatever kinks had developed from being laid on.

“I have updates, my lord,” Brivere said softly once Sidon seemed awake enough to actively listen, kneeling before the Prince. Despite how softly Brivere spoke, Link groaned and rolled over, burying his face in the roll of wool the Prince had been sleeping on.

“Yes, go on,” Sidon said, his hand coming to cover his mouth as he yawned, sharp teeth gleaming in even the soft light of coming morning. He rubbed at his eyes, not feeling any less tired than he had been when he laid down to sleep. When his hands fell softly to his lap, and he made his best effort to appear attentive, he noticed Brivere attempting to maintain a gentle smile, but there was something uncomfortable in him that he wasn’t speaking nor expressing. “Is something wrong?”

“No, my lord,” the pale, golden Zora shook his head, his long tail moving lightly against his back. “Things are reasonably on schedule. All of our injured warriors weren’t healed, as Estuu ran out of strength and will likely be unavailable to complete the job. However, those remaining only suffered minor injuries, and our medics are tending to them.”
“Good,” the Prince nodded. “I’m grateful for the work he’s done for us. You should be proud of him.”

“I am, of course,” Brivere spoke, quiet and reserved, his emotions tightly hidden.

“But you’re also worried,” Sidon commented, attempting to hone in on the source of Brivere’s discomfort, much as his Knight tried hard to keep his concerns from disrupting the Prince’s peace of mind.

“Yes. I fear I pushed him too hard. He’s in a state of shut down from the strain. I feel badly for asking so much, but it also felt necessary to do so.” The Zora Knight sighed quietly, shaking his head in minor inconvenience. “Also, Betaal refused healing, much as her wounds needed treatment.. I suppose she still holds a grudge.”

“She’s strong. Give her space to heal naturally if that’s her preference.” The Prince knew of Betaal’s skill and tenacity. He had faith that she would weather any injury she suffered. Faith was likely better than pushing uncomfortable matters, anyway.

“Hmm.. I’m still surprised she wasn’t chosen for my position, over me,” Brivere spoke in reflection. “Her wounds were dire enough to need mending, yet she was still and straight-faced as anything as the medics stitched her up. Her calm intensity alone is.. Admirable.”

“I remember the Tournay for the position of my Knight well enough,” Sidon offered a gentle nod and a smile of belief. “You outclassed her with ease, Brivere. Your skills have never come into question.”

The gold Zora offered a grateful bow of his head to his Prince, though he hovered in silence, highly trained reserve concealing any emotion he might have been feeling. When he spoke, he was calm as the early morning around them. “All I remember is the unfair advantage I had over her and I think the circumstances might have denied you someone stronger than myself.”

“Always so full of self-doubt.” Sidon shook his head, yet he couldn’t help but give his friend a fond smile. He felt their partnership had always been a smooth one, as they both needed occasional reassurance, and they were typically quite ready to offer it to the other in turn. “My friend, you’re strong and faithful, not to mention clever and vigilant.”

“You’re too kind, my lord, truly,” Brivere spoke, these compliments seeming to rinse over him and off as water would, but the Prince could still feel the warm reaction that his Knight held deeply within himself.

“You live for my praises, Brivere,” Sidon somewhat tittered, then he added, “don’t be coy.”

“It does mean the world, my Prince,” Brivere dipped his head low in respect, brushing one of his long forefins over his shoulder as he straightened. “I seem to lose track of my thoughts in your presence, forgive me. There was more I needed to say.”

“My fault for being a distraction, go on.”

“The funeral pyre has been completed, as you wished.” The golden Zora’s calm voice took a more somber tone, his yellow eyes trained on the mats beneath his knees. “Also, the archers have all regained consciousness and seem healthy, if a bit disoriented.”

“And Dunma?”

“She’s recovered, but is still resting and hasn’t been given the news yet.”
“Hm,” the Prince nodded solemnly, the tone of his own voice dipping back to a more melancholy note. “I’ll take care of that first and foremost.”

Yellow eyes very slowly dragged themselves upward as Brivere stole a glance at the Zora before him; concern may have been written within those vibrant depths, had he not tucked it all away. His gaze quickly flicked to where Sidon’s uneaten dinner remained. “You didn’t touch your meal from last night.”

“I had no appetite, I’m afraid,” the Prince sighed.

“I’ll see to it that something else is prepared for you. You should try to eat something; you need your strength,” said the golden Zora, his voice clear and calm despite his fussing.

“Is that official advice or are you just worried?”

“I suppose it was both,” Brivere answered the question posed with complete seriousness, only realizing the tune of sarcasm after. “Or are you trying to tease, my lord?”

“Trying,” the Prince exhaled the quietest laugh, his amusement vague but still there. “You’re much too serious for it, clearly.”

“My duties come first, of course,” Brivere said, pushing a tiny smile onto his pale lips, humoring his Prince’s attempts at clever charm.

“Is there anything else on your mind then?” Sidon continued to probe, certain that he was missing something.

“No, my lord. I believe I’ve told you all I meant to. Am I dismissed?”

“I wanted to say,” Sidon began, his words tentative as he searched for even a subtle reaction, then he gestured to the sleeping Hylian at his side, “could you make sure the Hylian Champion receives a meal as well. His stomach has been growling in his sleep, I fear he hasn’t eaten enough.”

Brivere glanced to the heap that Link formed, curled against the Prince’s thigh as he officially claimed Sidon’s rolled, woolen cushion. The Zora Knight’s expression changed subtly, his lips forming a tight line upon his features, his pupils narrowing to thin slits.

“Ahh, so I found the source of your discomfort, did I?” the Prince commented, his tone sounding vaguely unamused, despite his success in uncovering the mystery that had been so masterfully hidden.

“It isn’t my place to say anything,” Brivere uttered, internally squirming, “but since you’ve indicated your interest in my opinion.. My lord, are you sure about what you’re doing? Are you certain this is wise?”

“Brivere,” the Prince sighed, searching for words that were both right to say and also felt appropriate. He concluded that these particular words didn’t exist. “..It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Then I’ve no need to be concerned,” Brivere answered with a curt nod of his head.

“Quite right, my friend,” the Prince said, moving to the task of putting on his various fancy adornments, the task slowed by the stiffness that echoed from between his shoulders, up his neck and along the muscles of his tail.

“May I?” Brivere asked, a soft, merciful look falling upon his struggling prince as he moved to assist.
Sidon had managed to pull his sash into place, his fingers fumbling about as his aiguillettes were slid onto his right shoulder. Brivere’s nimble hands bundled the cloth of the Prince’s jabot, tucking the loose ends of the aiguillettes beneath before it all was pinned into place with his broach.

“Thank you, Brivere. I’m terribly stiff from sleeping like this,” Sidon spoke quietly as he was attended.

“Better loosen up before you go about outfitting in full armor. It’s much more tricky than these little things,” the golden Zora idly spoke as he carefully fastened the Prince’s epaulette to his shoulder fins, then reached for Sidon’s elaborate collar, placing it on and ducking his hands to the back of the Prince’s neck to latch it.

“That’s what I have you for,” Sidon said, his tone as light and casual as he could manage on such a somber morning, to which Brivere offered a small smile and a shake of his head. This wasn’t part of his duties; little things like this were out of friendship and fondness, which didn’t seem to stop Sidon from teasing, even so.

Lastly, Brivere placed the Prince’s aigrette atop his bowed head, making sure it was secure before he lowered his hands, tracing his palms along the Prince’s forefins. “Hm,” he hummed thoughtfully, “your scales have looked better.”

“How kind of you to say so,” Sidon mumbled, his golden eyes fixing Brivere with a look that spoke his insult.

“I mean to say, of course, I can help,” Brivere said, his voice still calm as gentle rain, his words running just ever so slightly together as he made haste to fix his apparent blunder. “I have something that will be of aid to you. I’ll fetch it when you’re ready.”

“Very well,” the Prince nodded, forgiving enough despite his lack of decent rest. “You may go now.”

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The Prince was ever so cautious as his hand fell upon the sleeping Hylian’s head, fingerscales combing through the mussed, golden locks with curious wonder. Despite how two plates of food awaited, Sidon was almost grateful when Link didn’t stir very quickly, as it gave him a few extra minutes to enjoy the unique softness of the Hylian’s hair against his palms.

“Hnn,” Link groaned when the touch began to loosen him from a state of deep sleep. “What is it?” he mumbled.

“Pardon my fascination,” the Prince replied, a bit embarrassed, but glad enough he had an excuse for his actions. “You’re just so soft all over, your hair, your skin.”

“You shouldn’t go around touching people’s hair without permission, just because you don’t have it,” Link managed to speak blearily, his eyes still closed and pressed into the roll of wool he’d stolen quite literally out from under the Zora. Despite his complaints, he appeared to lull once more beneath the touch.

“Ahh, well I was attempting to gently wake you as well,” Sidon explained.

“You usually don’t bother even trying,” Link managed to observe, groggy and half-awake as he seemed.

“I like to let you rest, I know you need it. You may go back to sleep if you wish, but I wanted you to
know that I have food for you, if you’d like to eat it while it’s still hot.”

“I knew something smelled good,” the Hylian said, his voice brightening slightly in new interest as he sat himself slowly upright. His hair was a horrid mess and he combed his fingers through it as he yawned, sure that the smile on Sidon’s face was in amusement at Link’s state of disarray. He peered in the direction of the steaming plates of food, as though he had some kind of super sensory technique for scoping out a decent meal, and the Zora took Link’s interest as sign enough to hand the plate to him.

“Only a Prince can manage to get breakfast in bed at a time and place such as this,” the Hylian muttered tiredly, shaking his head despite how he welcomed the food presented. There was a serving of rice with small bits of Hylian shroom, still sitting neatly in the shape of whatever utensil placed it onto the plate. It was topped with an egg and a small grilled fish fillet placed neatly to the side. It appeared the Zoras had rifled the supply crates thoroughly, if Link had to judge. He supposed now he had to mark that off of his list of things to do.

“And you,” Sidon smiled as he took his own plate in hand like it was a chore.

“By convenient association,” the Hylian answered, though he wasn’t going to complain in earnest. Sidon’s habit of seeing to it that Link was fed, or otherwise gifting Link with delicious consumables was probably what sealed their friendship, now that Link was thinking about it.

“Don’t be silly. My people’s debts to you seem to be wracking up, the least we can offer are meals to keep you going,” said Sidon in between bites, though his attention almost immediately turned from his food, to Link as he felt something change in response to what he had said. “Did I say something wrong?”

Turning his head to glance at the Prince, who still towered despite how they were seated, Link peered up to see Sidon looking at him in curiosity or in concern. Link just shoved another bite of food into his mouth and shook his head. He didn’t feel any real need to explain his every shift in mood to a nosy Prince, who still couldn’t just be honest. His kindness apparently didn’t occur because he cared, but merely because his people had some kind of obligation to the Hylian Champion.

“It would be easier to avoid these blunders if you would tell me what I’ve done,” the Prince spoke again, his voice a fragile, careful thing.

Groaning, Link swallowed a mouthful of food that was perhaps too much at once, waving his hand dismissively at the Zora as he did. Once his mouth was unoccupied, he said, “We’ll be here all day if I’m forced to explain every little thing that sets me on edge. Just accept that I’m always angry and stop prying.”

“Alright,” Sidon said with a nod.

Yet, despite how the Prince did precisely as Link had asked, it left a clawing sense of guilt climbing up the Hylian’s spine, twisting around his neck, and he couldn’t help but wonder, was this all their supposed friendship had to offer? Discomfort, pettiness and hurt feelings. Link didn’t want to get caught up in that kind of complication, it was too much effort.

Sidon’s friendship had always taken all of Link’s effort to return, yet the Hylian hadn’t walked away yet. Sighing, he decided to relent, speaking up to say, “This was nice, and it’s from you, not some obscure entity like ‘your people’, and not out of obligation to me. But, it’s not fair for me to nitpick your every word, so you should just let me be angry, instead of trying to hold yourself to an impossible standard. You already do that enough for everybody else.”
“Hmm,” the Zora nodded, “but now you don’t seem so angry. Your anger dimmed as you explained yourself, so talking about it actually helped you work it out.”

“That wasn’t the talking,” Link said dully, “that was the food.”

Smiling softly as the mood between them drifted back toward something comfortable, Sidon focused on his own meal, eating at a drastically different pace than the Hylian by his side. Even if Link was occupied with the task of shoving huge portions of food into his mouth, he still managed to turn his head to watch Sidon do the exact opposite.

Was that his princely behavior? Or did he really just feel so little love for the one and only perfect experience life had to offer? He held his utensils delicately balanced between his fingers, each bite measured to fit the utensil with precision and every bite the exact same as the last. Link found himself a bit fascinated, his own meal likely not being granted proper attention as it rapidly disappeared while he watched the Zora.

The most amazing yet confounding thing about the way Sidon ate was that, despite his most ferocious set of teeth, the utensil never once clicked against them as his mouth closed upon it, his jaws most delicate and polite. Then again, perhaps it was simply because he didn’t appear particularly hungry, his plate soon lowering to rest upon his lap before he’d eaten even half of what had been served to him, his golden eyes staring at what remained in the same way one might measure up a foe.

Link watched as Sidon quietly deliberated on his apparent lack of interest in the food, waiting until the Zora Prince placed the plate aside to speak his concern. “Are you sure you’re not hungrier than that? I saw your food leftover last night, how can you eat so little now?”

“Hm,” the Prince smiled, looking on Link’s own confused expression with a mix of amusement and affection, “I’m not so certain that you and Brivere don’t believe yourselves to be my parents, as much as the two of you worry over me.”

“Well, it’s his job,” Link said, handing his own empty plate to the Prince, “and maybe not exactly my choice. But I’ll eat what you don’t want, if you’re sure.”

“Quite sure I simply can’t manage,” said Sidon, gladly exchanging his plate for Link’s empty one. “I am typically served more than I can eat in one sitting, so an empty plate is actually a rare occurrence. However, the events of the day to come manage to unsettle my stomach.”

Link nodded to indicate that he was still listening as his mouth was filled with food. In his silence, he was wondering what troubled the Prince more: the deep responsibility he seemed to feel toward his people, the guilt he apparently heaped onto himself when lives were lost under his command, or being surrounded by others who were all feeling immense sorrow and loss? Regardless of the answer, the Hylian couldn’t help but feel hyper aware of his own blunted sense of empathy, his own emotional depth a dwindling puddle compared to Sidon’s boundless sea.

He wasn’t sure what to express or how to express it, his mind a fumbling, awkward thing. Was it selfish for him to not feel enough, for him to come to the Zora Prince when he needed to be soothed, if he couldn’t return that favor?

Once Link had chewed and swallowed the bite of food in his mouth, he sat for yet another quiet moment with the intention to talk, awkwardly trying to find words that were suitable. “I... Don’t know what I can say to help,” he began, sighing as he inwardly criticized how quickly he could make things about himself, “but I’m here. My presence is all I have to sincerely offer.”
“And that’s just enough, my friend,” the Prince gave a nod and a small smile. “Having you near gives me strength. Your courage reflects itself on me, and that is precisely what I need.”

A look of uncertainty traced Link’s features and he raised his eyes to gaze upon the Prince’s face, searching it for the sincerity that Link’s first instinct was to doubt. Not one thing offered the Hylian any confirmation for his concerns, from the warmth that lingered in the Zora’s eyes, to the smiles that were freely given, as unlimited as the sunshine.

“Hmph,” the Hylian looked away, unable to hold the Prince’s gaze for long, fearing something in his chest may implode if he tried. “You always know just the right words for every situation. You’re too smooth to be trusted.”

Somehow, Sidon managed to laugh, his dear friend granting him moments of amusement, even when the world outside tore at his resolve. “Yes, I suppose words can be used with the same precision and effect as a sword. You and I just profess in different things.”

“Only you’re also a skilled warrior as well, so that’s not as reassuring as it could be,” Link mumbled between the final bites of Sidon’s leftovers.

“You ate it all,” the Prince spoke, leaning over to look more closely, as though his eyes were deceiving him somehow. “You Hylians have quite the metabolism, to need so much food.”

“It’s the real reason I’m so strong.” Link said, his serious tone lending some extra humor to his words. “In battle, I just think about my next meal and I always succeed.”

The pause which followed the Hylian’s statement served to suggest that Sidon actually believed Link was serious. As Link handed the Prince his second empty plate, he offered a teasing grin, finally earning a laugh in response. Faintly, he found himself hoping that these moments of laughter served to deflect even a small amount of the sorrow buried beneath the Prince’s smiles.

And then came the shift of the tent’s door flap that brought Brivere, who entered and kneeled just before the bedding, saying, “My lord, Dunma is now awake.”

The sound of those words stole away the smile from Sidon’s face and as the light of his happiness faded into bleak sorrow, some rare, little piece of Link that hadn’t already been broken finally shattered.

All the Hylian Champion needed to do was pull on his boots, then grab his weapons and supplies before he was following on the Zora Prince’s heels. Sidon was walking alongside Brivere in the direction of the area sectioned off for the medics to work, the same area where Dunma could be seen in the distance, sitting upright and looking around in frantic confusion.

The Prince took a deep breath to steady himself, then looked to Link as the Hylian walked in his shadow. “It’s alright, you don’t need to come with me.”

“Okay,” Link nodded his head, slowing his pace to allow Sidon to pull ahead, though the Prince seemed to slow in order to match his pace.

“I just don’t want to crowd her,” Sidon said, his voice heavy with concern.

“I’m here if you need me,” Link replied, stopping and watching as Sidon continued. The Prince peered over his shoulder with a grateful smile that was difficult and forced, so unlike his usual expressiveness.
He must have dismissed Brivere as well, because as Link looked on, the golden Zora gave a bow and stopped momentarily, before some other duty must have jumped to mind and pulled him off in another direction.

Link remained, a distant onlooker, as Sidon approached the place where Dunma waited, bandaged and roughed up from battle, yet rigid and alert in consuming anxiety. Even from where he stood, Link could see the desperate, terrified spark of realization in the young warrior’s face as she looked up to see Prince Sidon approaching, already knowing what it meant for him to be delivering the news, yet she was shaking her head in denial.

Sidon slowly kneeled near the mat she rested upon, and though words were being exchanged, Link couldn’t make them out. He could see that before the Prince even finished speaking, Dunma’s face wrinkled and her mouth went wide as a sob tore its way from her. The young woman folded against herself, the sound of her cries audible enough for even Link to hear, and she pressed her hands to her face as though she could take them away in a few moments and this awful thing wouldn’t be true.

As the Hylian Champion stood gazing, he began to lose focus of the scene in the distance, Dunma’s cries a faint, vague sound in his ears. A strange, uneasy feeling came over him, accompanied by an even stronger vertigo that left him unsure whether or not he was still standing straight. His breathing began to come unsteadily, then a chill crept over his skin, a feeling of being pelted and soaked by rain which was nowhere in sight.

Link closed his eyes and rubbed at his arms, just trying to catch his breath as the bizarre sensation faded away, leaving behind a tremor that wracked his frame. When he looked up again, the Prince was still speaking, and he attempted to reach out to Dunma, only to have his hand slapped away. It could be seen as well as heard; the young Zora began to yell at the Prince in tearful fury, her sharp canines flashing, the wetness of tears upon her cheeks shining in the sun of early morning, and Sidon just nodded his head solemnly.

Link didn’t want to watch any longer and he thought it best if he went somewhere quiet for however long it took the mysterious trembling to recede.

Walking the length of the moats served just the right purpose. Some places within the fort were still a mess of destruction, likely too troublesome for the Zoras to be bothered with, as they were assumingly not planning to stay here for very long? Link wasn’t too sure what their intentions were, but if they let the red moon come without doing anything, it wouldn’t be long before the Bokoblins filled these walls once more.

As he walked, the noises of the company of warriors got lost under the quiet trickle of the river flowing, the gentle current entering the gates and tracing the shape of the moats as it continued on. It was a tranquil, soothing sound and Link tentatively walked along a large piece of debris from a fallen tower that stretched across the moat, inspecting the dry, looping binding that still held some pieces together. It was no wonder that those towers came right down as soon as the fire started to spread.

Taking a long, slow breath, Link sat himself down on the wood overhanging the moat, allowing his mind to go blank, his upended state of emotion fading back into something quiet, and comfortably numb. He closed his eyes and let his face rest against his palms, wondering what had even caused this strange spell?

The serene quietude persisted for some time, as Link attempted to put himself back in order, or at least something close enough. Strangely, the idea of Sidon managing to track him down and interrupt his solitude didn’t seem as bothersome as it had just days ago. Rapid changes, however, only led the Hylian to a feeling of wrongness, like he’d made a mistake somewhere along the way. He couldn’t trust what feelings he did have, he couldn’t trust the weakness they created and he couldn’t trust
himself not to grasp something beautiful far too tightly, like a tiny, delicate flower in the hands of a careless child.

Instead of the Prince, however, a rush a bubbles from the depths of the moat below came to interrupt Link, and he lifted his face from his hands with near frightened quickness, strange sounds always a metaphorical hand on the hilt of his sense of battle readiness. The sound that had driven him into alert had no immediately apparent source, but a cluster of bubbles now sat atop the water just below, drifting slowly away in the gentle current.

Shifting onto his knees, Link cautiously ducked low enough to peer beneath the overhanging debris he’d sat upon, expecting to find some smart-assed octorock taking shelter just below, ready to blast the Hylian right in the face with one of its nasty stones. Instead, Link laid eyes upon the wobbling silhouette of a small, reddish figure. He reached down to rest his hand just near his eyes, to stop the light pouring across his face, preventing him from being able to focus on the shadowed area beneath the debris.

When his eyes adjusted just enough for images in the dark to become clearer, Link easily realized the hidden figure tucked out of sight was Estuu, apparently taking time away from everything else, similar to Link, himself. The young Zora didn’t appear to be sleeping, but it was difficult to ascertain; he was laying at the bottom of the moat, his legs folded against himself, his face tucked against his knees and his gills pumping quickly enough to create little puffs of bubbles.

Getting more comfortable, Link flattened onto his stomach, his arm tucked under his chin as his head tilted downward, just watching the hidden Zora below. Estuu was utterly still, the most movement coming from him little more than the simple flutter of his forefins in the current. Link didn’t care or plan to disturb him, but continued to watch in quiet curiosity.

“Hylian Champion,” an uncomfortably familiar voice called, just clear enough for Link to easily hear, yet not terribly loud, either. Rather it was precisely measured, like everything about the person it belonged to.

Link dragged himself up to see Brivere walking in his direction. His blue eyes turned particularly cold as he watched the golden Zora approach, an express distaste growing from a whisper in his mind to a kink in his bones that clicked in aching aggravation. Brivere’s expression was calm, yet there was a small wrinkle of concern to it, or else it almost looked that way, despite the fact that Zoras didn’t have the same expressive brow as Hylians. Whatever it was, something about this busybody of a Zora’s face bothered Link something fierce.

“Hylian Champion,” Brivere repeated in staunch formality as he stood near enough to speak. “If you’re looking to interact with Estuu, know that you should, instead, leave him be. He’s over exerted himself in healing the multitude of injuries our warriors suffered and is now overstimulated as a result. He needs darkness and quiet in order to recover, which you will be interrupting, should you meddle with him.”

Link had nothing to say, which wasn’t terribly uncommon, but it seemed even less so in regards to Brivere. He’d had no plans to interrupt the boy, not even entirely sure if the young Zora was simply napping from the late night, or something more. So, Brivere was wasting his breath, therefor.

When Link uttered not a single word, Brivere spoke again, saying, “Leave him be,” as though he assumed Link hadn’t heard him. It brought up an interesting question in the Hylian’s mind; he had yet to stop wondering whether Estuu actually couldn’t speak, or merely opted not to in most situations, as Link tended to do. With that concern in mind, what must it have been like to have a brother that assumed you were just ignorant if you didn’t speak back?
At last, Brivere turned and walked away, and Link found the corners of his mouth upturning at the sight. Some days, his lack of willingness to communicate, and the frustration it caused others, was oddly pleasing.

The Zora people stood quietly together as the bodies of their fallen were delicately placed upon the funeral pyres. The five fallen warriors were dressed in their armor, their weapons tucked by their sides or upon their chests by the careful hands of those that survived them.

Link watched in solemn silence, standing at the Prince’s side in the neatly arranged lines that surrounded the pyres. He watched as those chosen to handle the bodies began further stacking the wood around them in a very precise manner, forming a peak overtop that sheltered the bodies but did not touch them. Among the Zoras aiding with the pyres, Link recognized Kree and Bazz; Bazz was bandaged and bound in places from lingering injuries, yet still he worked with graceful diligence.

By Link’s other side, he could feel Brivere shifting uncomfortably and the Hylian let his eyes drift slightly to his left, his attention captured by the subtle movements of the golden Zora. Maybe Link was only imagining it, but he had the notion that Brivere was feeling slighted by the order Sidon had placed them in. As Link understood it, the mourning lines were ordered by rank, and in placing Link between himself and Brivere, the Prince made it clear that Link held a position of greater authority. The Hylian supposed his designation of ‘Champion’ held weight, even during something as sacred and commanding of respect as a funeral service. Even if it hadn’t, the Zora Prince would have it no other way and his word on that was clearly final.

Then again, now was the worst of times to behave in a petty way, so perhaps Link really was imagining Brivere’s discomfort.

When at last the group of Zoras arranging the final pieces had completed this task, they came to stand before the carefully arranged stacks, one Zora for each pyre. They took torches in hand, only the first among them lighting their torch with a piece of flint, then the flame itself was passed along the line. One lit torch was held outstretched to the following unlit one, and so on until they all burned brightly. Then, at last, the pyres were set afame.

The fire slowly grew from small and faint, steadily crawling upward until it stretched to the heavens and crackled hungrily, consuming the bodies cradled within. But the hot, intense glow of the fire was not the only thing that began tiny before rising over the crowd; as the flames grew, so did a sound among the mourning Zoras.

Quiet voices echoed in soft song, the tune a gentle, haunting murmur as it grew in strength and resounded through the withering fort, melodiously melancholy but resolute and hopeful. It was sung to carry the souls of the fallen gently to their place of grand rebirth, where their woes would be healed and they would begin a journey, anew.

The Hylian’s sensitive ears twitched slightly upward at the choir of beautiful voices surrounding him. He’d known the Rito were renowned for their voices, but the Zoras were something else, altogether. Whereas the Rito sang with clear, precise notes, the Zoras were gentle and harmonic in a way that was as dreamlike as their domain.

Link was ultimately distracted from the song, however, when something else began to occur before his eyes; a tradition of a Zora warriors’ funeral that the Hylian had never beheld. A soldier from the end of the line walked before the first pyre and kneeled, shedding the armor from one arm and placing it by his side. As he did, one of the Zoras who had lit the pyre now relit their torch in the pyre itself, swinging the torch immediately after to quiet the flame so that only the end of the torch
remained hot and faintly glowing. The kneeled warrior extended his arm, turning it to that the underside faced upward, then the hot end on the torch was tapped against the skin of his wrist.

A questioning look was turned to the Prince and he noticed Link’s eyes on him almost immediately, one visible gold eye quickly flicking downward to look upon the Hylian. His mouth fell shut for a moment as he ceased in singing along with the tune that still carried across the crowd and he bent himself a bit lower to speak directly to Link.

“You’re wondering about this ritual?” He spoke to be certain Link’s curiosity was what he believed it to be. When Link nodded in confirmation, Sidon continued, “Those of us who survived the conflict must, for a moment, allow ourselves to feel the sting of the pyre, to honor those who’ve fallen.”

“How does that honor them?” the Hylian asked, sincerely wishing to fully understand the ritual he was witnessing.

“The feeling of the hot end of the torch is meant to... represent a brush with the pain of death, a death which another suffered so that you may survive. You feel the flame’s touch for a moment to thank the ones who lay within. This is, of course, not quite as drastic for us, given the resilience of our scales. You are not expected to partake, so don’t worry.”

Link said nothing in regards to the explanation or his apparent exemption from it, mostly because he felt chattering too much would be disrespectful. He gave Sidon a nod, so the Prince knew that he understood.

The warriors continued, each kneeling before every pyre, being lightly tapped upon the arm each time. Most accepted these passing moments of discomfort as honor enough for their dead and moved back into their places in line. However, one of the archers who had fought alongside Rivan, who had been saved by his sacrifice, kneeled before the pyre where Rivan laid burning to ash, and when the torch tapped his arm, he did not immediately draw back. Instead, the archer endured the burn for a few moments longer than what was required. Once he did take his arm away, he bowed his upper body low to the ground before the pyre in thanks, and moved along.

Every archer from the group of Zoras who had been captured repeated this action, each one doing this to show their gratitude for their lives. Then, when it was Dunma who came before her father’s pyre, she outstretched her shaking arm to accept the sting of the torch, hardly flinching when the hot end touched her. The seconds passed and the grieving but resolute young woman refused to lower her arm, her hardened resolve turning soon to cringing pain, yet she refused to let it end.

The pain soon reduced the young warrior to desperate cries, the rest of her body bending and shaking from the burn, but she would not back down, intent on suffering the sting until the end of the torch smoldered and died. As she sat before the pyre crying in pain, many of the Zoras paying witness lowered their heads in pity, or finally let go the tears they’d been fighting to restrain, yet none dared interfere.

That was, until one warrior could no longer bear to simply watch, breaking her place in line so to stride before the crowd and join Dunma before Rivan’s pyre; that warrior was Betaal. She kneeled by Dunma’s side, making no move to halt her actions, instead taking hold of her opposite hand and gently squeezing it within her own to wordlessly offer her strength and support as Dunma bravely pushed through the pain.

The glowing end of the torch finally smoked and died, and when it did, Dunma drew her arm back, cradling it and sobbing. It was hard to say whether her physical pain or the pain of her loss stung more, but no matter the answer, Betaal helped her to her feet and walked the young woman back to
the line with an arm draped across her shoulders, to shelter and comfort her.

There were several others that came after Dunma, but Link recognized none of them personally, until Estuu came before the first pyre. The Hylian watched the boy in interest, sure it was him despite how he had his headscarf pulled low across his face so that even his eyes were hidden from sight, the tiny jewels at the hems of the scarf dangling against his cheeks.

When Estuu kneeled, he did not present his arm as others had, but instead placed a flower before each pyre. The first four were offered blue nightshade and swift violets, then a rare silent princess was set before Rivan’s pyre. He did not linger any longer than it took him to deposit these offerings and he scurried back to his place with Brivere watching closely as he did.

Those that followed Estuu were all of noble blood, so it wasn’t long before Brivere approached the pyres. Unlike his fellow nobles, who only allowed themselves to be tapped momentarily, Brivere allowed the hot ends of the torches to rest upon his wrist for a few extra moments all five times. Link found himself wondering if the Prince’s Knight really believed all of the fallen were worthy of such respect and admiration, or if Brivere’s actions were some show of courage and fortitude for Sidon to witness.

When Brivere returned to his place in line, Link didn’t waste a moment, unwilling to risk that he could be skipped over. He strode before the first pyre, unbuckling his bracer, placing it aside and tugging off the wraps that covered his forearm as he kneeled and presented his arm. He spared a glance slightly upward, calm blue eyes peering up at the Zora warrior holding the torch, who seemed almost hesitant. Still, the warrior didn’t question this occurrence, and bathed the torch in flame to heat it before pressing it to Link’s wrist.

The pain was expected and predictable, making it easy enough to harden oneself to. Link knew the hot torch was about to burn him, he knew what a burn felt like, and his body tensed in response as he allowed it to happen. The most difficult matter was fighting his instinct to recoil as the sting turned from a flash of heat into vivid pain that burned deep into his skin and spread through surrounding nerves, like a controlled wildfire. When he at last pulled his arm away, the burn was severe enough to leave his fingers shaking at the quiet, painful echoes, but also nothing he couldn’t simply endure.

By now, he couldn’t do anything worse to himself than what his enemies had already done hundreds of times before.

Link repeated this action before each of the pyres, if only to linger at every one at least as long as Brivere. However, when the Hylian kneeled before Rivan’s funeral flame, he endured the pain of a lengthy burn for another purpose. Rivan had been his friend, a friend whom he could not remember, nor truly feel anything for. The only part of Link that recalled events from the past was his marked-up hide, every inch like a page from a tale of battle. If Link’s worthless mind could not remember Rivan, then it would be written permanently into his skin, in memoriam.

The Hylian gathered his shed garments before he stood and turned back to the crowd, slowly walking back to his place beside the Prince. He could see the look on every Zora’s face as his eyes quickly traced the line; most gazed upon him in respect, glad to see him follow their traditions despite his soft, Hylian flesh. Brivere wore an expression of insult, then again, that might have been his resting face- Link still hadn’t decided. Sidon looked absolutely horrified, but couldn’t immediately say anything because he had to go before the pyres as Link returned.

As to be expected, Sidon performed similarly to Brivere, suffering the burn for an extended period before each pyre, then bowing low to every one. The Hylian didn’t know if this was in respect and love for every one of his people in equal measure, or if Sidon was bowing in apology for leading them ultimately to their deaths; both seemed like logical conclusions, as far as Link was concerned.
When Sidon returned to the line, he looked upon the small Hylian by his side and quietly said, “You didn’t have to do that.” His voice rang with gentle concern, a careful hand reaching out to grasp Link’s arm, holding it up just enough for him to inspect.

Link’s skin was a vibrant, flaring red, only a touch more pink than Sidon’s own complexion, blistered and blackened where the torches had touched him. The Zora Prince shook his head at the sight, likely thinking over a hundred things he could offer to soothe Link once this service was over, but the Hylian allowed him to speak not one.

“I wanted to. I had my reasons,” Link stated, sliding his arm out of the Prince’s grip, depositing his hand within it, instead.

For at least this moment, Sidon accepted his friend’s explanation, saying nothing more of it. They stood together, maintaining the quiet, simple comfort of the lingering touch, until the fires dimmed and the ashes were swept into the river below, into the water where those who had fallen returned, in death.

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Chapter End Notes

Alright, friends. You guys all did really well letting me know how you feel about smut, even if the answers were as varied as I expected. So, I'm thinking that there will probably be at least two smut scenes, both of which are sure to contain meaningful dialogue and plot relevance just based on my writing style. I'm thinking one will be a bit lighter on the details, as it will probably be more of a flashback to a sexual encounter that has been implied to have already happened. Another more heavily detailed scene will probably happen a bit later. In both cases, I will place warnings immediately before the scenes, so that if you don't want to read any smut, you can skip that particular scene, rather than the entire chapter. I hope this manages to please all or most of you! Because, seriously, the lot of you are wonderful. :):}
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Hylian Champion finally attempts to navigate a difficult discussion he's been waiting to have with the Zora Prince. The Prince attempts to manage this complicated friendship, alongside his own struggles with the Zora bureaucracy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sun was high into the sky, the summer days long and intense. It was clear that most of the Zoras were feeling the effects of the heat, having retreated to the cool water of the moats for a rest. Perhaps the most tired among the warriors were the ones who had worked through the night, and it was those who had drifted underwater to sleep while everyone else made preparations for the journey back to Zora’s Domain.

The Prince was surrounded by his upperclass officers, as usual, and Link had managed to hear that they would split into two groups, with one taking the majority of their forces back upstream, while the Prince would lead those carrying supplies back on foot. He expected it to be a relatively quick hike, given that there were no monsters, for now.

Link managed to busy himself as supplies were packed and last minute things taken care of. He had collected two full sacks of monster parts, which he was hoping to sell off soon, if only because the weight on his shoulders was becoming too much. The payoff was sure to be worth it, as well. For such a short trip, it was much more bountiful for gathering than usual, and the Hylian supposed he owed that to the company of his Zora allies. Even though this trek had only lasted two days, however, it felt as though it had been much longer than that and he was certainly ready to head home. Or, well, Zora’s Domain.

It took an hour or two before the groups were ready to head out. The Fort Gates were opened and a large group that appeared to be headed by Kree and Strata swam through the water-level entrances and disappeared into the river current. All that was visible were the top fins of the upperclass leaders as the group disappeared upstream.

Only one other upperclass warrior tagged along with Sidon’s group, apart from Brivere, but the Hylian hadn’t caught his name. Despite the fact that the smaller, significantly less powerful group were walking back with no expectations of being attacked, Sidon apparently wanted one other to aid him in command, in the case that something unexpected occurred. It was a precaution, but Link had the feeling that the one chosen for this job was not entirely pleased. He must have been looking forward to taking the quick route home, but also wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to gain Sidon’s favor.

If Link had learned anything about these upperclass Zora, it was that they were all constantly vying for additional power or honor and they seemed to understand that it could ultimately be obtained through Sidon. He was the future king, so maybe that much was obvious.

Another occurrence that Link noticed was that the one nameless upperclass warrior who was chosen to accompany Sidon’s group was also walking with Estuu by his side. This left the Hylian to wonder
if Brivere had ordered his younger sibling to follow this other Zora, rather than allowing him to stay glued to Link as he had before. It wouldn’t surprise him, but he also didn’t really care. Link was a bit too old to be made to feel like a brat kid whose ‘friend’ was forbidden to ‘hang out’ with him by overprotective family.

It wasn’t a major hindrance because once the group got on the road, Link found himself shadowing the Prince as he hadn’t been able to before, much to Brivere’s ire. Unless Link was just assuming things again; he was terrible for that.

With the group consisting of mostly soldiers with packs on their backs, it wasn’t such a matter of complication to lead, so Sidon wasn’t as bogged down by careful sensory readings and the strategic movement of warriors. As a result, he was much more open to casual conversation, and Link chatted to him as they walked. It was strangely comfortable, perhaps even easy, which was an odd feeling for the typically silent Hylian.

“I wanted to ask,” Link began, decidedly turning the conversation to something heavier after a long period of light talk, “did you still plan on facing that Lynel?”

“Hm?” Sidon perked at the mention of the Lynel, like he had forgotten all about it. The Hylian couldn’t help but inwardly scold himself, given the possibility that he may have just reminded the Prince of this particularly foolish idea.

“It was still something I was planning for, yes,” Sidon answered with a kind of casual ease that managed to toss Link directly into a place of pure frustration. He honestly made it sound as though he was meeting up with the Lynel for tea.

The Hylian sighed, ducking his face into the palm of his hand as he attempted to keep his irritation under control. When he raised his head to speak, he put a very intense effort into keeping his tone even. “After all that’s happened over these last couple of days, you still want to go through with that?”

“My Lord,” Brivere seized the opportunity to speak up before the Prince had a chance to respond. “I can’t help but agree with what the Hylian Champion seems to be asserting. Perhaps you should heed his word.. Or my own.”

“Brivere,” Sidon said, casting a faintly aggravated look upon his Knight, “if you wouldn’t mind falling back, I’d like to speak with the Hylian Champion alone.”

The golden Zora managed to grumble with his appearance alone, though he offered the Prince a curt bow and indeed slowed his pace just enough to allow Sidon and Link to pull ahead, but not out of sight.

“Link,” Sidon spoke once he felt sure Brivere was no longer within listening range. The Hylian’s pointed ears twitched upward at the sound of his own name, at the sudden lack of formality between himself and the Prince. “I thought you had decided not to play at this overprotective behavior any longer.”

“I’ll stop when you stop giving me reason to worry,” Link answered coolly, not even caring to spare the Prince’s feelings. “You want to speak to a Lynel. That may be the most foolish thing I’ve ever heard anyone suggest.”

“Foolish, is it?” Sidon recoiled, clearly insulted, though it faded away quickly enough and left him with an expression much more pensive. “I think that’s coming from the warrior in you. Like any warrior, you kill enemies without a second thought. You’ve concluded that all these creatures are
monsters or beasts and that is what makes it so easy for you, or any one of my own warriors, to just kill them without question.”

“They are monsters,” Link asserted, speaking with the certainty that came with his vast experience. “They’re not like us, they just kill. It’s all they do. It’s their instinct, you can’t change that.”

“Don’t you think they feel the same about us?” The Prince questioned, a truly curious sound to his voice, a clear want for actual answers to his apparent moral dilemma.

The Hylian just shrugged, this entire conversation feeling like the purest naivety to him. From the few things he could recall, not even Princess Zelda had been so whimsical. “I don’t know what they feel. All I know is that those creatures aren’t intelligent or civilized, and they just kill anything different from them.”

“Yet different species of monsters can apparently coexist,” Sidon said, loosely crossing his arms over his chest in a thoughtful manner, the fingers of one hand straying to his chin and tapping before he voiced his considerations. “They don’t kill one another. They feel just like we do; I know, I’ve felt it. When we attack them, they feel anger and fear. When we strike one down before the eyes of one of its own, it feels sadness and hatred.”

Link peered up at the towering Zora walking by his side, or so he tried. It was difficult to read his expression, even at such a proximity, because the Prince was just so damn tall. All Link could tell was that Sidon’s pale cheeks had flushed a faint violet from the heat of the sun.

“Look at me,” Link spoke, easily capturing the Zora Prince’s attention with these words, and he fixed him with a serious expression. “How can you be having this conversation, when you just lost five of your people against those creatures?”

A faint glimmer of surprise could be seen shining in the gold of Sidon’s eyes, yet it dimmed away in quiet disappointment, like a star fragment cutting across the sky and disappearing behind a mountain’s peak. He sighed, but he did not break the Hylian’s eye contact. “I can have it with you, because I trust you. I thought you might have been willing to entertain my ‘foolishness’.”

The tone of Sidon’s voice somehow forced the Hylian’s mind to open up, almost as though he’d cut through his skull to do so. Perhaps it was momentary, but for that moment, Link actually considered the ideas being presented. He’d seen mounted bokoblins canter past territorial Lynels, without the Lynel giving them even a huff of warning, and perhaps that was odd.

But then again, if one simply considered all monsters to be an allied force under their own deity, or whatever they considered the Calamity to be, it wasn’t strange at all. It was uncomfortable, however, because it truly did mean that monsters were no different than the people unified under Hylia. It brought about the question of whether the Calamity itself was actually evil, or merely just an opposing force. It wasn’t as though Link hadn’t felt slighted by his own supposedly ‘benevolent’ Goddess.

“I’m just not the best choice for this discussion,” Link took a gentler tone as he finally responded, his head dropping low as he spoke, though a tiny smile found its way to his face. “I’m just the weapon of the Goddess’s will. Killing monsters is my only purpose. I would be useless if empathy were my strong suit.”

Link felt uncertain of what the Prince must have thought of these declarations and the bleak sense of humor that accompanied them, but a quiet titter of amusement came from him, regardless.

“When you said you were going to ‘speak’ with the lynel,” Link began again, this time a bit less
preachy than before, even if deep down he still thought this entire idea was idiocy, “…were you actually planning to use those powers of yours to connect with it?”

“That was the idea,” Sidon gave a nod. “Of course it does make me nervous. Feeling changes in people’s moods comes naturally but actually reaching in takes much more strength, which could leave me vulnerable.”

“Why not just try this on something a little less dangerous than a lynel?” Link suggested.

“I have.”

“And?”

“I’m able to hold some sway over other creatures for a short time, but it typically just confuses or frightens them further. I can grasp enough to understand their motivations, but the real barrier is that fact that we can’t communicate.”

“Why would a lynel be different?”

“Lynels are very intelligent, despite how aggressive they are. And, as I mentioned when first we discussed this, this one has given me reason to believe that it perhaps can be reasoned with. Maybe it’s different somehow?”

“I’m still pretty sure it will just kill you.” The Hylian didn’t really need to guess at that possibility. He’d been killed by the lynel in question twice, just days earlier. “Remember what I said about middle ground? This really isn’t it. This might actually be a bit beyond getting swallowed by a hinox.”

Sidon’s frustration with his inability to gain any ground with the Hylian Champion made itself audibly evident as a deep sigh poured from him, his tail giving a flick. Link couldn’t help but watch in subtle amusement, a bit too pleased with himself for causing the Prince to break his mannerly facade, even slightly.

“Do you ever think,” Sidon began, managing his frustration just enough to persist, “…maybe these creatures aren’t ‘civilized’ because we don’t allow them to make it to that point? Or maybe it isn’t wrong for them to live the way they do. Maybe we’re just the stronger, smarter monsters, in the end.”

“Hm.” Oddly, this was a notion that Link could entertain. He had felt frustration with his own useless, apathetic race of people so deep in his bones, his marrow probably ran black. There was also that odd kinship between himself and the monsters of this world, that feeling like he was really one of them and had been tricked into fighting on the opposite side; maybe that was why Sidon seemed so determined to tame him? These probably weren’t the kinds of justifications the Prince was searching for, however. “Not that I disagree, but if the Calamity escapes before I destroy it, the monsters may get the better of us, then it won’t matter whose stronger or smarter,” Link answered casually, choosing not to give any voice to his dark thoughts.

“In any case, you need not assume I’m entirely naive,” Sidon spoke in reassurance, still a bit defeated as he did. “I didn’t plan to approach the lynel without being prepared for a fight. If it remains a problem and a danger to my people, it must be dealt with.”

“Sidon…” The Hylian spoke, his voice oddly touched with feeling, the burden of his ever-present frustrations managing to present themselves at the forefront of his mind, screaming in his face, ‘hey, remember me?’

Link’s mind wandered off from the topic of discussion to those needy feelings of anger and bitterness
that just couldn’t quiet down. He needed to cast them from his shoulders in order for this relationship, whatever it was, to stop feeling so damn forced. He needed respite from his own turmoil, but relief could only be granted by his unknowing tormentor.

The Prince, though his attention was an ever-drifting force, quickly found focus when his dear friend’s tone and mood changed suddenly. “Yes, my friend?” he uttered in concern, placing a gentle hand on the Hylian’s shoulder.

“I actually wanted to talk about something else,” Link began, his own eyes venturing elsewhere at the weight of the Prince’s attentive gaze on him. “I just didn’t want to mention it while Brivere was here.”

“Oh? What is it? What’s troubling you?” The Zora’s back curved slightly as he bent himself lower, attempting to look into Link’s face as the Hylian’s head dipped downward.

The Champion took a deep breath, then let it out, feeling strangely unsure of himself, though he would blame it on the fact that this subject hadn’t been received well, or at all, when he last attempted to speak about it. He spoke slowly but clearly, wanting to be sure that his words got through to the towering Zora by his side. “You remember the celebration that your people threw after we got the Divine Beast under control?”

As Link spoke, Sidon’s posture straightened, his hand withdrawing and falling by his side. The Hylian turned a sideways glance in Sidon’s direction, sure that the Zora Prince knew precisely what topic was about to be dragged back to light, and he fell into a moment of hesitant silence as it was evident that it couldn’t be avoided.

“.Yes.” Sidon uttered at last, discomfort clear in his voice, even as he tried to maintain his usual confidence.

Link could have spared the Zora this awkward conversation, seeing that Sidon didn’t wish to take part, but the Hylian also couldn’t feasibly continue this friendship without getting this out of the way, either. He had no mercy to offer. “And you remember that night?” Link continued.

“.of course,” came the Prince’s curt reply.

“I haven’t thought to bring it up for so long, because I’ve been unsure how you felt about it,” the Hylian explained, thinking for a moment that maybe it was unfair for him to expect an explanation of another person’s feelings when he couldn’t quantify his own emotions or discern their meaning.

“Uhh..” The Prince seemed like maybe he wasn’t sure, either, or that he didn’t wish to be made to speak about it. “In what sense, Link?”

“It just seems like you’ve been pretending it didn’t happen, or like you started to avoid me after that,” Link began, trying to put his grievances into words, “I can’t tell what you’re feeling and hanging in uncertainty has left me hostile. I need to know what’s really going on.”

Clearing his throat, the Zora glanced about, seeming to measure the distance between himself and every other person nearby before he dared to speak. “Your timing is certainly.. Unusual,” he said, more of his typical mannerly, dismissive nonsense, his hope to sway Link from this conversation apparent.

“Sidon,” Link bitterly spat the Zora’s name, “there is no good time. There hasn’t been one single moment that seemed right. I’m tired of waiting at this point.”

“Alright. Well, Link,” the Prince hesitantly relented, pausing to think carefully over his words, “what
happened that night was... hasty, to be sure. I hadn’t considered that it could hurt our friendship; Actually, I was sure that it wouldn’t, so I apologize if that was an ill assumption, on my part. I certainly wasn’t avoiding you at any point, I am just, truly, very busy. In fact, knowing that you were still around Zora’s Domain in the days that followed, I had actually been trying very hard to find time for you, not wanting to leave things where they were. Even so, whenever I came around, you seemed... well, hostile as you said. I’m sorry, I wish I had known you wanted to talk about it, but alas, I don’t read minds without good reason.”

“Okay...” Link spoke a bit more calmly, quietly considering what he had to say, now that they had breached the forbidden topic. “The morning after; I tried to talk about it then, but you kept avoiding the subject, deflecting me, all very politely, of course. You had the bed stripped and cleaned, for pity’s sake...”

“It’s normal to keep one’s bed clean,” the Prince spoke up quickly, feeling it was odd for Link to be offended by such a thing. He wasn’t sure if this was some kind of Hylian taboo, as they surely had more feelings about beds than Zoras. Still, Zoras drained and refilled their cisterns after lovemaking too, so it wasn’t as if there was no comparable equivalent.

“It just made it seem like,” Link began, pausing as he attempted to explain what he felt, remembering watching all remnants of his presence being sanitized from the Prince’s quarters, “like the entire thing made you feel dirty, or ashamed.”

“Oh,” Sidon uttered quietly as he grasped the Hylian’s explanation, then hovered in an uncomfortable silence, not bothering to deny that this could possibly be true. “Don’t take it personally, Link, you are certainly an attractive Hylian and a treasured friend. Nothing about you is off-putting to me. But the conclusion you came to was somewhat of an accurate one.”

It had been a very long time since Link had felt unable to even find words before the Zora Prince, minimal though his speech could be. But now, hearing the Zora confess such a thing, he had not one word to say. Listening to that admission, he felt perhaps he had known all along and had just been anxiously looking for the evidence to prove his fears, his self-loathing putting on a mask of anger, because that fury was much more comfortable than facing himself at fault.

“Link,” Sidon spoke up when his Hylian friend said nothing at all, his tone taking on a gentle, reasonable sound, “...there was blood all over the sheets. That isn’t normal. What happened wasn’t normal. It was... truly awkward.”

“No, it was fine until... that part.” And how busy he had been, feeling bitter and empty over Mipha, using her brother to entertain his needful body while pursuing a petty means to spit in the face of his fallen lover. He wanted her to see and he made sure she did. “I just pushed things a bit too far. It was a mistake.”

“It was more than that,” the Prince spoke, gently shaking his head. “You wanted to know how I felt, so listen well. What I felt was... used. I suppose there was a certain appeal to the fact that I’m something different than what you are and I was sure that would be okay. Yet, after the act, I felt as though I had been made into a plaything, rather than a person and I didn’t like how that felt. The morning after, I just wasn’t ready to talk about it then. I needed time to think. Beyond that, I didn’t believe you cared to discuss it either or I would have. However, you and I are adults. We can handle our feelings like adults, surely. Our friendship need not be strained by one awkward experience.”

“I didn’t mean for it to be so... Terrible,” the Hylian uttered the weak, quiet lie. He was guilty of everything the Prince had so gently accused him of and even more that Sidon wasn’t aware of. At that time, he hadn’t cared what Sidon thought or felt and he was lost as to how that could have possibly changed, but was distinctly aware that it had.
“I didn’t use the word ‘terrible,’” the Zora attempted to reassure, as though he were afraid to wound Link while explaining how Link had hurt him. “I’m fine, please don’t assume that there are any hard feelings. And I wasn’t just feeling sorry for myself, if that’s what you’re thinking. I feel badly for what happened to you, as well. I could have said that I didn’t want to do as you asked, but I did it anyway. I knew better. I was foolish. In the end, it seems clear that you and I are just too different, that Hylians aren’t meant to endure the kinds of things that are natural between us Zora.”

The Prince’s words held finality, and while Link didn’t exactly have expectations of receiving any more than what he’d already taken, something about this felt so abrupt and empty. Link didn’t want to let this go so easily, he didn’t want to allow this rare beginning to turn so quickly into yet another ending. “That’s not true,” he said, finally peering up into the handsome Zora Prince’s face, looking on the confused expression he found upon it, “you and I just need to be less.. reckless. I-..”

The Hylian trailed off, letting his words die in his throat, a lump of wasted verbiage that he might have choked on. What was he thinking? That he could attempt to care? He should have known better by now.

“Hn,” the Prince hummed quietly to himself, watching the Hylian as Link’s gaze drifted back to the path before them. He did not turn away however, looking on his Hylian friend with an almost apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, my friend. I just.. I don’t think it’s wise.”

A sigh came from the Zora as he spoke these words, as he felt Link’s inner turmoil raining over him, a torrent and flood of.. guilt? Disappointment? Hatred? Anger? Resentment? No, it was ever impossible to read, like stone etchings weathered beneath the storm. Sidon let his gaze stray from the Hylian by his side, slowly turning over his shoulder just enough to see Brivere, still following at a distance.

“Please don’t fret,” Sidon spoke, an attempt to make amends. Link felt the weight of the Zora Prince’s hand come to softly rest upon his shoulder and the Hylian raised his bleak, blue eyes to look up at the Prince as he stooped ever so slightly. “Our friendship is a fulfilling one. That is enough, isn’t it?”

Link said nothing, but offered a nod of his head.

The Prince found himself heaving a sigh of relief at seeing the sun settle behind the curtain of mountains that cradled his beautiful home. He felt sure that his fins had begun to cook in the heat of the afternoon, yet now he was refreshed from a lengthy soak he’d treated himself to before getting back to business.

The hazy shine of Zora’s Domain cast a ghostly glow over the numerous residents, many of which were coming out from their dwellings as night took the sky and slowly began to turn it a deep, dark blue. The summer months in Zora’s Domain saw a shift in the Zora people, turning sleep schedules a bit closer to nocturnal thanks to the heat. Yet, as beautiful and clear as this night was, it was one Prince Sidon would be spending asleep, once his duties were concluded.

Of all the fantastical structures of the Prince’s home, the palace glowed the most brightly of all. Despite having been away for a few days, however, he wasn’t as pleased as he could have been to see his home, nor ascend the stairs to the palace. He was all too aware of how fatigue effected his political performance and he would need every ounce of his vigor to face his father’s council.

Sidon’s bare feet gently splashed in the quiet fountain of water that poured across the stairs, glossing the entire surface to a glassy shine. Following him was Brivere and five other young Goddess-
bullied nobles, all of which had accompanied him on his expedition. They now joined their Prince in a battle of a different sort.

“The Hylian Champion didn’t wish to accompany you?” Brivere spoke plainly, taking a single long stride to bring himself to his Prince’s side.

“Hm?” Sidon turned to look upon the golden Zora by his side, his frantically working mind interrupted by the odd question. “Oh, yes, the Champion has gone off on his own again. He mentioned having things to see to and he typically doesn’t involve himself in these matters, anyway.”

“I see,” Brivere gave a nod of acknowledgment, opting to say no more on the subject, though he wasn’t entirely convinced. Given the Prince’s recent doubts, it was clear that the Hylian Champion had plenty to say about how Sidon led and behaved, even when he pretended he had nothing to say at all.

A bell was rung to announce the hour by the palace timekeeper, and the Prince proceeded into the palace where the Royal Council had gathered, headed by his father’s personal adviser. Muzu offered Sidon a nod of greeting as the Prince came before them.

Sidon smiled and offered a bow of respect to thank them for gathering, then he looked over all the faces in attendance as he cleared his throat. Some of the faces belonged to very elderly Zoras, while others were weathered and wise but not quite so old. This council consisted of various prominent nobles, each the head of their respective family, though they were vastly different people, from wealthy landowners, to retired Knights and respected members of the Zorana Basilica, the Zora branch of worship paid to Hylia.

It was no small task to appease the lot of them, so to attempt to make motions before them often felt like feeding oneself to the sharks.

“Good evening,” Sidon greeted them, his eyes still moving slowly from one face to another, “I’ve come before you first to detail the results of a request submitted by those among you who have been negatively affected by the monsters lining the route from Zora’s Domain to the Lanayru Wetlands.”

Sidon paused and Kree stepped forward from where she stood in line behind him, presenting him with a report taken by the Guard Captain. It was a very detailed report, but Sidon skimmed over it for the details that the council would most want to hear. “The official count of monsters slain along the route include: 56 lizalfos, 32 bokoblins, 12 moblins, 16 octorocks, and a Hinox. Since the last clearing of the route, the numbers of monsters have increased, particularly in the amount of bokoblins that have made it out this way, likely due to the occupation of an old Hyrulean Fort located in the Lanayru Wetlands. From the Fort, our forces cleared approximately 300 bokoblins and 30 moblins. In short, the work is complete and the route is now clear.”

The report was passed back into Kree’s hands, with Sidon attentively looking over the council, seeing that some of them were nodding gladly at the news, likely those invested in maintaining trade with traveling merchants, or those that could turn a profit from any resources made newly available.

“If I may,” Sidon spoke up once again, “in order to maintain the security of the route, I would suggest further efforts to remove and dispose of any monster remains left behind. If these remains aren’t cleared, then the majority of the monsters will simply reappear upon the next Blood Moon. The request could be made through the city guard, but it would be most helpful if general laborers were hired on for the bulk of the work.”

“I agree with the notion of further clearing of the route,” came a voice from the council, to which Sidon offered a nod of gratitude. “However, clearing the abandoned fort was beyond the mandate of
our request. As such, would his Highness care to elaborate on why it was done?"

A soft chorus of voices hummed and they nodded their heads, agreeing. Even without any reports, it was clear that word had gotten out about the losses suffered prior to Sidon’s arrival, if the council’s reaction was any indication. Still, the Prince maintained his pleasant smile and said, “I would be happy to clarify, yes. Before setting out, we had no way of knowing the state the abandoned fort was in. However, once our group was within its vicinity, it became quite clear to us that if we did not secure it, the route would be lined with bokoblins again within a matter of days, making the entire mission virtually pointless. I discussed it with the council available to me at the time and this was the conclusion we came to.”

“Five of our soldiers were lost for what we believed was a simple request?” came a quiet, gentle voice from one of the Basilica Apostles. Her tone was more solemn than critical, but it still caused a stir across many of the other council members, until one slightly more aggressive member added, “It seems that it was by poor judgement that these five individuals lost their lives, if this is true.”

“What will the impact on security be?” another voice chimed in, quickly wresting control of the situation from the Prince, though he maintained his cool, well-mannered calm, even as he was criticized. “This means five positions of the Zorana Guard must be filled, all while our Guard Captain is still being covered for, as he was injured as well.”

The Zora Prince shook his head and raised a hand to calm the council members before him. “I assure you all, our security can only be improved from this point, on. The route is free of monsters and there is no shortage of recruits for the City Guard. New recruits are regularly rejected, in fact. The Zorana Guard’s ranks are beyond capacity for the amount of security we need and can afford. Five open positions can be filled with ease.”

There were yet more heads shaken as Sidon spoke, more wrinkled faces pinching into bitter scowls, until someone uttered the words, “Shameful. It’s unbecoming of a future king to speak of his subjects as though they were expendable.”

“Let’s not bring personal feelings into these matters, if you please,” Sidon quickly spoke up, still wearing a smile on his face though there was bite to his tone. “I feel the pain and suffering of our people much more deeply than anyone here, especially considering I fought alongside those who gave their lives. My council and I did what we could to minimize losses and those we did lose gave their lives to assure our future and security. To diminish that only demeans their sacrifice.”

At last, the council was left in relative silence, quieted by the Prince’s words. He held no foolish assumptions that he had won them over, but he took the opportunity to present his own motion to them as he felt he had their attention. “I do believe that clearing the fort was a matter of import, and not just as an extra measure to maintain the security of the route leading to our Domain. It is my belief that the fort could be of use to our people, perhaps as a trade port or even as the beginnings of a new settlement. From what we saw of it, the fort is stable and secure. The repairs necessary would be fairly minimal.”

Another voice spoke up to note one fact that the Prince was seemingly forgetting. “The fort is within land considered territory of the Kingdom of Hyrule.”

Sidon gave his head a soft, dismissive shake. His people could guiltlessly pile their scorn and hatred upon the Hylian people yet still managed to act as though they held respect for the borders of a fallen Kingdom. “Well pardon me for saying so, but I don’t believe the Hyruleans are getting much use out of it. Even if the Kingdom and Court of Hyrule were still around, it could easily be said that the territory was indirectly gifted to us, as the Hylian Champion aided us in securing it.”
“We still don’t have the resources nor the hands necessary for such an immense undertaking.” A voice of stubborn doubt rose up to challenge the idea presented. “How would we even keep such an extensive line of territory secure? It would only lead to further incident! Did his Highness have plans to remedy these deficits?”

“I’m so very pleased that you asked!” Sidon responded with enthusiasm that was dripping with false gratitude. He could see Muzu shaking his head at the highest seat of the council, fighting off a secretive smile which was pulling at his lips.

“I went over just such a plan with Kree of the Royal Order,” Sidon gestured to the deep gray Zora standing in line behind him, and she offered a bow to the council as she was acknowledged. “We believe that if we’re quick in our movements, we can establish a guard route between Zora’s Domain and the fort. We would need to set a permanent camp for our forces within it, perhaps additional barracks, in time. For the greatest likelihood of success, however, I would need this plan approved and set into motion before the occurrence of the next Blood Moon. As for resources, labor and forces available; Council Members, even with clutch restrictions in place, our Domain is at its carrying capacity. What we certainly do have are hands for the work. What we don’t have are resources enough to maintain all the repairs necessary to our Domain, with it overpopulated as it is. We’ve been paying diamonds from the royal treasury for the luminous stone needed to repair our structures, luminous stone which was once abundant and is now depleted, unless, of course, the council would like to see us mine our Hallowed Caverns in desperation.”

“Blasphemy,” one of the particularly devout members of the Basilica hissed, sharp teeth glinting in a snarl of offense, “even the suggestion.”

“Ah,” Sidon tittered, offering a deep bow of his head in apology, “of course it was not a suggestion, merely a warning. My apologies if my language wasn’t literal enough. Council Members, my point is that we desperately need to expand our territory in pursuit of the very resources we do not possess. We need this fort.”

As it became clear that the Prince had very little patience for irrelevance, one of the council members spoke up to offer something that could actually progress the conversation. “Highness, before this motion could even be considered, the fort would need to be surveyed by our architects, to get a better idea of what actual resources would be required to restore or modify it to suit our people’s needs.”

“I agree,” Sidon responded with a nod, “I can take care of the paperwork necessary for such a request myself and have it submitted by tomorrow. I would ask that the council work quickly in assigning someone to the request, as there is one important detail that I have yet to mention, in regards to the fort.”

The council members looked on the Prince in silence as Sidon folded his hands behind his back, his posture straightening before he spoke. “The fort should now be considered a site of cultural significance, as we left behind five stone pyre circles. If we do not take control of the fort, then our pyre circles are sure to be desecrated when the monsters return on the Blood Moon.”

“Under whose authority did you hold a service?” The calm voice of one of the Basilica members spoke, genuinely curious as to the answer.

“By the authority of Strata, Knight of the Goddess Order.” Strata offered a bow before the council, bending one knee and pushing his tail over one shoulder as his head dipped low. Sidon paused as the council’s attention fell upon Strata, then continued as the Knight stood upright once more. “As a Knight of the Zorana Basilica, he holds enough legal authority to officiate a warrior’s funeral service, and the Rite of Departure. Council Members, if you’re in doubt, we all wear the honor burns from the service.”
Sliding off his elaborate cuff, the Prince raised his arm above his head with his wrist turned out so the council could plainly see the darkened scales. His six subordinates closely followed his example, removing any coverings they might have been wearing and raising their arms to expose their wrists.

“This is outrageous!” One of the council members took immediate offense, standing from his seat. “This was a political move! You intentionally used our fallen warriors’ deaths for your own ends!”

“Council Members, to be certain that these sacrifices were not in vain, I did what I had to; I did what was right.” Sidon lowered his arm and very gently slid his silver cuff back over his hand, turning a polite smile to the council once he looked back up at them. “I hope you’ll do the same.”

The Prince bowed low before his father’s council, his subordinates once more doing as he did. They remained in this position of respect for an extended moment, just long enough for Sidon to reach out, mentally taking stock of who was truly outraged versus how many were neutral or even pleased.

When the Prince straightened, he turned to exit the throne room in order to allow the council to discuss the matter. Sidon’s six subordinates closely followed, Brivere walking especially near and coming to stand by the Zora Prince’s side.

“Surely riling them right at the end didn’t help your cause, my lord,” he said calmly, sparing a look up into the frustrated visage of his Prince. “Did you take count?”

“Hn,” Sidon gently nodded his head, sighing as his group descended the stairs once more, stopping to stand together before the palace. “That last move upset almost half of them. We need two thirds of the council’s votes, at least, for the King to approve the motion.”

“You have the heads of our families’ votes,” one of the young nobles spoke, their eyes momentarily falling on Brivere, then flicking back to Sidon. “Well, five out of six.”

The Prince gave an appreciative smile, nodding his head. “Yes, and I am grateful to all of you and your families. I just hope that, despite the outrage, we’ll get the votes of the Basilica members by default.”

“Surely they will want to protect our pyre circles from desecration,” Strata said in a quiet, reassuring tone. “It is the right thing to do.”

“My lord, I believe you handled the Council masterfully. I’m sure they live in fear of the day a Zora as strong-willed and clever as yourself becomes King,” Kree began, the dimples of her cheeks depressed as she grinned. She then cleared her throat, glancing about at the others in the group a bit awkwardly. “Do you have any further need of us?”

“No. You’re all dismissed and our work is complete, for now,” Sidon sighed, but maintained some semblance of a smile before his peers. “Thank you, all.”

As the other four nobles bowed and left the Prince and Brivere where they stood, Kree did not walk away, despite having been the one to prompt the dismissal. “Speaking of your future rule, my lord.. I know this is a bit outside of tradition, but given how well-known you are for acting beyond the strict limits of our old ways, I thought you may appreciate it-”

“Oh?” Sidon uttered in intrigue that was a bit half-hearted due to the onset of fatigue, “Yes, what is it Kree?”

“As I’m sure most noble families are doing also, my family intends to present me to the King as a possible suitor for yourself. I thought, perhaps, I would simply present myself to you, for your consideration,” Kree’s words came out hard and clear, each syllable like a blow exchanged on the
battlefield, yet even so, she could not meet the Prince’s gaze. “You and I trained as warriors under the same mentor and I’ve always admired you for your strength and courage, as well as your skillful leadership.”

“Kree..” The Zora Prince began, his voice quiet in the surprise of this makeshift proposal. He blinked, his golden eyes tracing the violet color staining the Knight and noblewoman’s cheeks, thinking it was odd to see someone as bold as her suddenly so flustered. He chuckled softly at the sight, finally gaining her eye contact as he did, and she fixed him with an embarrassed but very serious expression, as though she may well fight him if he laughed any further.

With an attempt to wave off his previous amusement, the Prince allowed a warm smile to remain upon his lips as he spoke. “I certainly also recognize you to be a powerful, valiant warrior, and your confidence and council have been advantageous to me, but the truth is, I’m simply not looking to be wed any time terribly soon.”

“Hmm,” the charcoal colored Zora gave her head a nod, sighing as though in relief, and relaxing her posture. “I bet you’d love to stay the bachelor Prince for life, wouldn’t you? Well if you ever change your mind, I’m still here for your consideration. I would grant you strong heirs, probably as stubborn as you are, but becoming of your legacy. And don’t worry, you still have my family’s support, regardless of your decision.”

“You have my thanks, Kree, for all your hard work and your support,” the Prince offered his words in a tone of sincerity, smoothing over any awkwardness between himself and the young Knight, so that when she walked away, she did not appear to be overly hurried or tense.

A long, slow breath tightened the Zora’s Prince’s chest as he inhaled, then he let it out again, his head tipping forward slightly. By his side, he could feel an unusual buzz of emotion from his own Knight, and he spoke up in an unamused tone as soon as it caught his attention. “Stop that, Brivere.”

“Stop what, my lord?” The golden Zora uttered, his voice feigning ignorance perfectly, despite the smile that pulled at the corners of his mouth.

“You’re feeling particularly amused,” Sidon explained as though Brivere truly did not know. “Stop.”

“You’re imagining things,” Brivere said in a completely serious tone that belied his playfulness.

“I should make you copy every word of ‘The Princely Manner’ yet again,” a gruff voice called out to the Prince, interrupting his previous exchange. Sidon turned to see the Zora who spent many not-so-patient years educating him, now slowly hobbling his way down from the palace, one stair at a time.

“Ah, Muzu.” He greeted the elder Zora with excitement and anticipation beaming from him. “Please, what was the council’s decision?”

“You need to get the orders to have the monster remains cleared from the route written up very soon, as well as the paperwork necessary to send out the proper specialists to inspect that fort of yours.” He nodded his head, giving his former pupil a chiding look. “You managed to catch the attention of the council members who are part of the Basilica with that stunt, as was your intent, so you’ll be pleased to hear that they’re sure to request that the Divine Oracle send forces to inspect the pyre circles.”

At this news, the Prince indeed perked up, the smile upon his face turning sincere for likely the first time all evening. “That’s progress, at least. I’ll get the other orders written up tonight and have them submitted to the proper authorities tomorrow.”

“You should mind that sass of yours before the council. If you continue to be so arrogant, you’ll lose
all approval.” Muzu hissed in warning, bopping Sidon in the hip like a misbehaved child before folding his hands behind his back.

“How can it be helped, Muzu?” The Prince said, his voice heavy with annoyance. “These nobles are so old-fashioned and stubbornly opposed to progress.”

“That is the nature of politics. You’re too young to already be so frustrated.” Despite his scolding, the elder Zora couldn’t help but chuckle, feeling perhaps the fiery, young Prince at least made said politics a bit more entertaining. “However, wily as you may be, that forethought helped you to take hold of the situation, so I suppose my lessons weren’t wasted on you. You did well.”

“Thank you, Muzu,” Sidon answered in warm, sincere gratitude, giving his former teacher a bow of his head in true thanks before Muzu carried on, likely glad to be done with duties for the evening.

“Shall I see you to your quarters, then?” Brivere spoke up when he was once again left alone with the Prince.

“I think I can make it there safely from here,” Sidon said, his voice almost taking on a tone of sarcasm, though he gave the other Zora an expression of question, finding a rare smile upon Brivere’s face when he looked at him.

“If you recall, I mentioned having something to soothe your dry scales.” The golden Zora spoke in a soft, calm voice, looking into the Prince’s face with fondness. “At this point you need something more than just a long soak. I have just the thing, if you’ll allow me to accompany you to your chambers to apply it.”

“You don’t think I could do it myself?” Sidon asked, teetering on the edge of insult once more.

“You’re certainly no hatchling,” Brivere answered, his words coming with ease, “but you’re probably the least flexible Zora I’ve ever known, so I’m certain you’ll need assistance.”

The Prince laughed quietly, beyond overly tired, but he nodded in acceptance. “Very well.”

Wow, friends, look at this beast of a fic. This story could have nearly won National Novel Writing Month and of course I feel like we’re just getting started here. So, for those of you who haven’t noticed my schedule yet, I’m thinking I will keep my updates on Fridays, so you guys will know exactly when to come looking. Enjoy, and please let me know what you guys are thinking and feeling about the story so far! :)
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Link and Sidon both find themselves spending the night alone; neither of them wanted that.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! Alright, I'm sure you guys are used to the wild things that happen in this story, so I doubt anything would surprise you lot, at this point, however, here's an additional warning. There's plenty of unnecessary touching but no actual smut, so worry not. Also, this fic has gone to some dark places already, but this chapter is a rollercoaster right into a trainwreck, so just be ready. It's a wild, crazy ride. Other than that, please enjoy! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The door opened with a gentle, soundless swish, the humid warmth of Sidon’s cistern bedchamber welcoming a guest into its peaceful confines. The Prince, himself, still stood before his mirror, hurriedly shedding his various adornments and placing them aside, while Brivere surveyed his sleeping quarters.

A gently trickling flow of fresh water poured from the oculus of the ceiling, the sound of it echoing musically within the pleasantly acoustic build of the space. The golden Zora strode over to the edge of the sleeping pool, bending down to dip his fingers beneath the surface, just to be sure the water was cool enough. He remained in his crouched position, golden eyes looking over the sheer size of the pool with maybe a touch of envy.

Sidon’s cistern was larger than most built for a single Zora, though of course it was made with the intention of fitting a King with ample space to spare. If Sidon were unable to move and submerge himself, what good would it be?

The Zora Prince’s feet tapped against the tiles as he approached and he came to sit himself down by Brivere’s side, at the edge of his pool. He, of course, didn’t look on it so impressed as his quiet Knight. Brivere turned a cautious glance to the Zora by his side, studying him in hurried observation; he was drained of his typical exuberance, his entire body just barely held up.

Brivere knew well that his Prince was very tired, so he made no effort to force Sidon into the showy expressiveness he typically maintained. He found himself feeling quite sure that it must have been exhausting.

The pack the golden Zora had been carrying was loosened from his back, and he laid it aside in order to extract the very thing that had given him reason to be here- a bottle of cream that the Zora people crafted for the sake of soothing very dry scales. It was made from the secretions of sneaky river
snails, blended with herbs and other minerals, but despite the ingredients, it left a pleasant smell behind. Most importantly, it served its purpose very well.

Brivere said nothing, quietly moving himself so that he was kneeled behind the Prince, uncorking the bottle and coaxing the cream out into one palm. The consistency changed ever so slightly from thick to a bit more loose as it was exposed to the warmth of the Zora’s hand and he spread it between his hands before placing them cautiously upon the Prince’s shoulders. Sidon flinched from the momentary chill but settled quickly as the liquid was smoothed over him and rubbed into his scales.

The Knight’s strong hands spread the liquid about the expanse of the Prince’s back, fingertips carefully dipping into the depressions between the muscles, making certain the balm was evenly distributed and that he didn’t miss a single spot. The liquid was rubbed along the Prince’s rear fins with care, then the bottle was picked up once more, and examined.

“I’m going to use the entire bottle on you,” Brivere quietly commented as he peered through the clear glass, having not considered that these quantities had been produced with an average sized Zora in mind.

Raising his head, the Prince came out of the tired lapse that had fallen over him and he looked over his shoulder with concern written on his features. “Should I reimburse you for it?”

“No, my lord.” The knight spoke in a quiet voice, a faint amusement still audible enough. He could hardly believe his Prince thought the cost was his concern, when it was rather that he may not have enough. He spoke up in reassurance, regardless. “I offered it to you, my lord. There’s no need for you to worry.”

“You’re off-duty Brivere.” Sidon spoke up. “You may just call me ‘Sidon’.”

“I'm not sure you officially dismissed me, actually.” The golden Zora spoke in observation, though he laughed softly as he did. “But it’s a habit now. You're stuck being ‘my lord’ forever.”

“I wonder if you call me that in your thoughts,” Sidon commented, a want to seem playful, if not for how tired he was. It caused Brivere to pause in consideration of the idea presented, a touch of surprise and embarrassment jumping up in his psyche before he stamped them down like tiny embers.

“Perhaps,” Brivere answered, with the Prince chuckling softly as he did. Brivere began to smear the balm over Sidon’s tail, his fingers gently grasping his pliant fins and spreading the liquid along them until they shined. Sidon began to lull once more as the other Zora’s hands moved along his tail, his eyes closing and his head lowering just a bit.

“Don’t fall asleep yet. I’m not finished,” Brivere said, his voice so smooth and calm, it was as though he actually wanted to see to Sidon nod off. “Turn around.”

Sidon made something of an effort to turn himself, managing to spin round until his outstretched legs were parallel to the water, and Brivere stood, stepping over one and fitting himself easily in between. The Prince observed, curiously fixated as his Knight remained completely impassive, dumping more of the cream into his palms and reaching out to rub it over the front of his shoulders, making certain to get under the flaps of his fins.

Brivere somewhat sighed, this quiet exhalation of breath the most expression that came from him, though it only seemed to be a vacant sigh and little else. He took more balm into his hands, smoothing it across the broad expanse of Prince’s chest, then up, along the graceful column of his neck so that Sidon raised his chin and Brivere’s hands snuck underneath his forefins.
“How are you always so calm and neutral?” Sidon asked, having never thought to question it before. He could recall many, many years ago, his sister specifically instructing him in showing emotion, despite how reserved she was, herself. As someone who could always just feel the emotions of those around him, he’d thought it wasn’t necessary to outwardly express, assuming everyone around him could feel everything the same as he did.

Brivere had emotions like anyone else, but he managed to keep them quieted and concealed, like trouble-making children, permanently placed into the corner in silence.

At the question, the golden Zora hardly reacted, his eyes not even meeting Sidon’s as he considered his response. He might not have been considering it at all, actually. Sidon couldn’t be sure so he ducked his head lower in an attempt to make eye contact.

“I’m going to get this all over your face if you’re not still,” Brivere spoke, attempting to rub the balm into the point of the Prince’s brow, then along his head fins, and Sidon tipped his head downward in order to give the other better access.

“I’ve been doing it all my life,” Brivere finally answered. “It just comes naturally now.”

“But why?” Sidon asked, falling quite still as the cream was rubbed into his head fins.

“Hm.” Brivere hummed in consideration, stretching himself up onto his knees so to reach the Prince’s topfin. “When one is pushed to the edge, people line up to shove one over it. One learns to ignore everything, to keep everything hidden, to deal with minor discomforts, rather than invoking major ones.”

“In order to be strong?” Sidon asked, raising his head and once again searching the face of his Knight, finally receiving the eye contact he’d been looking for. Brivere’s eyes were calm and as golden as his skin; like the rest of him, they gave nothing away.

“To be safe,” he answered.

“I see.” The Prince nodded, looking on his Knight with some degree of sympathy. He couldn’t feel any sorrow from the Zora before him, but he knew Brivere’s background well enough to assume there was reason for it. Sidon said nothing of it, however, not wanting to give his friend cause for distress. If Brivere wished to speak of his past, he would choose to do so unprompted.

As silence fell over them again, Brivere placed all of his focus back onto the task at hand, shaking the bottle that was nearly empty, just as he’d said it would be. Once he had an ample amount collected in his palm, he smoothed it evenly between his hands and rubbed it into the scales of the Prince’s thighs, applying gentle pressure as he worked it in, moving slowly down from there.

At the point that Brivere found himself massaging the balm into Sidon’s feet, the Prince decided to speak up. “You didn’t need to do all this. You’re my Knight, not my masseur.”

“We’re friends,” Brivere replied, making an actual effort to push his fingertips into the bottoms of the Prince’s feet, a soft titter coming from him as Sidon started to fall back at the sensation. “That and I know you can’t reach your feet.”

“I can, if I fold my legs to do it.” Sidon said in rebuttal, easing even further into a reclined position, clearly unable to make a legitimate fuss. He’d been walking all day, so of course his feet were aching. “Ahh, that’s nice.”

Despite how the Prince laid still under Brivere’s soothing touch, the golden Zora took only as long as was necessary to have Sidon slathered in the moisturizing balm and not one second more. He let the
other Zora’s foot slide gently from his grasp, down to the smooth tile below. “There. You’re evenly covered, my lord, and slathered thickly enough that the water won’t rinse the balm away.”

“Yes, all slimy. I’m just a giant river snail now.” The Prince uttered in slight distaste, pulling himself upright and gladly sliding into the cool water of his cistern. The heft of his body dipped him straight to the bottom and he exhaled all the air from his lungs to further allow himself to sink. His gills felt sticky from being dry and he just drifted lazily at the bottom of the pool for a moment, enjoying the simple pleasure of wetting his gills after such a long day in the heat.

Sidon stretched, then kicked softly to carry himself back to the surface where Brivere was waiting. Moments after the Prince’s head breached, Brivere bowed and said, “I will see myself out so you may rest, my lord.”

“Wait,” the Prince uttered, coming to the edge of the pool. The golden Zora had already turned away but paused and glanced back as Sidon called to him. “There is plenty of space in my own cistern, if you’d prefer to stay here. It saves you the effort of walking all the way home, as well.”

“Ah-” Brivere, for the faintest instant, looked almost perplexed. He chased that away with practiced quickness and cleared his throat, but still spoke up in question. “My lord?”

A great weight, of sorts, had settled into the back of Sidon’s mind and all the comforts of this world couldn’t remove it, apart from perhaps the distraction of company. Even resting, the dull hum of another person’s presence could well blanket his mind with enough emotional white noise to keep his own at bay. “Things feel a bit more stressful than usual,” he explained. “Simple company would be appreciated.”

There was hardly any physical sign, barely even a twitch of expression painting Brivere’s countenance, but for a moment, there was something deeply troubled to be felt from him. Still, he turned to face the Prince’s cistern and strode over to it, crouching low and slipping just beneath the water for a moment before he resurfaced near Sidon.

“My lord, I would stay without question,” he explained, the impassive sound removed from his voice so that it took on a more soft, comforting tone. He swam in near the Prince, gently bumping the crest of his brow to Sidon’s own, rubbing against him softly. “However, I cannot leave Estuu alone.”

“That’s right!” Sidon spoke in embarrassment, swimming back from Brivere, feeling he hardly deserved to be comforted when he was being so thoughtless. “I apologize, I simply forgot. I was being utterly self-absorbed, please forgive my absence of thought.”

Brivere shook his head, dismissing the Prince’s concerns, as they were completely unwarranted. “The council must have stressed you terribly. You forgetting important matters is unheard of. Nevertheless, there is no need for apologies. I will return in the morning, if you like?”

“Alright,” the Prince spoke softly, ashamed that he’d allowed himself to commit such a blunder. Thankfully, Brivere seemed relatively unbothered. The other Zora gave a tiny kick, the water rippling around them gently as Brivere tucked himself near Sidon once more, his slightly smaller frame fitting perfectly into the space provided. His hands were rested upon the Prince’s cheeks, the touch cautious but reassuring as Brivere brought the point of his brow back to Sidon’s own, offering a nuzzle of comforting affection.

The touch was maintained for a few quiet moments, then the other Zora crawled from the pool, uttering a polite, “goodnight,” before he left Sidon in peace.

..or in restless, troubled introspection, as it seemed to be.
Link hated it here and he wished he had a better reason for coming back again and again, other than the fact that he’d stored all of his excess supplies inside this particular Sheikah Tower. Neatly chopped, stacked wood took up a small area along the edge of the circular enclosure that was the Great Plateau Tower. Armor and garments in varying states of wear and cleanliness were piled nearby. Excess weapons, shields and bows laid close, just a bit more orderly but not by much. The Hylian Champion had managed to clean out most of the collected monster parts, spending his evening zipping from stable to stable, selling this and that to various merchants until his stash was emptied.

A fire crackled, softly lighting the tower and providing just a bit of warmth. While even the plateau had turned balmy in the hot, summer days, the nights still held a certain chill, a soft breeze turning to a harsh wind as the hours carried the moon across the sky, chased by clouds that would bring a storm.

The Champion sat himself at the edge of the tower, legs hanging over the side, the massive drop a welcoming temptation, if only he were a normal person who could actually stay dead. He wished he felt like a normal person, like a real person, but he didn’t and he wasn’t. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t normal for somebody to exist just for hatred and slaughter.

He really, really hated this place, even if it was peacefully quiet and offered him uninterrupted solitude. The view of the Calamity’s shroud was particularly clear, the black cloud just circling the castle in the same way an islander hawk lazily circled the sky, flying at such an altitude that it couldn’t have been hunting. It was just sort of existing, instead. Was the Calamity just existing for the sake of existence? Were its hatred and fury excusable feelings? Did it deserve revenge for whatever wrongs refused to allow it rest?

Link wasn’t sure. He was sure that Sidon had gotten into his head, however, causing him to question stupid, pointless things he never had before.

He didn’t want to think of that damnable Prince. He didn’t want to think about his pretty face, his golden eyes shining with apologetic pity, his pale lips stained red, his features darkened in the secretive veil of the late night, yet still so obviously hurting- no.

No.

The Hylian closed his eyes, sinking into the abyss behind his lids, imagining the drop before him taking his body into it with just the easiest forward movement, his stomach jumping into his throat for one uncomfortable moment before it all ended. Then began again and again and again.

And what an appropriate place for Link to be feeling suddenly so bitter that he couldn’t just end, like a bad story- the place where this bad story began. He took a deep breath, letting it out before he opened his eyes once more, the wind harshly whipping against his face and tousling his blonde locks as he turned to glance over his shoulder, in the direction of the Shrine of Resurrection. He wasn’t sure why, but that place gave him a very bad feeling.

This entire plateau gave the Hylian Champion something that qualified as a ‘bad feeling’, however. How could it be helped? He’d stumbled out of that shrine, wet and naked as a babe, his head about that empty, as well.

Who was he? He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything and the Ghost of a has-been King sure as shit didn’t give him any real indications. ‘Hello you confused, angry creature, go ahead and save my daughter and my kingdom now.’
Only a King could die and still assume he could hand out orders. No thanks.

How could he even ask such a thing, after haunting about and watching everything Link went through? This Hylian surely wasn’t whoever that ghostly King thought he was. He was no trained Knight, that much was certain. He wasn’t the same person they placed into that shrine 100 years ago and he knew that deep, deep down in his gut, but the truth was an aching pit of horror that dug itself in and kept itself hidden.

Was he even a real person? He didn’t know what he was.

He had wanted to be alone, but now that the dread was crawling up his spine, he didn’t want that any longer. He wanted a big, beautiful Zora man to smile at him, take away the emptiness and make everything make sense. But, of course, Link had thrown that possibility to the void. He’d damned himself.

Link crawled down from the danger of the ledge, the view beginning to lose its charm. Plus, his butt was getting sore. He let his gaze wander as he circled the tower, unsure where to go from here. He still didn’t know if he felt inclined to save Hyrule, or the world, or whatever was in danger from the Calamity. He surely had no motivation to do so. Was that so wrong with that, though? He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything.

When he’d crawled from that shrine, he hadn’t even known how to fight. He’d been like a newborn in the body of a., hell, he didn’t even know how old he was supposed to be.

He’d picked up a damn branch, stumbling about, shivering from the cold, hiding himself behind trees and stone outcrops, the furrows between his ribs deepening as he went days without food, too weak to fight when creatures came for him in the night and beat the life out of him again and again, and again, and again, and... by morning his mind was a hazy ghost of a place; he didn’t exist. He’d wandered, listless yet restless, blank yet driven by some bizarre force.

He’d found himself sitting before a fire that he stared into for however many days and nights passed him by as he just waited, his consciousness in a stupor he couldn’t escape from, his body a puppet he didn’t hold the strings for. Did he built the fire? Did he walk here on his own? Did he cook the food he could vaguely remember eating? He just didn’t know.

His body had been wracked with phantom pains, and there was more comfort to be found in sitting so close to the fire that his skin began to sting and itch from his proximity than if he simply made an effort to move himself back, even slightly.

In time, he’d recovered, still unsure what had happened. Had he died? Yes, he had died, many times and yet here he was. That made no sense. People didn’t die and come back. That made no sense. It must have been a dream. All of this was a dream.

Whatever it was, the morning Link finally felt capable of stringing thoughts together, converting them into words that he could tell himself and commands he could send into his worthless body, he found a bow and a few discarded arrows. He must have been using them to hunt and had eaten some bad meat; that’s what he’d told himself. It was all a fever dream. Nobody died and came back to life.

He’d spent that day hunting; focusing on a task gave him back a semblance of vitality, making the world around him feel a little real again. He’d been terrible at it. He scared everything in the forest with his loud, clumsy movements, and when he didn’t, his aim wasn’t even close to being good enough to kill anything. He wondered how he’d even managed to put his hands on any bad meat in order to poison himself in the first place?
Link had finally managed to locate an actual sword while he was busy shooting at fish. Remarkably, the fish all seemed to swim shallowly enough that they made themselves into fantastic targets and even though Link had emptied his quiver into the pond hundreds of times over, he had fish to eat by that night. Fish, baked apples and some water he boiled with Hyrule herbs. Maybe things weren’t so bad?

Link had apparently managed to delude himself.

He hadn’t wanted to stay on this plateau for the rest of his life, so he’d decided to do as the old man asked, if only to receive his paraglider to escape this isolated hell. However, he’d also known he would need to fight in order to accomplish this task. He’d practiced his swordsmanship using a torch against trees, trying to comprehend what actual battle against monsters would be like.

He’d had no fucking clue.

It was when Link decidedly took up his sword against an entire camp of bokoblins that he was brought to what was likely his lowest point in all his wanderings on the plateau. Not only did they manage to wrest his weapon from him, but they swarmed him once he was down, beating him more senseless than he already had been for even starting that fight.

Bokoblins might have been weak, but they were beyond vicious when given the upper hand. They were cruel. This particular camp had recently killed a boar, as Link could remember the smell of it roasting as they dragged him deeper into their camp, stomping and beating him, not with their weapons, not with the intent to kill him, but with the intent to hurt him.

That was it. They’d tied him like a pig and dragged him about for days with him kicking and screaming. They’d lashed him with torches, axe-handles, sticks, stones, anything but a blade, anything but something that would make the finishing blow. They’d strung him upside-down in a tree, and left him there, returning only to jeer and whack him a few more dozen times for amusement. He’d been bloodied from head to toe, every inch of him just a measurement of how much it was possible to physically suffer. He hadn’t even known the name ‘Hylia’ but he’d been praying to whatever nameless entities would be kind enough to allow one of those damn bokoblins to hit him hard enough to just kill him.. But they wouldn’t.

That was, until their food ran out. By then, the Hylian was beaten beyond broken, no will to resist, no ability to fight, flee or even struggle for the sake of dignity. He’d just been grateful that they didn’t attempt to eat him while he was alive. He’d met his end on their chopping block, and it was a bitter, thankful end, the sweetest release death had to offer.

And when he came back, he wasn’t afraid anymore. He was beyond enraged, beyond furious. The thought of making them pay was the only thing driving his aching, unfed, newly resurrected body. True, they could have done it all again if he failed, but that was also exactly why he wouldn’t.

It wasn’t a graceful fight by any means. He’d ran in swinging, intimately aware of every detail of their little camp, felling several of them with his sword, breaking the blade as he flailed it with relentless bloodlust, hurrying to where they kept the exact axe that had been used on him. He’d ended that fight atop one of their towers, gouging the face of anything that even thought of climbing up.

He’d been a trembling, terrified, blood-stained ball of fury and he’d found his fighting spirit in that very sense of bitter rage. Nothing would ever hurt him like that again, and even if something managed to, he would come back, and he would eventually find a way to make it suffer, to end its life.
And then there was Sidon.

No, that wasn’t right. The pain Link was feeling now wasn’t by the Prince’s doing. It was by his own doing.

He hadn’t realized that in making himself so numb, so bitter, so fucking cruel and dangerous that he would still be the idiot boy tied in the tree, and the monster holding the stick and swinging it over and over, all at the very same time.

The Hylian blinked and stopped walking, unsure how many times he’d blindly circled the tower while he locked himself in the dismal attic of his own head. He wanted to rest but his brain couldn’t shut up or stop venturing elsewhere while his body auto-piloted. He couldn’t grasp why his concentration was behaving so spastically. Normally he didn’t completely lose his fragile hold on reality until the night of the Blood Moon.

Link sauntered to his mess of clothes, pulling on his cloak for the tiny bit of extra warmth it offered, his mind still working over everything that had happened to bring him to this point. He took the huge sack of rupees he’d acquired, thinking perhaps counting them would lock his thoughts into a more comfortable pattern, so that he could finally rest. Hoisting the bag over his shoulder, Link carried the softly clinking collection closer to the fire, so he could actually see well enough to decipher what color each gem was.

It was funny- it had been the evening of the Blood Moon when he met Prince Sidon. He’d been intent on just sleeping in one of the towers of the Inogo Bridge, when that damn Zora fell from the sky, right into his life.

How had Link managed to go from whatever he felt the morning after some royal stranger spent an entire night looking after him, to the evening he decided he would completely spit all over that random kindness? Was it really anger and bitterness over Mipha? Or was it the sense that Sidon had only put in the initial effort because he just really needed a savior for his people and their desperate situation? Maybe it was the fact that Link hated being confused over whether he was attracted to the Zora Prince or utterly annoyed by the stupidly fake way he presented himself.

It was actually all of that, most likely.

So, of course, Link didn’t even think things over, he just jumped right into the first bad idea that came to him. He jumped into intimacy with the Zora Prince the same haphazard way he jumped into battles he wasn’t prepared for, his one and only goal always the damn same- I’ll just do as much damage as I fucking can.

The Hylian sorted the pile of rupees by color, because it was virtually thoughtless to do so. His hands were shaking the way they tended to when he began to breach the memories locked within the deepest depths of his consciousness. He stopped, bundling his hands together and drew them in close to his chest. He still had no clue if it was healthy that it often felt as though some parts of his mind were actually still dead and were only just beginning to wake back up.

Maybe that gross feeling would go away if he laid down for a moment? He slowly lowered his body to the ground, curling on his side with one trembling hand beneath his head. His ears twitched as the first few patters of rain met them, followed only moments later by the imminent downpour that instantly left the air smelling wet.

The air always smelled wet in Zora’s Domain, the foliage-lined areas of land vibrantly green and crisp, the wildlife energetic and abundantly healthy. It still smelled wet the night of the celebration, after Link had calmed the Divine Beast and slain the monster cocooned within, setting free Mipha’s
trapped spirit. The rain had stopped by then, but the air still held the fresh scent it left behind.

The atmosphere was joyous and jovial as the Zora people mingled, gathered in numbers Link hadn’t even known their people had reached. Apparently half of their population lived within the undercity and rarely ventured up to the upper levels, so witnessing the Domain square packed with Zoras came as a surprise.

Link stood far above all that, not even close to being interested in having his short self sandwiched between all those elegant yet monstrously tall people. Crowds were disconcerting enough, never mind when the crowd was made up of fish titans. However, he’d been fed to his capacity and he’d even had enough to drink to loosen up his tongue, so it wasn’t that bad.

Sidon still found him, despite the crowd, and despite how Link had taken refuge, tucked somewhere out of the way. The Zora Prince looked upon the Hylian with concern that was somehow charmed, a cautious hand reaching out to Link as the Hylian tipped back a drink with thirsty disregard for the alcohol content. The Zora’s sharp fingerscales clicked against the glass, his fingertips softly grazing Link’s knuckles as he attempted to slow the Hylian’s pace.

“Slow down,” he said, chuckling at Link’s persistent brashness, “Zora drinks are much stronger than Hylian drinks. You’ll make yourself quite sick at that pace.”

“I’ve already had several and I don’t feel any different,” Link carelessly replied, pulling free of the Zora’s gentle touch and finishing the drink anyway, maybe just because he felt challenged to do so as Sidon watched. When he placed the glass aside on the railing he was slumped against, he gestured to his collection of empty glasses, smiling in amusement at the Prince’s expression of amazed horror.

“A Hylian of your stature shouldn’t still be standing,” the Zora uttered in quiet wonder, looking as though he believed he was being tricked as he counted the empty glasses a few times over. “This amount would leave even a Zora unable to swim straight.”

A tiny laugh came out of Link at Sidon’s amazement. His face and ears felt a bit warm, so it was safe to say that the drinks were having some effect but there wasn’t much more to it than that. He looked up at the Zora at his side, who appeared as though he believed Link was soon to need a medic. He had a similar look of worry as he had the night they’d met, and the Hylian decidedly reached out to give the Prince’s hip a pat of reassurance before he turned frantic.

“Don’t look so worried,” Link said, turning so that his back leaned against the rail instead. “I have some kind of resistance to alcohol. I don’t know why, but it just doesn’t work for me.”

He actually didn’t know why he had such a heavy resistance, but he suspected it was somehow related to the fact that he also couldn’t die. It would only ever be a suspicion, however, because who could he actually discuss that with?

“You are truly amazing, my friend,” Sidon spoke, leaving Link to snicker over being complimented for over-indulgence thanks to alcohol resistance. Boundless, questionably sincere praise seemed to be what this Prince was all about, and Link quietly shook his head, bitter words begging to be set free while he debated whether or not it was the appropriate time and place.

“I’m beginning to think you want something, with how you keep complimenting me.” The Hylian allowed the words to escape, softening his edges by softening his tone ever so slightly.

The Prince hesitated at the words the Champion had spoken and Link glanced upward to catch the momentary guilt that crossed the Zora’s features before he chased it away with his ever charming smile. “Oh, I do!” Sidon enthusiastically reassured, “I want you to enjoy this evening. Has the
“Most things are new experiences for me,” Link said, giving something of a shrug, “but tonight has been particularly full of them. And when most of them are consumable, I can’t complain.” His thoughts were still plagued by the loss of a former lover he hadn’t even known he had. Memories of Mipha had wormed their way into his mind, boring a hole in him and chewing at his soft, rotting core. He wouldn’t mention that, however. He was actively trying not to be a total downer.

“That’s wonderful to hear!” Sidon said with a nod and various grand gestures of excitement. “I’m so glad to know that you’re pleased! And Zora cuisine truly suits your tastes, then?”

“I’m not very picky,” Link answered, though he couldn’t discount the quality of the food he’d received. He often found himself eating hastily thrown together ingredients that were heated over a flame, whereas these people provided meals that had been perfected over generations and prepared with care. “But yes, the food was good. It’s probably the best I’ve eaten in a long while.”

“Ah, good, good!” The Zora Prince continued to nod, clearly relieved and glad to find that his Hylian guest’s experience was a good one. His mood began to shift as he found himself caught in a moment of unsure silence, however, and he peered down upon the Hylian, golden eyes full of indeterminate emotions as he debated his next words. “Pardon me if I’m prying,” the Prince began, the tone of his voice quieter than before, perhaps even wary, “..but did you plan to leave from Zora’s Domain very soon? I should like to see you again before you go, if so.”

“You don’t see me right now?” The Hylian champion chuckled under his breath as he teased the Zora. “Maybe you should stoop down and get a better look.”

“Very amusing,” Sidon laughed softly, clearly just humor ing Link’s attempt at playful banter, perhaps even mildly frustrated that the Hylian chose now, of all times, to be funny. “Of course I meant, it would be nice to spend some time together.”

At those words, Link’s previous attempt at lightheartedness managed to be yanked through his fingers, the skin between his brows furrowing softly as his recently uncovered memories of loss prodded him in mentally uncomfortable places. His gaze faltered for a moment, blindly searching the space before him without sight as he became lost in thought. He quickly blinked those feelings away and turned his cold, blue stare upward to look upon the towering Zora’s patient expression. Sidon was standing with his posture straightened to the point of stiffness and Link couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re just like your sister,” Link breathed quietly, mostly to himself as he was aware that Sidon wouldn’t have a single clue what he was talking about. The Prince’s confused expression only reaffirmed that, when Sidon actually did manage to hear what Link said. “Nothing, nothing,” Link waved his hand dismissively, as though to sweep away his previous statement.

“We’re together right now,” Link said with a forced smile, settling back into a place of failing humor where he dodged the true meaning of what was being said to him. His lost relationship with Mipha had left him with this bleak notion that the future was certainly not a promised thing for anybody he happened to be interested in; either that or he was just terrible at flirting.

“I’m getting the sense that you’re being intentionally obtuse to fluster me further, Champion,” Sidon spoke, allowing his frustration to shine through his typical mannerliness, which left Link laughing in true amusement. It was good that Sidon seemed to understand his clumsy flirting better than he did, himself. Also, he was actually kind of adorable when someone managed to get under his scales.

“So,” the Zora persisted, reining himself in, in order to get through the difficult front the Hylian was
putting up. “..if I’d like to spend additional time with you?”

“Well I’m free all evening,” Link said with a shrug, still smiling up at the Prince and thinking that perhaps he should have offered more in return, given how difficult he was making things for him. “..but I thought you would want to mingle more, as social as you seem to be.”

“I’ve mingled quite enough for tonight, actually. I’m content enough to stay here with you, if it suits you,” Sidon spoke in a calm, genuine way, offering a smile that was somehow different from his usual charismatic charm. It was so strange, Link felt; despite the fact that his numerous deaths to Vah Ruta never actually occurred, Sidon still looked at him the same as he had through all of it, even though he didn’t remember.

Why did the Zora Prince look at him like that? He had no reason.

“I’m content to go elsewhere with you,” Link offered a bit bluntly, thinking only after he’d said it that it was maybe too blunt, as it left the Prince staring down at him with an oddly blank expression. Perhaps it was just too much of a surprise, as it was probably hard to translate the difficult way Link was behaving into true flirtation. He doubted it would be any more successful for him to say, ‘I find the way you behave slightly annoying but I also really want to touch you in all the places.’

“..the crowd is a bit overwhelming,” Link added.

The Prince blinked, then gave an awkward nod of his head as though he had been completely misunderstanding things, but had gotten his thoughts in order and was now on the right track. “Oh.. you don’t enjoy simply watching the gathering from this distance?”

The Hylian let out a sigh, his own inability to carry on a conversation and behave naturally as frustrating as the apparent social rules that made it taboo to just be honest. He wasn’t sure why a Prince, of all people, seemed to still be interested in interacting with him, as his usefulness was at its end, but Link was just too damn awkward to discern if Sidon’s wants aligned with his own, or navigate to the point where those answers could be unveiled to him.

Honestly, if Link had managed to capture Sidon’s attention with that whole ‘mysterious, wild, nomadic warrior’ image, why was it so hard for him to just reel this in?

“I was actually trying to imply that I’d like to go somewhere with you that is private, but I’m guessing from your reaction that you’re not interested,” Link confessed, feeling unable to carry on pretending he hadn’t meant it this way.

Again, the Prince was momentarily left looking confused, but that expression quickly shifted to something of charmed amusement, and he laughed quietly, despite the Hylian’s offense. “I’m sorry, my friend,” he attempted to excuse himself as he restrained his laughter, “but it is quite funny that you’ve been making it more difficult for me to arrange time for us to be together because you apparently wanted to be together.”

Sidon cleared his throat once he’d gotten himself under control, took a breath and attempted conversation once more. “Your suggestion did catch me by surprise, and I was lost for what to say in reply as I didn’t wish to assume too much. However, if I may point out, if you are simply finding yourself curious about our kind, there are those among us who profess in entertaining Hylians, for a price. I could handle the cost for you, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.”

“Did you..” Link began, finding himself feeling suddenly more awkward than before. “Did you really just offer to pay off a courtesan for me?”
“Was that terribly improper?” The Zora looked abhorred that he may have just trodden some sort of important social convention. “I apologize, I’m just very bad at reading you.”

“I wasn’t just curious about Zoras.” Link spoke in clarification and maybe a bit of reassurance. “I was interested in you. I won’t push it, though. It’s probably too odd, considering that I could have been engaged to your sister a century ago, not that I really remember much about it.”

“No, Link, I-” the Zora hurried into his reply, biting his tongue when he realized how rushed his thoughts had turned in his haste. He paused, thinking through what he wanted to say with better clarity, and then he placed a careful hand on the shoulder of the Hylian before him. “I am worried, of course. You mentioned that you remembered Mipha and said little else, but it is noticeable that ever since you began to recall, you’ve been.. Quite upset. I can’t imagine what it must be like to feel such loss and also such confusion.”

“I’m fine,” Link said, distinctly wanting to avoid this entire subject. “It is confusing, yes, but I’m okay.”

“Alright,” Sidon offered a nod of acceptance, though he seemed unconvinced. He drew his hand back as he spoke further. “As for myself, I have come to terms with things, as they are. In fact, your actions have given me the last bit of peace and closure I needed to move on. Perhaps I should have more reservations, especially considering where my people and culture stand on such things, but I personally believe it would be unfair and cruel for us to pretend that you are still promised to... well, a woman who is no longer with us. My friend, you are alive and with us, and you deserve to move on with your life and your love life. It is good for you to do so, actually.”

“Even with you?” The Hylian daringly uttered these words, peering up into Sidon’s face in order to watch and wait, to see if he could find a trace of temptation on his features. The Prince opened his mouth to speak, his words appearing to die in his throat before his tongue could dare utter them, leaving his lips parted as his golden gaze looked over the Hylian, dipping just below Link’s face for a fraction of a second in consideration.

“Ahh, well..” The Zora’s words were soft and hesitant, like someone who was trying to find the will to reject a rich sweet, but couldn’t. “I admit... It’s certainly a tantalizing notion. It’s impossible for me not to acknowledge that you are a very handsome Hylian and.. It’s a bit embarrassing to speak aloud, but as of late, I haven’t had much time for these sorts of..casual engagements.”

“Oh,” Link somewhat tittered at what the Prince’s words suggested. “So you’re saying you’ve had lots of casual partners, just not recently?”

“Not ‘lots’, as you say.” The Zora corrected, looking as though he were being accused of something horrendous. “But now and again, with the right person. Adolescence was what it was, I suppose.”

“Right. Those wild years between your fourties and fifties,” Link remarked, joking though his tone remained impassive. He reached up to grasp the railing at his back, and with a quick leap, he plopped himself atop, gaining a bit of extra height as he did. If only he actually were taller, then maybe Sidon wouldn’t seem like such a mountain to conquer. When he was sufficiently settled upon his perch, he looked up at the Prince once more, seeing that Sidon was just quietly watching him as well, a questioning uncertainty about him. Link gave him a smile that had a certain slyness to it, and he said, “Did adulthood take your desires with it?”

“Of course not,” Sidon said, his voice lowered to a softer sound as he walked nearer, the hazy glow of the surroundings shining on his scales and glinting in the gold of his eyes.

“Then why hesitate any longer?” Link breathed, his expression one of challenge as the Zora neared
in an almost cautiously slow way, as though the Hylian were a deep, black void that he could become trapped in. “I’m here offering myself, no strings attached, not trying to wed you for status, nothing like that. Do I need to pretend to fall backward from this rail to get you to touch me?”

“No,” Sidon uttered, reaching out to where Link was perched, his hands coming to rest upon the Hylian’s waist. He did not break the eye contact between them, the dark slits of his pupils flitting ever so slightly back and forth as he searched Link’s face, a questioning still written on his features. “But why the rush?”

“I’m trying to live for the moment,” the Hylian answered, adding, “It’s as you said, a casual engagement. There’s no need to overcomplicate that.”

If Link had to judge from the soft upturn at the corners of the Prince’s lips, it was an answer he accepted, or it was good enough for now, at least. Sidon’s hands at the Hylian’s waist held him securely, his fingers beginning to splay in investigative touch, his palms actually feeling Link’s weight as it rested between them and the comparatively small size of his frame, or maybe even the texture of the fabric that encircled the Hylian’s body.

Link tentatively reached up to touch one forefin, his hand tracing upward along the rough surface as Sidon bowed lower to allow the contact. With the Zora more within reach, Link’s hand dipped beneath his forefin to lay upon his cheek, curiously feeling the texture of his skin.

“Hm.. The white parts are softer,” Link commented in adoration. “Your red scales are rough, but the white areas are more fine.”

Sidon smiled as the Hylian idly investigated, his golden eyes peering down upon Link with interest while one hand roamed up from where it had been rested, careful fingertips smoothing over one of the Hylian’s pointed ears, the sharp tips of the Zora’s fingerscales following the intricate furrows of the delicate appendage.

“I confess,” Sidon began, “I’m sure it’s no surprise, but I’ve never been intimate with a Hylian. If you’re sure that’s what you want, I’m afraid it will be rather touch-and-go and plenty of guidance will be required.” The Zora’s voice was a quiet purr as he spoke, true concern laced with a deep, underlying hope that Link was indeed bold enough.

“Don’t worry,” Link said, his own voice a gentle whisper. “Is that why you’ve been holding back? Because you don’t know what to do with me?”

“There’s that,” the Prince uttered, a faint violet staining his pale cheeks, “and the fact that I could easily cause you harm.”

“No.” The Hylian shook his head, bringing his fingertips to rest softly over the Prince’s mouth, quieting him. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I trust you.”

The Zora offered no words in response, as Link was still holding his fingers in a shushing position, but he still gave a soft nod. As he did, Link’s hand then strayed upward to touch the prominent crest of the Zora Prince’s brow, and Sidon quietly hummed in contentedness, seeming to enjoy this contact, and so Link’s palm remained, gently rubbing at the rough surface.

“Then that’s good for you?” the Hylian questioned, his tone genuinely curious as he also hadn’t a clue what sorts of things actually were enjoyable for a Zora, apart from assumably the same basic things sex involved.

“It does feel nice, yes,” the Prince spoke, “though it tends to be more of a comforting, affectionate
touch, between us. Here, I’ll show you.”

Link’s hand fell away as Sidon dipped himself further, still holding onto the Hylian as he did. He bowed his head just enough so that the point of his brow gingerly rested against Link’s own and then he gently nuzzled the soft fringe of the Hylian’s hair.

“We nuzzle one another like this to show tender affection. I suppose it’s not quite the same, as you are built very different, but you get the idea,” Sidon’s voice was quiet, almost as though he were uttering a secret to the Hylian he was pressed so close to.

Link pushed back into the gesture of affection, his busy hands seeking contact once more, fingertips delving into every nook of the elaborate collar the Prince wore, tentatively exploring them as if in search of the flesh just beneath. They then moved up to the line of the Zora’s jaw, moving back along it, continuing, ducking beneath the Prince’s forefins and managing to locate one of his earholes by accident, which caused him to fidget.

“Sorry,” Link said, raising his eyes to look into the Prince’s own, bumping his head back against Sidon’s and sliding himself in nearer until their lips were pressed together. Link could feel the Zora’s grip tighten on his waist at the contact. Whether it was in surprise or excitement, he wasn’t immediately certain. The latter quickly began to seem the more likely option, as one of the Prince’s hands finally moved, one arm tucking behind Link’s back to keep him secure while also dragging him in closer.

Sidon pushed into the kiss, adding just the lightest bit of extra pressure in confirmation of his want for it. Until that moment, Link had felt the Prince’s interest seemed a bit tepid, but now he could feel the Zora’s hunger reflected in the kiss; it was in the way his mouth sought after Link’s once the contact was established, the way his lips smoothed across the Hylian’s and closed around them, the way he only continued to tighten his grip on the smaller male, until Link’s hands were braced against Sidon’s chest, his palms rubbing along the softer scales of the area, feeling the pliant flesh of the muscle underneath.

When the two parted, it was Sidon who drew away, placing just enough space between them to properly focus on Link’s face and he looked at him with a kind of wanting that had been enticed as quickly as it was uncovered. “Perhaps my quarters would be more comfortable for you than the inn?”

A nod of the Hylian’s head was given, the offer keenly accepted, as well as the offerings that lay tucked politely underneath that upper layer of innocent hospitality. The Zora’s hands slid away from Link as Sidon stepped back, gesturing for his Hylian company to follow as he led with haste. Link did not hesitate for even a moment, pushing himself off the rail in his own rush to follow.

But though the Hylian Champion leaned his body forward, something unusual occurred; instead he began to slide backward, losing his balance and slipping toward the fall that waited. He grabbed at the rail, holding on just long enough to see Sidon walk away without him before he lost his grip and toppled down, down to the harsh embrace of the water below, which greeted him with force as solid as stone.

All breath was sharply struck out of the Hylian, stinging pain tearing itself up and down his back and knocking him so soundly in the back of his skull that a deep, unfeeling darkness sprang forth and closed around him, leaving him still and thoughtless in the void.

This wasn’t what happened. No, no, no, this was wrong.

He took a breath, coughing, choking; he was still underwater. The water was shallow enough that he
could feel a solid surface pressed against his back, cradling his broken body, which was slowly filling to its capacity with pain that flayed every inch of his skin from his frame, slicing and burning away whatever helpless bit of flesh remained.

..Link.. Open your eyes..

His eyes cracked open, a bright, white light shining into his face, wiggling just above the glassy shroud that covered him. He was still sputtering and coughing as his lungs filled with water. He was trying desperately to lift himself up, the surface just precious inches above him. A weight rested atop his chest, another person holding onto him, fingers tightening around his neck so powerfully that all struggling was ceased and he was forced to lay still as he slipped away. The water settled above him as his body lost all strength and will to fight, the wobbling, obscure images hovering over the fading Hylian slowly clearing into something almost recognizable.

Dark shadows loomed, the light at their backs silhouetting their forms, darkening the details of their bodies and faces, all but the bright, red marking emblazoned upon their foreheads- a glaring, merciless eye that watched as Link’s life waned and left him cold and empty.

..wake up, Link..

The Hylian shot up from his rest with a start, gasping as though he’d truly lost his breath, the early morning light glaring in his face and chasing away the darkness of his dreams. He was still in the Great Plateau Tower, his fire long burned out in the night, nothing but ash and blackened pieces of wood remaining. The smoky smell of it permeated Link’s hair and clothes and he blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light.

There was no time for him to calm his racing pulse and trembling frame, however, because as his gaze trailed from the ground where his rupees laid, scattered, he quickly caught sight of something that hadn’t been there before. Rather, someone who hadn’t been there, someone who’d crept into the tower as Link slept and now waited just beyond arm’s length across from him, crouched like a wasteland coyote watching its prey from the cover of the tall grass. A single person, clad in fitted crimson and gray, their face hidden behind a white mask adorned with the reverse Sheikah symbol; a Yiga footsoldier.

A choked gasp resounded from the Hylian in his shock and his hand shot out to where his weapon laid, the blade singing as it was yanked from the sheath and arced in a wide swing as quickly as Link could get to his feet. The Yiga footsoldier got to their feet just as hurriedly, leaping back to avoid the bite of the Hylian’s blade with mere seconds to spare.

Link expected a weapon to be drawn against him, and attacked with a kind of haste that sought to prevent a true struggle from even occurring. He would rend the invading assassin before they even had time to defend, advancing on them with his sword seeking a killing blow with each swing.

The Yiga footsoldier was backed to the wall, bending their knees as they prepared to leap away from the threat, their body curving into a graceful backward flip over the rail, but not before the Hylian landed a strike across their unguarded middle. A grunt of pain escaped them as they cleared the rail, one hand pressed against the wound as their other hand drew something from one of the small compartments in their tight fitting armor.

The Hylian rushed to the rail to watch as the Yiga footsoldier fell, throwing some kind of smoke bomb and disappearing into the vapor cloud left behind. Link didn’t wish to allow the enemy to escape, knowing they would likely share this information with their fellows and soon enough he’d be getting attacked in towers left and right.
Not waiting to see where the fleeing Yiga turned up, Link fastened on his paraglider and jumped the rail himself, soaring away from the tower and catching sight of the Yiga as they reappeared elsewhere. He tucked in the wings of the glider and dove, falling at a dangerous pace that yanked and whipped at him, slowing at just the last moment before drawing his sword and lunging toward his enemy from above.

The footsoldier diverted their path, leaping and tumbling to one side, rolling back onto their feet and bolting once more. The Hylian chased at their heels, diving into a strike of his own, one foot kicking out to knock the Yiga off balance, successfully sending the injured enemy to the ground in a graceless heap.

Link rushed upon them, raising his sword above his head to deliver the blow that would end the source of his startled morning. The Yiga laid helpless on their back, one hand still clutching desperately at their bleeding middle and they threw their other hand up before the Hylian, their fingers unfurled, their gloved palm held out in a gesture that implored and begged the Champion to stop.

The sword in Link’s hand came to a halt moments before striking down the helpless Yiga. His brow furrowed in irritation and confusion at what he was seeing; begging for mercy was certainly not something he’d seen from a Yiga prior to now. Still, it was a tactic and nothing more. He raised the sword again, and as he did, the footsoldier rolled out of the way, getting back to their feet and brandishing another smoke bomb, using the provided haze to make a stealthy exit once more.

Link still held his blade ready to parry or defend, though he was sure this one would make an escape rather than attacking further. He couldn’t believe he’d allowed this to occur, that he’d been tricked into hesitating—damn it!

Now he would have to stop putting off moving his hoard of supplies to his otherwise empty house in Hateno Village. That was sure to take days, which was why he’d been dreading it in the first place. He supposed it would help him get a certain Zora out of his head, however, so he resigned himself to it, as monotonous as it was sure to be.

It also meant he would never have to look at this damn plateau again, so that suited him just fine.

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Chapter End Notes

Whose flirting techniques are more effective? Link's or Brivere's? Vote now on your phones! Hahaha!

Seriously, friends and comrades, this was a long chapter! I normally crank out around 8K words per chapter now, but this one is almost right at 10K. So much happened in this chapter, yet nothing at all, haha. Let me know what you all thought! As well, a friendly handful of you have followed me on tumblr and started talking to me, which is great! For those of you that are shy, I'm letting you know right now, I'm totally open to messages, if you've been debating it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Dreams of the past and an ever-present golden Knight were perhaps enough to distract the Prince from his paperwork, but not from his want for the Hylian Champion's return. Link, on the other hand, had decided that distraction was for the best and set out for the Eldin province.

Chapter Notes

Hello again, friends. It's that time again! And let me tell you all, this chapter is LONG. I said the last chapter was a beast, but this one is a monster! It is 11K words. I did throw in a scene from OC perspectives, just to see how that went, and as a way to introduce more of my ideas about Zora culture and lifestyle. It'll play into the plot later, as well. HOWEVER, I gave a good bit extra to make up for that. So, please enjoy, my dear friends!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sidon?” The lovely voice of the Zora Champion echoed like a gentle coo in the young prince’s chambers as she walked inside, laying eyes immediately on her younger sibling, stuck at his study desk. Mipha softly laughed at the sight of Sidon, his face pressed into the pages of the book that laid before him in frustration.

The Zora Champion approached, bending over the younger Zora just slightly to have a better look; he had the book cradled in his folded arms, his body slumped into the desk with his face smooshed right into the pages. Mipha reached out to him, placing one hand on his tiny shoulder.

“Hello Mipha.” The young prince sighed into the book, his words muffled but audible enough.

“Hello Sidon,” she spoke with a tiny smile at her brother’s antics. “Is that studying going well?”

The small Zora raised his head and straightened himself, taking a breath and letting it go. Mipha couldn’t tell if it was a small puff of annoyance or if Sidon was actually trying to suffocate himself in that book. “Muzu is making me read ‘The Princely Manner’ again,” the boy spoke, his voice a calm, steady sound.

“What did you do?” The Zora champion asked, placing one hand on her hip, and mimicking Muzu’s scornful face.

“I don’t know,” Sidon shrugged, confused and guiltless. “He got mad because I said one of the visiting Hyrulean delegate’s head was too small for their body.”

“That’s mean, Sidon.” Still, the Zora Champion laughed as her brother sat kicking his feet, completely unaware why words had certain effects, despite his awareness of most people’s emotional states. “I think Muzu should have punished you more harshly, though.”
“What?” Sidon said, gazing up at Mipha with blank, yellow eyes that only ever looked; there was no expression behind them. The only thing that was clear was his sincere curiosity, having taken his elder sister at her word.

“Yes,” Mipha said very seriously, nodding her head for effect. “Bratty little princes should be punished with plenty of hugs that they don’t want.”

“No Mipha. That’s gross and I’m too big for that.” Sidon gave his head a shake, his short forefins flapping about with his movement.

The Zora Champion didn’t bother debating the issue. Instead she grabbed the tiny boy up in her arms, pulling him into the kind of position one might hold a very small baby in, despite the struggle he gave in response. She laughed all the while, holding tightly onto Sidon though he kicked his feet, and flailed his tail so that it smacked into the side of Mipha’s head.

“Hey, stop!” Mipha laughed, her own tail pushing back against her brother’s, to restrain him as she bent her head down low and nuzzled her brow against his. As she held onto him, she managed to disarm him with her affection to the point that he finally fell still in her arms. Much as he pretended that hugs were ‘gross’, ever since their mother had passed, he’d been unable to resist a comforting touch.

So, of course, the Zora Champion took advantage of this fact, slowly making her way over to her brother’s cistern, walking so gently that he barely even noticed until she dropped him down into the water, giggling like mad as he disappeared beneath the surface.

“Mipha!” Sidon spoke as he resurfaced, slinging one hand against the water so that a spray was sent in his sister’s direction. “You’re a big.... turd.”

“Oh yeah?” The older Zora tilted her head in mock surprise. “I should tell Muzu you said that.”

Sidon floated onto his back and began kicking the water from his pool out at his sister, in rebuke. The Zora Champion wisely took a few steps back, saying, “Stop, you’re going to get the gift I brought back for you all wet and ruin it.”

“What gift?” The tiny prince repeated, his interest immediately seized. He dipped beneath the water’s surface, giving a few sharp kicks so that he burst from the water and came to land on solid ground once more, one foot slipping for only a moment on the tiles of the floor. “Mipha, what gift?”

“Here,” the Zora Champion spoke, reaching into the shoulder bag she had been carrying for supplies, easily finding the trinket she’d recently acquired. It was wrapped in several layers of delicate paper to protect the details, which Mipha peeled away while her younger brother stood before her in anticipation that was utterly calm. Once the gift was free from the wrapping, she held it out for Sidon to see; a carving of a giant bird that he’d seen in a book which he’d been studying from. “You have to be careful with it. The shopkeeper said it was very, very old.”

“Okay, I will,” the young Zora said, putting his hands out expectantly.

“You don’t seem all that enthused,” Mipha uttered, aware that her brother tended toward emotional bluntness, and expression that was lacking. Sometimes she just couldn’t tell what was going on in his head.

“Enthused?” Sidon repeated, tilting his head in confusion.

“Yes. Do you not like it? You’re not excited at all.” She placed the bird statue into her sibling’s waiting hands nonetheless, watching as he took a closer look, sharp, yellow fingerscales examining
the feathered etchings with a kind of gentleness that bordered affectionate.

“I’m excited and happy.” Sidon reassured his sister, his voice still an impassive, quiet sound.

“It’s hard to tell that,” the Zora Champion explained. “Sidon, other people around can’t just feel your emotions; only you can do that. You have to wear them on the outside, if you want people to know how you feel.”

“On the outside?” The Prince considered his sister’s words for a moment, looking mostly confused as he tried to envision what ‘happy on the outside’ looked like. He’d certainly felt it all around him, a warm, shining, bubbly thing that vibrated and glowed and smiled a lot. Experimentally, his lips drew back in an attempted smile, his cheeks fat and round with the effort. It must have worked, because Mipha shined with happiness of her own, laughing softly.

“That’s good,” the Zora woman said, still restraining her giggles, “but you need to be more excited than just that. You really wanted that statue, didn’t you? You talked about the bird you saw in that book for weeks.”

“Yes, Mipha!” The boy agreed, drawing one hand up in a tiny fist and shaking it softly. “I really like it! It’s the best! It’s so pretty and amazing and wonderful! The best ever!”

“That’s better.” Mipha gave a satisfied nod, then patted her younger brother’s head, gently scratching his crested brow while he was maintaining an extremely wide grin.

The boy’s attention diverted moments later, the smile fading from his features as he looked around, expecting to see somebody else. He’d noticed another presence, which seemed off, because his guards shouldn’t have allowed anybody to pass, apart from his father or maybe Muzu, but it wasn’t them.

“Who is that?” Sidon spoke, raising his head to look up at his sister, though suddenly Mipha was nowhere to be found. The boy blinked, confused, and turned a circle, looking all around himself. He couldn’t feel Mipha’s presence any longer.

“Mipha?” He called out to his sister, though he received no answer. She was gone without a trace. All that remained was that other presence, lurking somewhere in his room, yet nowhere in sight.

Sidon’s eyes opened wide as nerves shook him from his sleep, and he wakened to find himself drifting in the cool water of his cistern. His pupils tightened from wide circles into slits as the light of morning reached down into the depths to greet him. The presence from his dream still lingered about, though the heightened awareness that came with waking helped him to realize that he recognized the feel of this person.

Slowly, the Prince paddled himself to the surface, raising his head from beneath the water to see that Brivere had indeed returned. The other Zora had shed the armor he’d worn on the mission outside of Zora’s Domain, his body now able to move much more freely as he practiced with his blade. His long forefins were pushed back over his shoulders and bound to his tail, so to keep them out of the way as he moved gracefully from one form to the next.

Quietly, the Prince spectated, unsure if his off-duty Knight realized he was being watched. Brivere’s chest expanded with his breath, his heavy blade lowering from an upright, defensive position and drawing back into attack. The golden Zora’s stance widened, his weight shifting with even grace on his webbed toes as his body turned, one foot spinning, his sword arching into a wide swing that formed a full circle before his weight went back onto his other foot, his speed increasing with every movement. The Zora gave a leap, his body rotating in air, the sword drawing around so that his
weight was directed into a powerful strike that shook the tiles as he landed.

Brivere stood perfectly still once the move was completed, inhaling deeply and slowly while his mind worked over every instant of his performance, critically analyzing each movement.

“You’re trying to do the whirlpool technique on land?” The Prince spoke up in the still silence left behind when the other Zora finished. Brivere went tense for a moment at the sound of Sidon’s voice, golden eyes looking over his shoulder to finally notice the Prince drifting awake in his pool.

“My lord, I hope I didn’t wake you,” the Knight said apologetically, lowering his sword and turning to face his Prince. “But I returned, as promised.”

“You did wake me,” Sidon confessed, his voice an amiable sound regardless, as he pulled himself up from the comfort of his cistern, the water cascading over his vibrant scales and off of him with ease. “But judging from the light outside, I’ve overslept as it is.”

“You needed your rest,” Brivere stated, his presence utterly still and attentive. “Exhaustion and stress shouldn’t be allowed to wear you down, when you can remedy them.”

“What about you?” The Prince spoke, his body reaching even greater heights as he raised himself up onto his toes with a stretch. “You’ve been just as busy as I have, busier, considering you have your brother to look after, yet here you are, bright and early, practicing advanced swordplay.”

“I’m afraid much more practice will be required. I’m embarrassed that you even caught a glimpse of that.” The golden Zora’s hands tightened on the grip of his blade and he moved to fasten it to his back, as though to remove it as a topic of conversation. “The timing of every movement was too slow or otherwise off, therefor the blow didn’t gain the proper momentum required to be sufficiently powerful.”

Sidon shook his head, smiling to the other Zora before he opened the door that led from his wet chamber to his dry quarters and Brivere followed quietly behind him as he went. “You may continue at the barracks, if you wish. Your presence would surely be no bother to me while I fuss over paperwork that should have been completed last night, but it seems having me glance your performance is just too much pressure to bear.”

The golden Zora hovered in silence until Sidon glanced over his shoulder, a playful grin tugging at his lips; as he did, Brivere spoke up. “If your attention were not too much, your teasing surely would be, my lord. I’ll leave you to your work.”

“Very well, then..” the Prince uttered, watching as Brivere indeed continued to the entryway and out, then Sidon padded to his work desk. It was much further off the ground than it had been when he was that boy in his dreams of the past, a pale, marbled ledge that stretched outward from the wall, just beneath a massive window. It was still scattered with a mess of this and that; books, papers, trinkets, that bird statuette Mipha gifted him long ago, even the pile of materials he’d gathered for armor-making still lingered, pushed off to the side.

The Prince cleared as much space as he could, pulling together what supplies he needed for his work in a somewhat organized manner, but no sooner than he took his quill in hand, then another thought stole his attention. He raised his eyes to the window, looking over the architecture of the palace nearby and the bustle of people already moving about in the cool air of the morning.

Closing his eyes, the Prince sharpened his focus on his sensory abilities, reaching far beyond his tower in the hopes of locating his Hylian friend. The signals surrounding him were numerous, a mess to sort through, but all distinctly Zoras. Some were active, others still seemed to be sleeping, and
Sidon pushed beyond this, reaching further, stretching himself to the furthest extent of his capabilities. The lynel was still lurking about nearby, the fishing parties were hard at work, and there was someone wandering alone a bit outside of Zora’s Domain, but no, they were definitely a Zora.

When he could look no further, Sidon opened his eyes and finally focused on his work, his chamber silent apart from the scratching of his quill against the blank sheets before him and the quiet sigh that came from him.

Brivere didn’t necessarily mind training in the barracks. Most paid him no heed, apart from the glances that followed him from time to time. Few of his fellow members in the Royal Order, the soldiers that served the royal family, even bothered to speak to him. They might have offered the basic respect required by his rank, but there was always the distinct feeling that they still knew he didn’t belong.

None of that mattered, however, because whether they believed he belonged or not, he was there more often than any of them and by that measure of dedication, he owned those training halls. Even when there were few duties required of him, as being part of the Royal Order was generally considered a ‘cushy’ position, he still set aside plenty of time for practice and improvement.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t truly for the sake of betterment that he fell into this daily routine, or at least he didn’t believe so. His level of skill felt, to him, like very old silverscale; it was capable of holding a shine that was impressive enough, so long as it was constantly maintained and polished. He couldn’t allow himself to risk the rust, so he pushed himself, his critical mind as harsh as a whiplash with each failure.

He had been working on the same one move for hours, the day passing by like water over the falls as he failed, and failed, and failed, and failed. Tiny improvements came and went, as though by luck of the draw, and he was completely unable to pinpoint where he went wrong, other than by simply being the person that he was. He, himself, was the critical flaw, the cause behind his failure to improve.

At this point, his tired muscles trembled just holding up his own weight. His blade was a burden in his hands, his arms and shoulders stiff and aching, his legs like lead weights that held him back, rather than carrying him forward. He could try once more to get that move right, however. Maybe just once more, and he would finally find the detail he’d been missing all this time. Maybe if he punished himself for his failures, the pain would reward him with success.

“Brivere,” somebody spoke nearby, cutting the golden Zora off from his deep, inner focus. It was a fellow Knight of the Royal Order, one who he’d spoken to in passing over the last few days; Kree.

The golden Zora lowered his weapon, turning his attention to the one who’d spoken his name. “Yes?”

“The bell sounded outside, but you must have missed it,” she explained, little feeling to her voice, as compared to how she spoke with Sidon. “Don’t you leave to meet your brother at this time?”

“I do,” he answered dryly, taking a deep breath and moving to the blade rack in order to return the training sword. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” she said with a scoff, looking over the golden Zora like he was a wretched sight. “Nobody wants to watch you torture yourself any longer. Go home and relax, if you know how to do that.”
“Understood,” Brivere muttered, walking as quickly as he could while still carrying his exhausted body with relative grace. He would need to be quick now that he was running late and he said nothing more to Kree before he saw himself from the barracks and began his walk to the Basilica, where Estuu went for lessons in the use of his magical talent.

The Basilica lurked beneath the Zora’s Domain undercity, far below the surface of the water, built deep within the basin that the Zora people crawled from, many tens of thousands of years ago.

Brivere dove into the water beneath his peoples’ grand construction, diving down toward the orb of guiding light below. The golden Zora may have well been black as pitch in the lightless depths, his pupils dilating until they, too, consumed the yellow of his irises. The moment before he came within range of the Basilica, the waters were bleak and lifeless as the void. He dipped through the oculus at the lowest reaches of the trench, blinking as the temple’s light filled his eyes once more.

The luminous stone of the Basilica’s structure was purer and brighter than the rest of his peoples’ city up above. It was a symbol of Hylia’s light, and the light of wisdom that could be found, even in the shroud of the deepest darkness. It represented, too, the light of consciousness, awareness, and virtue, when the Zora people turned from their formerly savage, monstrous ways.

The Basilica, itself, was a marvel of Zora architecture and craftsmanship; much like the city above, there were strong yet elegant tunnels in the place of bridges, twisting, twining structures with flowering edges and intricate detail work, all coming from the grand pod in the center of it all, which glowed like a bright, blue star. Within this grand chamber, there was a sanctum which was as dry and filled with air as the land above.

Brivere swam into one of the many tunneled openings, following the curvature of the watery hall, until it diverted upward and he finally broke surface within the sanctum. It was a grand, chambered heart of a building inside the Basilica, the halls lit by the stone they were built from, but Brivere navigated it with ease.

The apostles of the Basilica were the spiritual leaders of the Zora people but also the educators, making them as highly regarded as even the Monarchy. Estuu, as a Goddess-Blooded noble, had the option of private tutelage from a magically skilled apostle, though it was also dependent upon his family’s donations; Brivere’s donations.

When the golden Zora was unable to locate Estuu at the usual meeting place, he sought out his brother’s teacher, apologizing vehemently when he found her with another young student and was forced to interrupt. “My apologies, your grace,” he spoke, a look of concern somewhere to be found under his otherwise guarded features. “I’m looking for Estuu.”

“I’m afraid your younger brother didn’t attend his lesson,” the pale, lavender Zora spoke, brushing slightly back the elegant shawl she wore. Her tone had a certain quiet neutrality to it, her eyes looking on Brivere with recognition, not just as Estuu’s older brother, but as the Knight that stood by the Prince’s side when he manipulated the king’s council with his drastic political maneuvering. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Brivere bowed as the apostle brushed him off ever so politely and he turned on heel, hoping that he would simply find his brother at home. He returned to the surface with haste, dropping into the market for food on his way home, as his errant sibling was sure to be hungry.

Estuu was a horribly picky eater. The Zora diet was perhaps a bit more limited than that of other races, but Estuu took this to extremes. He would only eat certain fish prepared a certain way, so Brivere browsed the market selection with careful consideration. Any off detail about the meat, and Estuu simply would not touch it.
As the golden Zora perused, he came to notice that a large portion of the hearty bass for sale had apparently all been shot through the eyes. As a skilled archer, himself, he wasn’t even sure how this was possible in such perfect, obsessive repetition. In short, it struck him as very odd.

“This stock is fresh! All caught this morning.” The shopkeeper came over to Brivere, to stoke his apparent interest further.

“Who supplied this catch?” Brivere’s voice was a deep, still kind of calm that hid the turbulent feelings brewing.

“Our stock comes from various fishers from the undercity, mostly. All local, if that’s your concern.”

“I see.” Brivere nodded, unable to ascertain anything from the shopkeeper at all. He supposed he would have to go to the source for the answers he sought. “I’ll take two of these.”

The young Knight found himself brooding perhaps more intensely than usual as he continued home, after purchasing food. Ever since he’d taken his brother out on that mission, the boy had apparently regressed into formerly slashed habits. But what else could he have done? He was required to be the Knight by the Prince’s side, yet he also couldn’t leave Estuu alone, nor trust his sibling in any other Zora’s hands.

Clearly, it was just as foolhardy to trust him in Hylian hands. Perhaps the Hylian Champion was deceived by Estuu’s unassuming, youthful appearance, or the innocence in his silence. None of that truly mattered, however, because the truth was not such an obvious thing, and the Hylian Champion’s influence had given Estuu just enough freedom to enable the parts of him that were never meant to be free.

Brivere, alone, knew the truth, but it was bitter thing he’d swallowed down for the sake of keeping it hidden forever.

Once he arrived home, he was calm once more, his dark thoughts pushed aside. He found Estuu seated on the bench in front of the window, basking in the last light of day before the sun dipped behind the mountains. The boy seemed a soft, gentle thing, his skin the same warm shade as the sky as the sun loomed heavy on the horizon. His knees were drawn in, a book rested upon them and he sat so utterly still, only the statue of lady Mipha could rival that unmoving calm.

The elder sibling made no move to immediately disturb his brother, instead padding into the round area of their cozy home, a private residence which was provided to them thanks to Estuu’s nobility. He made his way to the countertop that extended along the wall near where their cooking pot was situated and he placed the wrapped up fish upon it, watching Estuu all the while- he didn’t even look up.

“Estuu,” Brivere spoke. The younger Zora finally raised his head as he was addressed, finding the stern gaze on his brother’s face that he seemed to expect, yet he offered a guiltless stare in return. Brivere began to casually unbind his forefins as he continued speaking. “You didn’t go to your lessons at the Basilica.”

A shrug was offered in reply and Estuu turned his eyes back to the pages before him. Brivere couldn’t be certain what this shrug truly meant, however; was the boy implying he simply didn’t care? Was he dismissing the subject? Did he just not want to speak to his brother at all?

“Are you going to say why?” Brivere asked, his tone remaining calm and gentle while he folded his binding material and tucked it neatly away.
With mounting frustration that was more than a little clear, the smaller Zora patted his hands against
the book on his knees, implying that he was simply too busy to be bothered with what his brother
was asking. In fact, he clearly seemed to think Brivere should have been able to assume that.

“Hm.” The older sibling grumbled quietly to himself but remained poised and patient. He strode over
to the sleeping cistern that he and his sibling shared; it was a round and small compared to the
Prince’s, but suitable enough. The golden Zora carried with him a ceramic basin which contained a
couple of washcloths, and he kneeled beside the pool, placing the basin underneath the trickle of
water that poured in a polite, gentle stream from the ceiling.

“You need to clean up before you eat, anyway.” Brivere spoke in soft insistence, his voice as clear
and with as much authority as any given parent. He slid the basin out from under the water flow
before it became too full and peered over at his younger brother, waiting for him to comply.

An impatient sigh came from the younger Zora and he snapped the book shut, shoving it aside in his
annoyance. He slid down from the comfort of his perch, joining his brother on the tile of the floor
near the basin and he impatiently rung out one cloth, wiping himself down in such a rush, it was
hardly thorough.

“Must you always be so difficult?” Brivere chided, reaching out to assist as Estuu managed to miss
the scales underneath his forefins. The elder’s hand was quickly pushed away and Brivere was left
shaking his head. “Obviously yes, you must.”

Before Estuu could finish with his hasty work, the older Zora spoke up once more, saying, “I want
you to tell me why you didn’t go to your lesson and don’t ignore me this time.”

The boy, despite his frustration, at last accepted the fact that his sibling had no intention of simply
dropping the subject, so once he finished washing, he walked to the shelf carved into the stone of
their walls and pulled down a notepad which he used for communication. Brivere sat watching with
an ever calculating gaze as he washed himself much more scrupulously.

Estuu detested being made to write things out but he carried his notepad back over to his seat by the
window, if only to satisfy his pestering older sibling. His careful hands fussd over every stroke of
his pencil, his method slow and cautious as he spelled out one single word, then carried the pad over
to show Brivere. ‘Tired,’ it read in penmanship that still came out less than fine.

Brivere nodded, appearing as though he believed his brother’s lie, if only to maintain the secrecy of
his suspicions. “Oh. So you stayed here to rest?”

The short, scarlet Zora shook his head with vehement frustration, his forefins bobbing with the force
of his expression.

“I see,” the elder sibling continued to nod, as though in complete acceptance. He said nothing as he
emptied the basin, putting the object away in order to keep their home neat, then he returned to the
counter where he’d left the wrapped up fish. The package was calmly unwrapped, the paper folded
and tucked neatly underneath the two hearty bass, before Brivere looked up at Estuu and said, “Then
you don’t recognize these, do you?”

For one single instant, the younger sibling was stricken with an expression very likened to that of a
startled doe, but it faded away with almost the same mastery as his elder brother. Estuu looked over
the fish, observing them as though he were actively searching for any apparent reason that he
actually should recognize them, then he shook his head.

A deep, frustrated sigh was emitted from the golden Zora as his brother attempted to lie, despite the
damning evidence. His eternal calm began to slip, wriggling through his fingers and forcing him to tighten his grip. He walked from the counter to where his younger brother stood, taking Estuu by the arm, though the younger Zora immediately began to struggle, screaming out as he was seized.

Brivere did nothing to harm the smaller boy, but forcefully took a closer look at his brother’s hand, finding the bent, furrowed scales that came from holding a bowstring taut. It was something that couldn’t simply be healed away or perhaps Estuu could have cleanly slipped out from under his brother’s accusations.

As Estuu continued to desperately wiggle in his brother’s grasp, Brivere let him loose, as he had all the evidence he required. The smaller Zora rubbed at his wrist, as though to brush away the feeling of his sibling’s touch. The look Brivere gave his brother was something much more inescapable, however.

“Estuu, why are you lying to me, when I’m only trying to protect you?” Brivere spoke, his voice stern yet imploring, perhaps even slightly wounded, though he tried with all his might to keep that hidden away.

The younger Zora turned himself inward, unwilling to answer Brivere’s prodding now that he had been cornered by his own lies so he returned to his seat by the window, bundling himself into something even smaller in the hopes that his brother would just let him be.

Brivere wanted little more than honesty and trust, yet as he hit the impenetrable wall that was his sibling’s stubbornness, he sighed in bitter resignation, then moved back to the counter in order to prepare a meal which was sure to be consumed in endless, awkward silence.

The birds outside were performing their typical early morning show, which consisted of twittering trills that grated until it seemed more like pitchy screaming, right outside Link’s window. Normally, such a thing wouldn’t even get through to him, but as he laid curled on the floor of his empty house, the discomfort of his sleeping conditions coupled with the noise effectively combined in successfully interrupting the Champion’s sleep.

He would have liked to continue sleeping, because everything else in life was pointless. Beyond his apparent fate, who was he? What did he want, as a person? Was there anything in this damnable life that he actually desired?

Yes.

No.

No- because even if he was an empty shell of a person, he wasn’t going to let himself be defined by a romantic interest. There had to be more to him than that, and not just because the person he was interested in had rejected him.

He had decided he wanted to be more than nothing. He wanted to do more than just exist, if his existence was something that he couldn’t escape. But did he really want to be the Hero that this world seemed to be waiting on? Did he want to enable their apathy and uselessness? No, he didn’t.

In the end, was he just proving himself to be another useless Hylian, ignoring the disaster looming on the horizon? Or was his life forever bound to be the same old thing as it was on the plateau? He had conceded himself to completing the old man’s tasks at that time, if only to escape the plateau, which he thought would make him happier. Now here he was, still wanting for something, not sure whose
He was a grassland fox caught in the ultimate snare. He didn’t want to be the sword of the Goddess any longer, yet he couldn’t help but continue on his intended path, in the hopes of finding a deeper meaning to his own life or something that would ultimately allow him to be content.

He certainly wasn’t content just succumbing to small town life and he didn’t want to stay here any longer.

At last, Link dragged himself up off the floor, his body sore from so many uncomfortable nights of sleep. He was literally aching for Prince Sidon’s water bed. No, he was aching for a bed of his own and he supposed he had rupees to spare, so he would speak with Bolson before he left Hateno Village.

Link dressed himself in the Hylian tunic he’d recently purchased from the tailor, tying his hair before he pulled on his hood, so to keep his face protected from the sun and the rain. His supplies had been sorted a bit more neatly, and he gathered this and that in his rucksack; a few monster parts he’d set aside to use, a bunch of fireproof lizards he’d killed and dried, a tiny loaf of bread, a small bag where he placed collected shrooms and nuts, a chunk of rock salt, and a couple of apples. It wasn’t much.

The Zora sword he’d received from Prince Sidon already looked horribly battered and knowing Link, he would probably accidentally break it or lose it in a resurrection. He hated to think he could still be killed so easily, but as he made plans to venture into uncharted territory, he somewhat counted on it.

Still, for one reason or another, the Hylian Champion couldn’t think to use any of the other weapons he had set aside. Maybe he’d simply become accustomed to the feel of the Zora Sword and he didn’t want to readjust himself. He hadn’t realized before, but he’d long tucked away a silver shield in his collection, so knowing he had a shield to match this particular sword, his choice was only reaffirmed. He would just take his whetstone and sharpen up the blade along the way.

Once prepared, the Champion left the dismal emptiness of his home behind, glad to have his hood, as the glaring afternoon sun was enough to leave his eyes aching from the brightness. He felt just like a keese trying to fly during the day, disoriented and a bit drowsy.

After Link crossed the bridge from his house, he found Bolson lingering about near the display homes. The man was laying out work plans for his employees, as a few new faces had apparently moved into town and put down payments on unbuilt abodes.

When Bolson was finished handing out marching orders, which his employees seemed happy to hop to, he realized Link was hovering nearby and a smile immediately traced his lips. “Well, look at that, the town stud has returned.”

One hand found its way to Bolson’s hip as his weight shifted onto one foot, his other hand reaching out to inspect Link’s obviously new clothes with a touch of envy. “And you’re dressed all snappy; how do you accumulate such funds just adventuring as you do?”

“It usually involves getting my hands dirty,” Link answered, his tone ever-hollow despite subtle efforts to cover that up. He actually found Bolson to be one of the more tolerable members of the Hateno community, so he tried to refrain from being such a joyless, unsociable lump.

“I do love a man who is willing to get his hands dirty,” he commented, a playful twinkle in his eye. “I’d let you tell me all about it, if I weren’t so busy.”
“Why are there so many people moving into town all of a sudden?” The Champion questioned, though his discomfort was clear. As much as Hateno was rife with small town pettiness, it wasn’t as though Link favored the idea of the town’s population growing, either.

Bolson shrugged, a bit neutral on the subject matter, and seemingly glad enough for the money and the thought of new businesses in town, if it offered even a slight change of pace. “I’m not sure. The nearest stable apparently isn’t big enough for the extended family, so they’re looking to open up a tavern in town. Some ruggedly handsome, older guy who mentioned being a blacksmith wants to settle here, though he’ll be stuck making nothing but farming tools. And there’s also a young Sheikah who wants to relocate from Kakariko- I couldn’t get much out of them, but they seemed to be in a big hurry and paid extra to have the construction rushed.”

“So I suppose if I needed a bed built, it would be asking too much?” The Champion asked, still reaching for the rupee bag fastened to his belt with the hopes that the jingle would be more persuasive than his tone.

“How could I disappoint my best customer?”

“Have you just been sleeping on the floor?” Bolson’s hand flew up to rest upon his chest, as though to still his weeping heart at such a notion. He then shook his head, tsk’ing in disappointment. “Honey, there’s no need for that when there’s room in my bed.”

“I’m trying to break the habit of jumping into other people’s beds, but thanks,” Link responded calmly enough, for such a blunt suggestion. “I’m not in a huge rush, but I’ll pay up front.”

Alright then.” The man shrugged, not slighted at all by the rejection, instead chuckling over the other Hylian’s casual admission. “Does a hundred rupees sound square?”

“Sure.” The Champion fingered through his rupee pouch, drawing out two purple rupees as payment and placing them into Bolson’s hand. “If I’m not around by the time it’s finished, have your guys let themselves in to deliver it, it’s fine.”

“How could I disappoint my best customer?”

“Thanks.” Link fastened the pouch back to his belt, raising his hand to Bolson in a polite, casual farewell as he continued about his business, intent on stopping by the general store for more supplies.

The man that worked the general store, thankfully, wasn’t too chatty. Actually, he was the most bland, boringly average person in all of Hateno, so really he just had nothing of interest to say. All he ever saw was the inside of these walls, so how could he? Link was just glad for the peace as he dropped in for rice and eggs, so he could attempt to recreate the rice dish he’d had for breakfast that morning in Sidon’s tent.

From there, the Hylian Champion took his ingredients to the communal cookery, reaching deep into his apparently faded memory of a few mornings ago. He would probably have a better grasp of what ingredients went into certain dishes if he ate a bit slower, but that would be like asking horses to walk at all times. What had it been like again? The rice was sticky and tender, lightly savory, with chunks of Hylian shrooms that had probably been cooked alongside something else, as to absorb other flavors, then there was a egg cracked overtop, steamed until the yolk was gelatinous, neither hard nor runny. Right- there had also been a flame seared fish fillet on the side, which Link didn’t have. He could recall stabbing the meat into little bits and mixing it into the rice.

Link had found himself looking over at the seated Prince several times as he ate; that much he remembered well. His emotions were the usual turbulent mess and Sidon’s vibrance was muted in the melancholy mood of that morning, but it was warm and comfortable between them. The canvas of the tent had sheltered and isolated them from the world outside and that was perhaps enough to
allow them a few content, quiet moments.

Well, maybe. Maybe Sidon felt differently about the entire thing than Link and maybe Link was idealizing it now that it was over and done.

In the end, the Hylian made rice balls with chill shrooms and boiled the eggs he’d purchased because they traveled better that way. There was no point attempting to mimic Zora cooking customs without a recipe, because he was bound to disappoint himself.

He also needed to keep his eye on two pots at a time, so he didn’t want to bother with complicated dishes. He’d fired up another pot of water in order to allow a handful of bokoblin horns to boil. Finding the proper time to add fireproof lizards was something of an art form. The horns had to boil over high flame for at least twenty minutes, then the temperature had to be lowered before further ingredients could be added. If the mix was too hot when the lizards were added, the heat of the pot would use up the fire protection effects.

Maybe the Hylian could just become a traveling merchant who specialized in potions? He was able to procure his own ingredients and cook pots were readily available anywhere there were people. He wondered if there would be high enough demand for that to be a feasible lifestyle?

Link checked the flame and checked it again, waiting for the perfect moment, fanning the embers gently so they maintained a glow but didn’t burn all the way out. When he was satisfied enough and too impatient to wait any longer, he tied his fireproof lizards in a bunch by their tails and dipped them into the pot to steep. It would take an hour or two for the liquid to cool completely and thicken, so Link left the pot in the care of an elderly local. She was working on a meal for her family that was sure to keep her busy all day, so the Hylian trusted that she wouldn’t leave his potion vat alone.

Before he set out, he wanted to pay a visit to Purah at the research lab. He hadn’t visited with her since the first time he’d dropped in and he’d been wondering if she could answer some of the painful questions he was having about himself. That was, if her age hadn’t regressed any further. It was amusing to ponder how far that could go. Maybe eventually her dead parents would be respawned and Link would walk in to find two Sheikah having sex where Purah normally sat.

As humourous as those thoughts were, he had to shake them from his mind before he opened the door to the research lab without even a knock and sauntered inside. He found Purah ducked in her work chair, peering over the back as though she’d expected some busybody Hateno resident to just show themselves into the lab, in search of juicy gossip.

“Just me,” Link said as he made sure the door was shut securely behind himself.

The Sheikah woman didn’t look any younger than she had been, but not any older either, so clearly she hadn’t tried out her aging rune since or it hadn’t been successful. It was too bad, because Link had been genuinely curious to see how that turned out, all laughable thoughts aside.

“Oh, Linky!” Purah clambered to her feet in the chair she’d been stooped in, looking more than a little relieved to see the Hylian Champion, though her excitement dulled away and she returned to a seated position, poring over the pile of papers and books that laid out on the table before her. “What brings you here? Gotta bunch of cute pics to show off, maybe?”

“Well…” The champion shrugged as he approached, a touch embarrassed at how many pictures he had of the one and only truly honest person in his life- his horse. She hated him and he loved her, possibly because she hated him. “Only if you want to see pictures of my Crazy girl.”

The visibly youthful Sheikah woman gasped in interest, her voice a sweet, inquisitive sound that
belied her true age. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that she wasn’t just a girl, despite how the
deep red of her eyes still held a jaded wisdom, a quiet reflection of all the things she’d seen. “Like a
crazy girlfriend?” Purah asked with a smile and a tilt of her head. Link still couldn’t tell if she just
acted this way as a ruse.

“Something like that,” he muttered, nodding. She’d definitely taken him for some wild rides.
“Anyway, I came to ask some questions.”

“Oh, I like questions,” Purah quickly piped up, the bell-like sound of her voice lacking the true
enthusiasm of a child, making it unclear whether or not she was being sincere. She didn’t
immediately look up from her papers, so Link’s concerns obviously weren’t a huge priority.

“Maybe it’s best if I start by asking you about your anti-aging rune,” Link spoke, noticing as Symin
looked up from his own work in the back corner of the lab. The man had an oddly blank expression,
like that of a hapless onlooker watching as something unraveled before him.

“You read my journal, didn’t you?” The Sheikah woman said, calm enough yet with an accusing
dge to her voice as she pushed herself and her chair back from the table with a slight effort, at last
appearing ready to offer Link her fullest regard. For a moment, she glanced back at Symin, waving
her hand at him in order to set him back to work and he jumped right into sorting books and
documents.

Link’s attention remained on Symin for a moment, his bleak, blue gaze following the man’s
movements as one book was moved down to another shelf, then another was pulled out and moved
down the row- the entire process looked somehow forced.

“I did,” the Champion confessed. “But now I have more questions.”

“Tisk tisk,” Purah shook her head, twirling a colorful pencil between her tiny fingers. “You’re a
soldier, not a scientist, Linky. You’re suppose to be swinging things at monsters. How can you do
that if you’re thinking so much?”

“You’re giving me the impression that you don’t want to talk about it,” the Hylian said, his tone a
vacant, hollow sound, though his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He was unsure why all the secrecy
wae necessary, at least where he was concerned.

“Of course not,” the woman spoke, rolling her eyes as though Link were ignorantly stating the
obvious. “Just look at me. Sure, I’m adorable, but I didn’t want this. It’s an embarrassment!”

“Can you just explain how it works?” Link asked, moving to the woman’s table to sit across from
her, making it apparent that he had no intention of leaving until she gave him the answers he wanted.

“Not in any way you’d understand,” Purah said, leaning into the table in order to fix Link with a
hard stare that was amiss, in a way, not belonging with the rest of her youthful features. She pushed
her glasses up her tiny nose, then sighed, relenting, if slightly. “...all I can say is that it’s similar to the
stasis rune, created to be used biologically. It turns back time at the cellular level, then locks the cells
in a stasis, of sorts. The ancient texts I had available to me explained how the rune was crafted, but
you know, it wasn’t like a recipe for cooking up a stew. There’s a lot to it.”

“Your journal mentions using the rune on soldiers,” Link spoke, this idea having been something of
an intrigue to him. The idea of Hyrule raising a vast army of ageless soldiers seemed a frightful
concept. The real question remained- did ageless also mean immortal?

“The idea didn’t just occur to me,” Purah explained. “I found mentions of the rune being intended for
that exact purpose in the same texts I studied in order to learn how to reproduce the rune. As far as
the ancient Sheikah were concerned, however, it was easier to build guardians than to change
biology. But of course it was, the guardians aged pretty well without a stasis rune, wouldn’t you
say?"

“So..” Link began, making too much of an attempt to be casual as he did, “...if something were to kill
you, would the rune bring you back?”

“Hmm..” The Sheikah woman actually appeared to entertain this notion for a moment, sinking into
her chair in thought. As she did, Link folded his arms upon the table and leaned forward, noticing
that Symin had stopped working again and was eavesdropping. Maybe he was just bored.

At last, Purah’s tiny shoulders moved in a shrug that was a bit too dismissive. “It’s an interesting
notion, sure. There are mentions of runes that existed which could increase a person’s healing factor,
like way back when. I’ve been trying to figure them out, but it’s really difficult, because.. Umm, well
a lot of information was lost, so I’m still here trying to fill in the blanks.”

“Oh!” The tiny woman shot up in her chair, jumping back to her feet and slapping her little fists
against the table top, causing Link to draw back. “Speaking of lost information! I got a letter from
Robbie recently, and he mentioned that his lab was ransacked and some important texts were stolen!”

“Why would somebody steal research?” The Hylian questioned.

“Not sure.” She appeared to think on the suggestion, then spoke up again. “He said that he believes
that a group of Yiga Clan members have been snooping around. Apparently the active guardian just
outside his lab completely ignores them, too. It’s a real bummer- he was kinda hoping that thing
would add some security.”

“Is that why you seemed so spooked when I came in? Expected a Yiga?”

“Yep!” She laughed it off, even so. “I mean, what can I do to defend myself as I am now? It’s not
like I can just get Symin to fight them.. I’d do a better job myself.”

“Hmph,” Symin uttered in minor insult, though he said nothing in his defense. So, clearly he was just
standing around listening, anyway.

“Bolson mentioned some new Sheikah person moving into town,” Link explained, thinking the Yiga
Clan seemed oddly active, as of late. “Maybe you should send Symin to check them out and make
sure they are who they claim to be. Just pretend to be a well-meaning neighbor while snooping.”

“Hey- we’ve been in Hateno for a long time, but not that long.” The Sheikah pointed her pencil at
Link, giving him a glare that was potentially playful, but also potentially serious.

The Champion leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking as his weight shifted, and he idly
laughed, regardless of whether Purah was serious or not. “Fine. Wait around for them to come kill
you all, then.”

“Can’t you take care of it?” Purah spoke in a way that made it clear that she believed it should have
already been done, without her suggesting it.

“I’m headed out of town.” Link shook his head and gave a dismissive shrug of his own. He’d
shouldered enough peoples’ personal problems without being overtly ordered to do so. Maybe
somebody should have told this woman about the incredibly low level of fucks he had to give. “You
and Robbie both will have to deal with your own problems.”
“Anyway, what I really came to talk about..” The Champion trailed off, a bit hesitant to bring up his unbelievable circumstances. He’d badly wanted to talk about it, having nearly spilled things to Sidon on quite a few occasions. He doubted the Prince could offer any useful commentary anyway. “..ever since I’ve woken up, I-

“Hold on, let me grab my observation journal!” The Sheikah scientist exclaimed her excitement as she sifted through her research and books until she located a tiny notepad. “Okay, go on.”

Link took a deep breath, not even bothering to try and organize his own thoughts, as that was hardly even possible. “I’ve tried seeking out the memories in the Sheikah Slate and they just don’t feel like my own memories. They’re not even from my perspective, if that makes sense. It’s more like they’re Zelda’s memories; a series of moving snapshots that she took, with a person who happens to look like me appearing in the background.”

“Snap!” The Sheikah giggled as her pencil scratched upon the pad in her hands, then she cleared her throat. “Go on.”

“Even with memories of my own that I’ve recovered, I still get the same sense that I’m looking into someone else’s mind and just spectating.” As Link spoke, the sound of his frustration became clear in the tone of his voice. “I can’t remember my own thoughts or feelings. I don’t feel like I’m actually the person in these memories at all.”

“Now just imagine how I feel,” Purah commented with a scoff.

“And that’s not all,” the Hylian continued, his hesitation and discomfort mounting to a peak, and he paused to debate whether or not he actually wanted to say what was on his mind. If he couldn’t reasonably discuss this with a scientist that served the royal family, honestly, who could he tell? Who could offer him any insight? Who could offer him any insight? “I’ve been killed by monsters. A lot of times, actually, and in different ways. Some of the deaths I’ve experienced leave little to question. It wasn’t just a bad injury, I was dead. But then, I just wake up completely unharmed later. That and if the enemy was injured, they’re suddenly healed too.”

“Mmhmm..” Purah scratched at her notes for an extended pause, her doll-like eyes reading over the words she’d written, then she continued adding more. Symin stood in the back of the lab, not even pretending to work any longer, just glancing between his superior and the visiting Hylian Champion. Purah eventually began to speak as she took down her observations, stating, “…subject’s delusions have grown in intensity and intricacy.”

A dejected sigh came from the Hylian, his eyes glancing toward the door as though he could walk through it with just his gaze. He would probably feel irritated and angry once he left, but for now he just felt.. Extremely disappointed, perhaps even regretful that he’d even bothered. “Good thing I didn’t expect any different reaction,” he quietly breathed his words.

“Look, Linky,” Purah said, pushing her glasses to the top of her head as she gave the Hylian Champion a look and tone of sympathy that was utterly false. “You’ve been through a lot. Like, a lot a lot. Your mind is as scarred as your body, so I’m sure it’s playing some pretty nasty tricks on you.” The Sheikah scientist paused, blinking as the light of an idea poured into her expression, and she exclaimed at her own brilliance. “Oh! Either that or the stasis chamber you were in kept your body young while your mind continued to age, possibly allowing dementia to set in! I hadn’t considered that possibility. How about we run some tests? It’ll require some tissue samples.”

Purah peered over in Symin’s direction, gesturing at him in enthusiastic haste. “Symin! Find my hand drill and biopsy needle!”
“I think I’ll just..” Link began, his tone as weak and listless as he felt. “..leave”

“What? There aren’t any real risks if you can come back from the dead, right?” The tiny Sheikah teased, giggling as though she were truly a rotten child as she did. “Calm down, kid. What I’m trying to say is, coming back from the dead, aside from being revived medically, as we did with you, isn’t biologically possible. There are plenty of unsolved mysteries in this world and that isn’t one of them. So you might try to avoid dying when you fight the Calamity, got it?”

“Right,” the Champion uttered bitterly, “..then why is it that monsters can return to life during the Blood Moon?”

“Alright,” Purah hissed, pushing her glasses back down onto her face, as though the huge spectacles served to mask her features in some way. She took a breath and let it slide from her in a very tiny sigh, then she leaned into the table to fix Link with a serious look. “Let me lay it out for you. Science and magical occurrences or things caused by deities are two vastly different things. You can’t equate the things accomplishable by technology with the power of deities or the dark, magical forces that exist in our world. The late King Rhoam made it perfectly clear to the Princess Zelda that science and spirituality weren’t things that could exist together; it was either one or the other. When you attempt to dig into the mysteries surrounding what gives deities their power, or how magical events or abilities actually work, it gets dangerous. Nobody wants to see their beliefs unraveled. Nobody wants the beings they worship broken down into factual information that mortals can just grasp and take hold of. There are some mysteries that aren’t meant to be challenged.”

The Sheikah settled down into her chair, leaning back as she relaxed, allowing her more bubbly, innocent-looking persona to wash over her, like a veil to the person she was underneath everything else. “With that said, if you believe that you’re actually coming back from the dead- that sounds more like the work of the Goddess. And do you want to take a guess who would be the best person to talk about that with? Yup! The woman that’s still fighting the Calamity, right now. When you save her, you can tell her all about it. Snap!”

Link watched as Purah raised her tiny hand above her head, snapping her fingers as her point was made, and he gave a weak, defeated nod. “Okay,” the Champion spoke. “I’m gonna go, then.”

There was truly nothing like walking all the way to the stable nearest to Hateno Village for breaking in brand new boots. There was also nothing like breaking in brand new boots for breaking in one’s feet. Link didn’t even need to take off his shoes to know he was developing some rather nasty blisters, which was odd considering that he was sure naught was left of the pads of his feet but calluses. Somehow, he’d managed to find his very last soft spot and walk all over it.

Maybe his feet had softened up while he was hiding out in Zora’s Domain. Maybe he had softened? Had he wanted that?

Perhaps it was best if he stayed out of his own head for a while.

The Champion placed one hand to the wrist that had been burned during the Zora funeral service, pressing his fingers against the leather of his bracers to see if he could locate any source of pain underneath. What he discovered was that either his armor was extremely good quality, or the burns had healed enough that they weren’t painful any longer. He would have expected at least an itch of healing to remain, but even that wasn’t present.

Just as soon as the Hylian Champion approached the stable, the man at the front window leaned forward, squinting in Link’s direction as though to ascertain his identity. Link already knew well
what was coming, but his expectations were surpassed when the man leapt out from the window, stumbling rather gracelessly as his foot got stuck, but this only slowed him down for a moment.

Link stopped where he was when the man rushed up to him, his overall appearance that of a very desperate soul; he was bandaged in several places, only counting areas that were visible, and a deep violet bruise stretched from the corner of one eye, across his swollen lid. The man’s hands were shaking nervously, his mouth opening to speak though his words were so hesitant, they could not come out.

A cold, blue gaze turned upward to make eye contact as Link waited expectantly for what he knew this man wished to say. At last, the man found his hidden voice and very politely said, “Welcome back to our stable. May I speak with you, sir?”

“Yes,” the Champion stated simply, almost amused at the hysterics this poor guy was trying to keep calm and hidden away.

“Please,” the man began, his hands coming together in a deeply imploring gesture, “the horse you have boarded here is far too dangerous and it belongs in the wild. You should really do the right thing and turn it loose. It has injured every single stable worker on multiple occasions”

“And I thought you guys were professionals,” Link spoke, shrugging with such little sympathy, it was almost mocking. He continued toward the stable, with the man hovering right at his heel, his hands still together as though he were begging for his life. “I need a bold, aggressive horse. It’s necessary, especially considering the messes I ride her into.”

Link’s boots tapped as he stepped onto the patio deck outside the inn area and he stopped when he realized that this man did not plan to let him be, despite his dismissal. Reaching for his rupee bag with the intention of paying the man off, the Hylian’s hand paused at his belt when his attention was captured by a group of wandering mercenary-looking types that had gathered at one of the patio tables. The table was lined with empty mugs and the group was making such a ruckus that Link felt he wouldn’t be able to hear himself speak, even if he continued.

One of the women that worked the inn section of the stable approached the group, though they hardly turned their heads when she did. She didn’t wait for them to acknowledge her, placing one hand on her hip and raising her voice to a shrill pitch to speak over to rowdy group. “You emptied those mugs hours ago! If you lot are staying the night, pay for beds or remove yourselves from our patio!”

The group howled with laughter, not even offering a response to her demands, instead mocking the high-pitched sound of her voice and falling over in hysteric. When it appeared quite clear that they wouldn’t budge, she stamped away in a huff, her boots tapping loudly as she retreated.

Link shook his head at the scene and unfastened his rupee pouch from his belt, digging through it until he found a silver rupee, which he shoved into the bothersome man’s palm. The man sighed, relenting, but spoke up to say, “You know, if you name a horse ‘Crazy’, that alone should be enough indication that it isn’t worth keeping!”

“I didn’t name her ‘Crazy’ because I actually think she’s crazy,” the Champion explained with a somewhat snide chuckle, “I named her ‘Crazy’ because that’s always what they call strong-willed women.”

No sooner than Link had finished speaking, a rush of heavy footfalls resounded across the patio, along with a shrill war cry. The Champion stepped out of the way as the woman from before rushed at the raucous group, parting them as she vaulted herself up onto their table, a sledgehammer in hand
that she swung madly about, aiming at heads and faces without mercy or hesitation. The band scattered, at least half of them jumping the fence that enclosed the patio, then one looked back once he was a safe distance away, screaming out, “You crazy wench!”

Link merely gestured in the direction of the scene that had just played out before him, and the man he’d been discussing matters with grumbled as he walked away in defeat. The Champion went back to his business once more, glancing in the direction of the woman who’d cleared out the loud group of assholes as he did. The woman had her sledgehammer over one shoulder, letting out a satisfied breath as she wiped her brow.

“Welcome back, Link!” the woman politely called out to the Champion and he offered a wave of greeting and a smile as he continued to the boarding area around back.

When Link found his way to the stall that his beloved mount was housed in, he somewhat tittered at how firmly she’d been locked away. The stall window was not only shut, whereas every other horse in the stable was allowed to peek their heads out, but the wooden gate was tightly locked, and a sign had been hung up that warned against opening either the window or the gate.

Quietly, Link placed his hand against the wood of the gate and spoke up, “Ready to run, Crazy girl?”

At just the sound of the Hylian’s voice, a deep wail and a snort echoed from behind the gate, drawing the attention of other people moving about nearby. One young stable hand watched nervously, looking as though he were prepared to lock himself in one of the stables as a means of escape.

There was a pause of tense silence before the fierce pounding of enraged hooves against the gate resounded throughout the structure, making even other horses begin to grow jittery in their stalls. A chuckle of affection came from the Hylian and he smiled fondly at the greeting he’d received, his hands fearlessly beginning the process of unlatching the numerous locks on the gate once the horse tired of her kicking.

The gate creaked as it was opened just a crack, and Link held an apple like a peace offering before the gap. A deep blowing of hot breath became audible first, then slowly, a hesitant, white muzzle slid into the opening, calmly sniffing the treat being held out.

Just as slowly, Link opened the gate the rest of the way, never taking away his hand or the apple he’d presented. There stood his horse, her ears in a permanently pinned-back position, though they shot back even further when she laid her blue eyes on Link’s face.

“Well?” the Champion murmured, pressing the apple out even nearer to the horse’s snout, capturing her attention once more and she took a step closer, extending her nose down to where Link’s hand waited in offering. Then, at the last moment, she lunged at the vulnerable Hylian, grabbing him by the forearm in a vicious bite, her strong jaw squeezing his arm and shaking the apple free from his grasp.

A grunt of pain came from the Champion at the bitter attack and he yanked his arm free, rubbing at the area Crazy had clamped down upon and watching as she followed after the dropped fruit, swishing her tail with a kind of attitude that Link found oddly charming.

“Good,” Link said in a determined tone, “I was worried that you’d gone soft too for a second there.”

He waited patiently for his Crazy girl to finish chomping the helpless apple, then he set to work saddling her up for a night ride into the Eldin Region. A nice ride would definitely take his mind off
any emotional turmoil he might have been feeling. He couldn’t miss things he loved, if he was distracted by something else he loved.

And he really loved his horse.

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Chapter End Notes

How was it, friends? I know that our boys have a lot of distance between them at the moment, but how do you think they're feeling in each others absence? I'll bring them back together in the next chapter, so nurse your thirst until then!

thanks so much for reading, for all the nice comments, and for all the love. You guys are my favorite friends. :)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Those distracting thoughts of Mipha and of the past were growing ever more persistent for Prince Sidon, to the point that he was getting little work done. He was glad enough to have been given the bravery to finally face them, though. Link, having successfully aided the Goron people, found himself visiting the Fort he’d helped the Zoras take. This was only a temporary stop on his way to Zora's Domain, however. It seemed that, despite his wish to wean himself from the addiction of Zora affections, the urge to see the Prince was ultimately irresistible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mipha’s quarters were essentially identical to Sidon’s, so it was often jarring and odd when he ventured into her space. It always looked as though his room had just been cleaned out and redecorated, so each time he went to locate his sister, he paused on the threshold, and peered around as though he were confused as could be.

However, it didn’t take long for him to be bouncing on his webbed toes and bounding into Mipha’s quarters with energy that was beyond vibrant. He’d finally finished with Muzu’s boring lessons for the day and was relishing his freedom, excited as anything to hear that his sister would be in Zora’s Domain for several days. Usually she was so busy, her duties carrying her here and there; Sidon sometimes felt like he never got to see her.

“Mipha!” the young Prince called, his feet making tiny patters as he ran over, finding his sister sitting in what immediately felt like calm turmoil before her vanity mirror. As soon as the bitter, hanging cloud struck the boy’s senses, he stopped, somewhat recoiling and backing away.

A shiver went through the young Zora, such powerful, negative emotions tending to overwhelm his untrained abilities, forcefully writing themselves into him, as though he were blank parchment, helpless to resist as he was marked by a tipped over inkwell.

For a moment, a strange surge of thoughts began to fill his young mind, questions of whether or not he would ever be good enough, and a distinct, burning want to be something other than what he was on the outside. He closed his eyes and shook his head, taking a breath and pushing these invading ideas away, as his magical tutor had instructed.

“Sidon,” the Zora Champion uttered in surprise, quickly tucking away her own emotional miasma as she realized her brother was there. She stood from where she’d been quietly brooding, walking over to where Sidon had paused with his arms wrapped around himself as though simple emotion had as much effect on him as something physical, like the weather.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Mipha gently apologized, stooping down and hugging the small boy to comfort him.

“Mipha,” he spoke as he was pulled closer to his sister, mumbling against her shoulder, “why do you feel so...” Sidon trailed off, unsure what word to use to quantify the complicated emotions he sensed
from his sibling. It was a mixed up concoction of this and that, most of which his young mind hadn’t words for yet. “Sad?”

Mipha let the younger Zora slide from her grasp slightly, pulling away so she could look upon his curious expression. Sidon couldn’t help but think that his sister’s eyes often appeared as though they were distant, like they were looking longingly into another world that simply didn’t exist.

“I don’t know if I can explain it to you..” Mipha spoke, her voice gentle but guarded. She climbed to her feet and padded back to her vanity chair, sinking gracefully into it.

“Yes you can,” Sidon spoke, following at his sibling’s heels. “You’re good at explaining things.”

The Zora Champion tittered quietly, amusement finding its way to her otherwise melancholy features. Sidon had already misunderstood what she was getting at, yet somehow it still made her feel as though perhaps it didn’t really matter. Maybe speaking to someone who wouldn’t necessarily understand was a better option.

“Well..” Mipha began, pausing to think on how to convert her troubling thoughts into words. She turned her golden eyes to the vanity mirror, her gaze slowly moving across the reflection before her, her pale lips forming a soft, sad frown. Reaching out, Mipha picked up a small, reflective tube of vibrant, red pigment that was as ruby as she was and she carefully smoothed it over her lips before she spoke up again. “You’re still young, Sidon. The only person you know how to be, as you are now, is yourself.”

“How could I be anyone but myself?” The young prince tilted his head in confusion. Indeed, the notion of changing oneself was something of an obscure idea to him, yet he reached for the thoughts that had invaded his mind for the answers- a want to be something else? A distaste with the person on the outside? He’d never felt such things, apart from what he sensed from his sister now.

“I’m afraid, as you get older..” Mipha attempted to explain, her words coming slowly as she sought out terms that her brother could possibly comprehend, “..the world around you teaches you how to be someone else. The world around you will try very hard to make you into someone else, someone you may not necessarily want to be.”

“How does the world do that?” Sidon asked, again caught up on phrasing, as he often tended to do. Somehow, his mind had conjured the notion that physically going outside could cause people to change... and Mipha went outside a lot.

“Oh Sidon, you always take things so literally.” The Zora Champion shook her head, offering her curious brother a pat, with the hopes that he didn’t take her gentle criticisms too hard. “Okay..when I say the world, I mostly mean the people around you. Everybody in your life will have these preconceived notions of how you should be, and more expectations than you can ever live up to. You can spend every day of your life, just fighting to make sure everybody approves of you and still not satisfy everybody, but worst of all- after you do this for so long, all you really succeed in doing, is creating a cage for yourself.”

“Umm.. A cage?” The boy wasn’t sure he was following the lesson his elder sister was trying to teach; maybe his brain was bogged down with all the information Muzu had already shoved into it. However, even if he didn’t fully understand, Mipha somehow still made sense. Sidon only needed to look as far as Muzu forcing him to read ‘The Princely Manner’ over and over to comprehend the idea of being taught how to act by others.

“Yes, a metaphorical cage, to be clear,” Mipha continued. “What I’m saying is, if you work hard to be the person that people expect and that people want you to be, you’ll be living a lie. You’ll spend
so much time creating a lie for yourself that before you realize it, it’s too late for you to go back. It becomes a prison of your own creation, the lies slowly forming walls that you put up with your own hands, until you’re trapped inside them. Those lies will slowly kill the truth. The prison will slowly kill the person you truly are. Does that make sense?”

Sidon lingered in silence as he thought over his sister’s words, trying desperately to understand, lest she may start to think she really was bad at explaining things. The way he was understanding it was like a game of pretend that never ended, which felt oddly threatening to him, as other young noble children had made it clear to him that he did not excel at imaginative play.

“Um, Mipha?” the Prince finally spoke up when he believed he had a good idea what the Zora Champion was telling him. “So when you told me I needed to feel things, but on the outside, was that a preconceived notion?” Sidon slowly pronounced each syllable, repeating the words his sister had used.

“Oh,” the Champion paused, caught unawares by her sibling’s cleverness. She hadn’t even considered this idea. “I suppose? Moreso, people are generally expected to show their emotions, so while I believed I was trying to help you, you may be right. I was trying to change the way you behave, when there wasn’t necessarily anything wrong with the way you are. I’m sorry, Sidon, I didn’t realize. I am glad you seem to understand, though.”

“It’s alright, Mipha,” the young Zora nodded his head. “It was good advice. I was able to use it on Muzu, and get out of lessons early.”

“You did?” the young woman questioned in quiet amusement.

“Yes. I smiled really big like you told me to, and said, ‘Muzu! Your lessons are very interesting and you’re the best teacher!’”

“Oh my,” Mipha uttered in pretend concern, her eyes widening as she realized the gravity of her actions. “What have I done? I’ve made him too powerful. I must remedy my mistakes before the consequences are too dire.”

“Huh?” Sidon uttered as his sister started talking strangely. The boy, as always, was easily duped by his sister’s playful pretending, and she swiftly scooped him up before he had a clue what her true intentions were.

“No!” the Prince cried out as his sister walked over to her cistern, ready to dump him in. She always did this! “You wouldn’t throw me away, Mipha! You’re too just, too kind, too nice!”

“That won’t work on me you little liar,” the Champion laughed as she tossed her brother into her pool, smiling as he helplessly splashed down. She lowered herself at the side of the cistern as she watched Sidon idly swim back and forth in frustration and then slid her feet into the water, waiting for him to surface and probably splash her.

When the young boy did return to the surface, though, he seemed oddly pensive, calmly paddling over to Mipha in order to ask her further questions on what she had been trying to say before.

“Mipha? Is that why you don’t like yourself? Because you’re not being the real Mipha?”

“Look at you, assuming I was talking about myself,” the Champion calmly spoke, brushing her fingers across the glassy surface of the water, her mind delving into distant reflections. “A long time ago, I suppose I did try to meet the expectations of others. I always wanted to prove myself and though I excelled, I found that people began to raise the bar each time I succeeded and it left me rushing to meet their impossible standards. But then, I met somebody who is very important to me
now. They did plenty of things I believed were impossible and they didn’t do it to prove anything at all. They were free-spirited and bold and they always knew who they were, no matter what other people believed. Because of them, I found myself inspired to boldly follow my heart and set myself free from that metaphorical cage I mentioned before.”

“What does is mean to follow your heart Mipha?” Sidon asked, his eyes narrowed in a concentrated way as he got hung up on metaphorical language again. “I didn’t think your heart could come out and take you for adventures.”

“Oh yes, quite the adventures, believe me,” Mipha said with a tiny, exasperated laugh. “But what I mean by following your heart is trusting yourself. Sometimes, only you really know the right thing to do, only you know the right path for yourself and nobody else can tell you what it is. That’s what it means.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re so upset,” Sidon commented in mounting frustrating, dipping a bit lower in the water so that he could blow bubbles like an angry bright-eyed crab.

The older Zora sighed, slumping a bit as she folded her arms on top of her thighs. “Sidon, there’s so much more to it and it’s a bit beyond your ability to grasp.”

“I can still try. I’ll grasp it and hold onto it so it doesn’t escape.” The boy paddled harder in the pool as he attempted to use his show of excitement to keep his sister talking to him. “Please tell me, Mipha! Go on! Tell me!”

“Okay, Sidon. Okay,” Mipha laughed. She really had created a monster. “Well...my friend, even though they were the one who originally inspired me, as they grew up, they changed. I watched as they took on the burdens of everyone around them. I watched as all these heavy expectations began to crush their beautiful spirit, and they just endured it in silence. I couldn’t believe the very person who taught me how to be free could end up in that same, lonely cage.”

“Why don’t you help your friend?” Sidon suggested as though maybe Mipha hadn’t considered this.

“How astute you are, little brother;” the young woman commented. “Can you tell me how I felt, seeing my dear friend suffer?”

“Yes, I can!” He could; he could feel the shift in Mipha, from just bringing up the topic. Something inside her was turning deep and dark, while also glowing like a raging flame, consuming everything in the secrecy of the night. She hid it well underneath her serene appearance, but she couldn’t conceal it from the young prince. “You’re really angry, Mipha.”

“That’s right.” Mipha nodded her head matter-of-factly, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m rather incensed, to say the least.”

“Incensed...?” The Prince repeated this word, having never heard it before.

“Right- that means really, really angry.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Sidon gave a shrug, splashing his hands about at the water’s surface, just feeling the way it moved past his scales.

“I’m going to do what I’m good at- I’m going to fight. At first, becoming the Zora Champion felt like a whim. It was a chance to be powerful and free, a privilege, an honor. But, in making this decision, I found a deep, new sense of myself in my will to fight. I had always been told that I was very strong. I had always excelled, if only to prove myself to everybody else. But it was only when I had my own, personal reasons to fight that I learned how strong I could really be.” Despite how the
determined tone of Mipha’s voice had Sidon suddenly engrossed in what she was saying, she allowed a quiet, melancholy sigh to interrupt her former strength of will. “...Even now, my friend is still helping me become my very best self, and he doesn’t even know it. He’s fighting to protect everyone and everything, and though I’m also fighting to protect my people and our world, more than anything.. I’m still fighting to protect him, because nobody else is.”

“You said ‘him’ Mipha.” The Prince observed, as if some greatly hidden secret had been suddenly revealed to him. “Your friend is a boy.”

“My friend is important to me and is somebody I care deeply for,” Mipha spoke up to amend her brother’s comments, wanting to make it clear what was most important. “Also, he’s a boy.”

“Is he the one that makes you feel all fluttery all the time?” Sidon asked, new details unveiling new curiosities and new questions to be asked.

“That may be accurate to say,” Mipha confessed a bit hesitantly as a faint, blue tinge colored her pale cheeks, “...and also the real reason behind how I’ve been feeling now. Because of my friend and all of the other friends I’ve made as Zora Champion, I’ve learned something new and difficult about myself. I’ve chased my own dreams into a corner, and I found myself wanting something I know that I can never truly have. In the end, my own expectations were the most difficult to meet.”

“What is it, Mipha?” Sidon dipped momentarily beneath the water, swimming closer to his sister before his head resurfaced and he placed his tiny hands upon Mipha’s knees, staring up at her with big, imploring eyes. “What is it that you want so terribly?

“Not something you could just give, if that’s what you’re thinking, little brother.” Mipha humored the boy, smiling as she playfully gave one cheek a pinch. He was perhaps a bit withheld but he was also genuinely kind, always trying to understand, always trying to make it better. “...I’m just afraid that he and I are too different, that I will never be what he truly needs, and at times that fear makes it difficult for me to be happy with myself.. I suppose I should try to be happy and honored to be playing the role of support in something so much bigger than myself, but... When I’ve put so much of myself into living selflessly, allowing myself even just one, tiny bit of selfishness feels so wrong... but I also can’t stop it.”

“I’m sorry, Mipha..” the boy uttered, his sister’s woe echoing in him so that his voice came out like the ring of a sad, silvery bell.

“It’s alright, Sidon,” Mipha cooed, though it was clear from the turmoil of her heart that these reassurances were thin and fragile. “You’re kind for listening to me.”

“My lord? Highness?” came the sound of a dainty, young woman’s voice, though it wasn’t that of Mipha, and it echoed in gentle persistence from the doorway of Sidon’s own chambers. The Prince snapped from his musings to quickly peer over his shoulder and catch sight of Chief Secretary Laflat.

“Ah! My apologies!” he called to the Zora woman. “I was in my own world. You know how my attention can be, I’m sure.”

Indeed, Highness,” the other Zora laughed in a breathless manner as she proceeded thankfully into the Prince’s quarters, the heavy stack of papers and books in her arms a burden threatening to spill over if she was made to hold them any longer. She sighed as her load was placed upon the Prince’s work desk, then she spoke up. “What would you do if I weren’t here to keep you on task?”

“Maybe we should switch jobs for a day? I’m certain Zora’s Domain would benefit from a Princess as dutiful and organized as you,” Sidon offered a smile and a charming jest in the hopes that Laflat
may forgive him for failing to notice her.

“No doubt,” she replied with a smile, though she laughed only moments later. “However, I’m certain you couldn’t handle my own job, in turn.”

“You’re dreadfully honest,” Sidon laughed right along, “and quite right, I’m afraid. So, what is on the agenda?”

“Oh, plenty,” Laflat said, gesturing to the pile she’d hauled all the way up Sidon’s spiral tower. “We have some very thorough reports about the work being done to clear the route to the Lanayru Wetlands; it details how many laborers were hired on and it even includes some very descriptive language about the remains and what is being done to dispose of them. I wouldn’t suggest reading that after eating or if you plan to eat anytime soon after.”

“Understood,” Sidon tittered, nodding attentively.

“There is also a copy of a report from within the fort’s camp. Can you believe they’re jokingly calling it ‘Fort Boko’?” For a moment, the woman allowed a hint of exasperation to roughen the otherwise musical sound of her voice. She almost immediately took hold of the tiny show of aggression, clearing her throat, then brought her gaze to meet that of the seated Prince. Her eyes hurriedly flicked back to the pile as she continued. “It just seems tasteless to me, but in any case, the report details everything from the guard rotation of the camp, to the initial findings of our structural engineers and the Apostles of the Basilica in regards to the pyre circles. Also, commentary from our cultural experts on how we can naturalize the structure so that it suits and reflects the architectural style of our people.”

The Prince laughed quietly, unable to keep himself from rolling his eyes at the last bit of Laflat’s summary. “There’s sure to be a very long-winded explanation as to why it’s of dire importance to make sure that the fort is converted to a more luminous, blue appearance.”

The Secretary joined in the laughter, her giggles measured and pretty but also fake. She shrugged, offering a tired excuse which came from her lips in such a thoughtful tone, it was as though the words hadn’t been written into her mind by the repetitious concerns of the older, upperclass population. “We live for tradition, Highness.”

“At what point does tradition become redundancy, I wonder?” he remarked, keeping his voice airy and unassuming as he did.

“It’s just a part of being a Zora, Highness,” she said, lazily explaining the issue away as ‘just something that has always been this way.’ “The wisdom of our elders is carried much further than it ever could be by, for instance, Hylians. Because of their short lifespans, their ideas and culture evolve much more quickly. True, our younger generations often translate adherence to old cultural norms and traditions as stagnance but it makes us who we are, and that’s important isn’t it?”

The young woman bent her graceful neck ever so slightly to look on the Prince, to measure Sidon’s reaction to her words. He made it difficult, of course, by lowering his own gaze to the marbled surface before himself as he contemplated Laflat’s words.

“Hmm,” the Prince hummed, nodding softly before he raised his head to regard Laflat once more, bringing a coquettish smile to her face as he gazed upon her pretty features. “I just don’t see why maintaining tradition can’t exist alongside allowing our culture to evolve and new ideas to flourish?”

“You’ll be King one day, Highness,” the young woman said with some measure of affection and pride, essentially giving up the discussion for reasons unknown to the Prince; she probably had work
to do and was too polite to say so. “So perhaps you may find the answer to that, if you can manage to get a handle on that short attention span of yours,” Laflat teased playfully, giggling in her quiet, polite way as she did.

“Oh!” the secretary exclaimed, looking a bit embarrassed as she, too, almost forgot something. “The plans for the Champion Festival are also here. You’ll need to look over them soon, if you want to bring any concerns up to the committee in charge of it.”

“Noted,” Sidon answered, though his tone fell a bit flat at the mention of the Champion Festival. “Thank you, Laflat.”

When Laflat bowed and showed herself from Sidon’s chambers, the Prince sifted through the reports left behind, immediately seeking out the plans for the Champion Festival with intent. They held this event every summer on the anniversary of the Calamity, always with the same events, the same food and games, and the same services honoring all the warriors they lost a hundred years ago.

Sidon looked over the plans, unsurprised by the utter repetition. When he came to the page, in which, the service paying homage to his sister was described he found that, it, like everything else, was more of the same tired tales and speeches from retired soldiers who’d received healing from her once or twice. ‘She was a selfless hero, a valiant, powerful warrior, and a compassionate healer.’

He couldn’t help but wonder- how would Mipha feel knowing that she wasn’t remembered for the person that she truly was but for the boxes that people forced her into? She was remembered for the idealizations of the person she was, not for her true values or character. Sidon shoved the papers aside as agitation began to take hold and he slumped at his desk, his face falling into his hands.

The Prince couldn’t be sure exactly why he felt the way he did; he should have been glad to dedicate time each year to the memory of his sister, yet with every passing summer, his fragile hold on the inconsolable child he’d been when first they mourned Mipha’s loss slipped further from him. He’d begun to grow unnerved by the reality that, if he couldn’t find some way to console these stubborn grievances away, he could turn as angry and spiteful as a certain Hylian he knew.

Sidon drew his face back from the dark shelter of his palms, quietly stretching out his senses to check and see if Link had yet returned, only to be disappointed for the hundredth time. His golden eyes peered out the large window before him, his sight moving over the horizon as he wondered what sorts of adventures his dear friend had found for himself, somewhere beyond Sidon’s reach?

Was it selfish to hope he returned, when he was surely needed elsewhere? Was it wrong to want for his presence?

He wondered, what kind of damage had he done to his friendship with the Hylian Champion? He had tried to do what was right and what was best. He had tried to be honest with himself about what he was feeling, and he had tried to make sure things remained healthy and positive, yet clearly he’d failed in that.

What had been his first mistake? He felt he was balanced somewhere in between trying to aid his friend in any way he could, giving everything he had to give, while also making sure he did what was right for himself. Had he tricked himself somewhere along the way? Had he hidden selfish reasoning beneath attempts to comfort his friend?

Sidon understood now what Mipha meant; living selflessly really did make small acts of selfishness feel like horrific crimes to endlessly punish oneself for.

“My lord?” When yet another voice came to interrupt the Prince’s musings, Sidon managed to feel
doubly terrible for his difficulty with concentration. He looked up to see Brivere waiting to be acknowledged in his doorway.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” he apologized, rushing to his feet. “I had meant to be at least somewhat prepared before you arrived.”

“I am very likely early, my lord,” the golden Zora reassured as he came into the Prince’s quarters, looking on with a mildly concerned expression, since Sidon’s mind appeared to be in disarray. “The fault is my own.”

“Oh, well, in that case, I’ll just sit back down.” Sidon spoke in a joking manner, though he indeed sank back into his seat, taking a deep breath to calm himself and letting it out in a morose sigh. “Brivere, can I ask your thoughts on the Champion Festival?”

“What of it, my lord?” Brivere said, coming to stand near the Prince’s side.

“Hnn,” Sidon folded his arms against his chest, raising his fingers to cup his chin in thought. His features were calm and pensive, showing nothing of his deep, troubled state of confusion. “I believe it should be something that offers peace and joy, given that it’s a celebration of the lives of those who fought. It isn’t meant to feel like a funeral, yet every year it leaves me mournful and downhearted.”

“There is some possibility that this is not your own fault, my lord.” Brivere offered this explanation after a moment of consideration. He couldn’t say he fully understood his Prince’s magical abilities or what they truly felt like, but that didn’t stop him from being hyper-vigilant in regards to them. “The event effects the emotional state of the entire population and it may be, in fact, that you’re unknowingly allowing outside influences to cause a shift in your own emotional state.”

“You really believe so many of our people feel so deeply troubled?” Sidon questioned, peering up at his Knight with new concern written on his visage which added to his growing list of issues to consider.

“The Calamity was a time of great loss for many people.” The golden Zora shrugged, brushing one of his long forefins over his shoulder as he did. To him, this just seemed the most logical explanation, even if it was also the simplest one. “No matter the intended mood of the festival, how can anybody truly feel happy while celebrating people who are still... gone.”

“Is that how you feel, Brivere?” The Prince uttered his question in quiet concern, his tone gentle and almost tremulous. Sometimes he wished his Knight would lower his strict guard over his emotions, even just a bit. However, it quickly occurred to him that prying was inappropriate and he shook his head to dismiss his own question. “My apologies, I’m certain that’s much too personal.”

“No, it’s fine for you to ask me this and I understand why you do.” Brivere, too, gave a shake of his head to dismiss his Prince’s concerns. He paused, attempting to delve deeply enough within himself to produce a proper answer, while also maintaining his impassive front. “You ask because my father died during the Calamity, correct?”

Sidon knew well that Brivere’s question needed no solid confirmation, though he nodded in reply, almost guilty that his own request had been heeded.

It was, as expected, a difficult topic for the Knight. With his mother long gone and the topic being much before Estuu’s time, who could Brivere speak with? As such, the issue was a tender one, like an injury that never healed and ached with every little movement.

Every year, Brivere’s ‘famous’ father was paraded before him once again. Every year he was
reminded of the coveted qualities that made his father the legendary warrior he had been, none of which had been passed down to Brivere. Every year, people celebrated him, while not even acknowledging Brivere as his legitimate son, all thanks to the dishonorable circumstances surrounding not Brivere’s own creation, but Estuu’s.

“...I’m afraid that, because I never met him, my own feelings can’t aptly compare to the loss you surely feel for Lady Mipha,” he began, predictably placing the suffering of another over his own, diminishing the value of his own emotions and pain. He brought his golden gaze to meet Sidon’s, feeling that the intensity of how completely the Prince listened was an overwhelming thing. When he chose to truly listen, it was never just the words spoken; he read over every word and the emotions that colored each syllable, taking it and feeling it so completely, he always understood.

“But yes, it is difficult,” Brivere continued. “Even when one loses somebody they had no feelings for, the ‘what if’s’ are always there and no matter what, those questions can never be answered. It leaves.. an indescribable emptiness behind.”

The golden Zora lowered his eyes, unable to maintain the contact as he stood, unveiled, before the Prince. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Sidon completely, but speaking of ails he’d never once uttered to any other was much like opening his eyes to the light of morning for the very first time. When Sidon said nothing at all, Brivere dug deeper into the dark pit where he threw his feelings to shrivel and starve. “Worst of all is the notion that, in a way, I owe my own creation to the Calamity itself and that has always made me feel a bit.. loathsome.”

“I think it’s beautiful.” Sidon, at last, had to interject. “The idea that, even during a time of loss, suffering and death.. There was still creation. Even with all the bitter, horrible, violent endings, there was at least one precious beginning.”

“Nn- My lord.. I-..” The Knight found himself captured and vulnerable, his tongue as helpless as the rest of him- how was he to just so swiftly produce words when his Prince offered heartfelt reassurances and warm, genuine smiles? He fought the reaction he could feel deep inside, scrambling to pull on his discarded armor as his skin began to crack like porcelain. He cleared his throat in his moment of awkwardness, then spoke at last. “I’m sorry, I’ve just never considered it in such a poetic way. Thank you for that.”

When Brivere next spoke, his calm reserve had returned. “I’m certain that my own emotional state is effecting you, so I’ll have to leave this topic at the conclusion we’ve come to, for now.”

“Of course,” Sidon mercifully agreed, nodding his head. “Then, I will prepare myself for our sparring session, before time gets away from me, yet again.”

The thunder of hooves and all the dust of Eldin being left on the path behind them was the best way to welcome in the morning. This was maybe the happiest Link had felt for some time, in fact, just watching that damned volcano disappear from over his shoulder.

His Crazy girl was clearly satisfied enough to run with violent fervor, the sound of her breath ragged puffs that echoed her pounding hoof beats as she galloped clear from the summit, back to where the terrain was once again forested, and the air wasn’t rife with ash.

The mare was covered in sweat, though it was difficult to tell where Link’s ended and his horse’s began, since they were both so disgustingly moist that it felt as though they’d trampled over a cluster of chuus. He was more than ready to shed the ridiculous outfit he’d purchased from the Gorons and he was sure that Crazy would be satisfied enough to wade into a malice-tainted bog, if it felt even
slightly cool. Every inch of the Hylian Champion felt chapped from the intense heat, his lips painfully cracked and dry, his eyes burning, watering nonstop and his chest aching from dry, dusty, hot air. His hair was also a bit singed at the ends, but it was getting much too long, anyway.

At a sign of movement on the path before his wildly barreling horse, Link took a tighter hold on her reins; on more than one occasion, she’d gone overboard stamping the life out of fire chuus, so that they were left literally racing across fire to get away. It felt kind of epically cool, at first, but it got old very quickly.

However, Link was happily, joyfully pleased when the foolish creature that warily stepped upon the path ahead turned out to be a hapless red-tusked boar, rather than any given species of Eldin fauna. It was a sign that they were, in fact, free of that damnable place. The Hylian let Crazy girl’s reins slide from his hands, and she predictably maintained her crash course with the rather plump-looking boar as he drew his bow from his back and nocked an arrow to the bowstring, pulling back and taking aim.

It was a shaky shot, as Crazy’s gait was anything but smooth, but when Link let the arrow fly, it struck the target, piercing the creature and becoming deeply bored in its neck. The boar gave a harsh cry of shock and pain, swerving into a bolting run when the shot failed to offer it an immediate, painless demise.

“Damn it,” Link hissed, his voice lost under the furious quake of his mare’s raging gallop. The shot pig was sure to die, but whether or not it managed to escape Link prior to doing so was the challenge. As the boar ran, Crazy girl sped after it, her own pride unwilling to be diminished by something so comparatively weak.

As they gained on the fleeing, bleeding quarry, the boar let out a panicked squeal when Crazy leapt into the air, her hooves drawn back in killer intent. The boar stumbled when the furious horse leapfrogged over its rolling body, her gait slowing to a halt when the boar attempted to scurry back to its feet, and she threw all the power in her hindquarters into a merciless kick. The mare’s hooves struck the wild pig with an audible crack that left even Link cringing in painful sympathy.

The boar toppled backward and fell still, leaving the horse to puff in the pride of her success. The Hylian Champion let out a low whistle of amazement, shaking his head as he climbed from the saddle, stopping to stretch and rub at his sore butt where he stood.

“You’re quite bloodthirsty, my lady,” Link spoke as he looked over the battered prey, gathering up the pig and moving to tie the dead beast to his horse’s back. He had picked up an unusual habit of speaking to his beloved Crazy girl as though she were somebody of regal status, occasionally putting on an accented voice when he really got into the act.

He supposed he had to find entertainment where he could, so it was harmless to indulge in a bit of foolishness.

It was honestly difficult to look on his poor prey’s disfigured maw, knowing that his dear Crazy girl had probably left him looking much the same, once upon a time. His horse’s appearance was rather unassuming and average, as horses went. She was on the shorter side, much like her owner, her legs a bit stumpy for how stocky she was and her pelt was a creamy white, splashed with brown. She wasn’t the horse you would expect to be a savage killer.

Some time ago, before Link had procured a mount that he truly liked, he’d found himself approaching small herds of wild horses, uncaring as to which one he would end up on. He typically rode a horse for a short while, on occasions when he needed to travel physically, then he sold it off once its use expired. He saw no need to waste funds on stabling, or the time it would take to travel to
wherever he chose to stable a horse when he was so innately skilled at plucking them from the wild.

Link could remember holding himself completely still when a particular herd’s ears all rotated at the sound of his approach, and restraining the curse that threatened to fall from his lips when they bolted away. Though, as five or six horses hastily fled, one was left standing with her ears pinned back and her head raised high as she searched for the apparent threat. Link had been thinking that this horse would be the one he jumped on, because she just wasn’t smart enough to run.

When she at last caught sight of the Hylian stooped in the grass, she didn’t hesitate. With a low wail of a war cry, she fiercely charged to meet this threat in a rather unexpected fight to the death.

Link faced the rampaging horse with his typical brash, improperly prepared brand of idiocy. She reared before him, the glaring sunlight passing over her rippling shoulders and between chunks of her windswept mane when she swung her head about, flailing her front hooves like iron-knuckled fists, then she firmly bashed the Hylian’s vulnerable head in.

By the time he resurrected, it was sundown. He sat up, his skin itching from the bed of grass, his vision a faded blur and his balance a thing that drifted in a nonexistent current. He didn’t have any time to nurse his splitting headache, however, because that crazy horse was still grazing nearby, and she galloped at him intent on round two as soon as he dragged himself upright.

This time, he did the smart thing and fled. It was a desperate, graceless stumble of a run and he couldn’t be sure how he even managed to get himself up a tree, but this was all he could do to escape the crazy horse’s wrath. His makeshift escape left her unfazed, and she continued in her pursuit of Hylian blood, standing upright on her back legs while pounding her furious front hooves against the tree trunk with the intention of knocking the damn tree over, if it was within her power.

By night, she had finally given up, but Link was still up the tree. That was the same night he laid eyes on his first mobile guardian. It aimlessly spider-walked across the open field that stretched into the vast, moonlit horizon, pausing to veer its mechanical head here and there, peering about in constant, purposeful searching. Something about its determination paired with its erratic, directionless wandering struck Link as fucking terrifying.

The crazy horse just watched the guardian drift past, casually grazing and flicking her tail with fearless, devil-may-care attitude; that was how Link knew that he needed her.

“I say, fantastically done my delightful lady. I never once doubted your savage abilities.” Link gave his horse’s hindquarter an affectionate pat as he chuckled to himself. It seemed very clear that both he and his horse were crazy, and that was why they were so perfect for each other.

With the trampled prey fastened into place, Link crawled back up into the saddle and made a clicking sound which let Crazy girl know it was time to continue. She began down the gentle incline at a more relaxed trot, an unusual choice for a horse that always seemed to enjoy the extremes. If she was anything like her owner, she was simply enjoying the view of the thickening foliage and lofty pines, the chirp of crickets which was absent further up the mountain, and the faint smell of water somewhere in the distance.

When at last they found that water, Crazy indeed trudged right into it, not even caring that she took her rider with her. Link somewhat laughed at the splash of cool, fresh water, reaching down to cup it in his hands at the point that his horse was up to her belly in it and he splashed it onto his face, sighing against his wet palms in relief. Crazy, too, dipped her entire face down into the current, then splashed about by raising her muzzle and shaking her head with an excited puff.

“Alright, Crazy girl, since you’re clearly busy, I’ll just leave you to it,” Link said, gathering up some
of the luggage he had tied to his steed. “Just don’t lose any of our stuff.”

The Hylian Champion himself had lost this and that during his time with the Gorons, but he’d also left with some souvenirs. His Zora sword was long bashed to tiny pieces, as was his silver shield; against moblins or lizalfos, he couldn’t remember. It wasn’t as though he mourned. That served to remind him, though, as he slid from his horse’s back and into the cool flow of the river, just where he was.

The Zora River; the cooling touch of its depths held him, giving his tired body soothing comfort as it dragged him along with a gentle insistence. He kicked his way to the shore, dripping wet and glad to be so. He stripped out of the cumbersome flamebreaker armor and boots, rinsing his body once more in the water before he changed back into his Hylian tunic and trousers. His supplies were moved from a fireproof rucksack he’d purchased from a merchant on the way, back into his more lightweight, leather one, then he returned the pack, his weapons and his paraglider to his back. The discarded clothes were stuffed into the fireproof rucksack, which was slung over Link’s shoulder.

“All right, Crazy, let’s keep moving,” he called to his horse, starting off on foot along the river. He knew she wouldn’t come immediately, but she also couldn’t stand for him to get out of sight. Link’s theory was that she was still waiting for the right opportunity to kill him.

The Champion’s plan was to ride back to Hateno Village but in passing through the Lanayru Wetlands and laying eyes on the fort he’d aided the Zoras in taking, he found something interesting enough for him to postpone that trip. One of the numerous guard towers near the gated entrance to the fort was occupied by a Zora warrior and a billow of smoke could be seen stretching upward from within the secure walls.

Did this mean the Zoras had actually moved in? Link hadn’t really stuck around long enough to discern the Prince’s plans for the conquered stronghold and he hadn’t even necessarily cared, but actually seeing Zora people so far outside of their domain was intriguing. Link shifted, pulling the bag hanging on his shoulder up as it had begun to slide off, and continued toward the fort entryway.

“Halt, Hylian,” the guard called to him from the tower. Link stopped in his tracks as commanded, looking up at the armored warrior. He looked young, maybe a bit shorter than an average Zora and probably new to his position, if Link had to judge. The warrior still took his spear in hand, holding the weapon casually enough that he didn’t appear hostile, but rather just aggressive enough to send a message.

So yeah, he was definitely new to his position.

The warrior fixed Link with a golden glare fierce enough to rival that Knight that was always following in Prince Sidon’s flank. He took a firm tone as he spoke up to address the obviously very threatening Hylian Champion. “This fort is under the control of the Zorana Sovereign and as such, a Hylian has no business here. Please move along.”

“Are you sure?” the Champion spoke up in a dubious tone. “I was certain that this was territory of the Kingdom of Hyrule.”

“Would you like for me to bind you and let you discuss it with my superiors?” The warrior bent himself forward to regard the Hylian below his tower as he threatened.

Link’s eyes widened and he tilted his head as a perplexed and surprised expression came over his features, though it was, of course, something of an act. “Sure,” he offered a nod of agreement, leaving the Zora guard gazing upon him in frustrated confusion. None the less, the warrior leapt down from the tower, rope in hand as he prepared to tie the suspicious character who refused to
Between managing the labor force which was taking care of monster remains, keeping guard duty rosters maintained, taking various irrelevant orders from fussy Apostles of the Basilica while making detailed reports on all of this, Betaal was up to her forefins in work.

She also loved every moment of it. The Apostles perhaps got under her scales slightly but they also didn’t actually have any authority over her, much as they pretended to, so she was free to write them off any time she pleased. All she needed to really keep in mind was that the Apostle’s approval of the fort as a culturally important site was necessary, as per Prince Sidon’s plans.

Aside from that, she ran a tight ship, sparing little leniency in regards to mishaps or shenanigans. According to Guard Captain Bazz, her methods were unique, but she was more than fit for the job; it was a compliment that she was still grinning over from time to time, probably frightening bystanders when she did.

She was grinning to herself in that very way when one of the warriors assigned to the front guard tower approached on her blind side and cleared his throat nervously. “Sir, I captured a suspicious individual attempting to enter the fort. What would you like me to do with him?”

Betaal turned to face the guardsman, her single, yellow eye coming to look upon a tied and somewhat smug-looking Hylian in the tight, merciless grasp of an inexperienced recruit of a guard. The Zora warrior took a deep breath and let it out in a slow, somewhat bemused sigh, her former expression turning quickly to a deep frown.

“Guardsman,” she spoke in a rough but serious tone, “why have you tied up the Hylian Champion?”

“The..what?” The young guard was left fumbling for words and turned to look at his prisoner, almost as though he expected an explanation, yet he only received a sly grin. He straightened and squared his shoulders, clearing his throat, and said, “Sir, he made no mention of such a title. Are you certain?”

“Yes.” Betaal responded, her lack of amusement growing as she was questioned. “Now release him and return to your duties.”

The guard scurried to untie the rope restraining Link’s wrists, his shaking hands only growing more clumsy with each passing moment while Betaal’s ever-hardening glare bore into him. He did eventually get the restraint removed, then he gave an apologetic bow to his superior, as well as the Champion, before he hurried back to his post, carrying himself like a chastised Hylian shepherd with a tucked tail.

“So-” Betaal addressed Link once the guardsman finally left her sight. When she spoke, she managed to still sound as though she were issuing orders to one of her subordinates. “Are you here on some official Champion duty or just to be funny?”

“I was curious,” Link explained a bit too nonchalantly for the Zora warrior’s liking. “I didn’t think it would be so complicated just to check on progress.”

“That’s because your friendship with our Prince seems to have come with the benefit of being coddled. You’re an effective warrior, to be sure, but your immunity to our chain of command is a bit disconcerting.” Betaal paused, her vibrantly red top fin flaring slightly as she appeared to remember something of great importance. “Though, I understand that you mentioned my skill to the Guard
Captain, who also seems to hold you in high regard. As a result..

The Zora’s fists tightened, her single eye seeming to shine like an ember before it burst into flame beneath fresh kindling. A deep, violet stain then traced Betaal’s cheeks and her lips drew back from her sharp teeth in a smile that appeared sinister, despite her obvious excitement. “As a result, I was promoted to Guard Sergeant, in charge of overseeing the fort camp.”

“You’re welcome,” Link replied, though he couldn’t actually recall giving this apparent raving review? For all he knew, it was probably Sidon, but he didn’t mind taking credit for it, for now. It probably wouldn’t come back to bite him. “You seem to have recovered from your injuries well enough.”

“Hmph,” the Zora swatted her hand dismissively. “Physical ails have never held me back, much as some injuries came with unwarranted doubt and gentle treatment. I’m glad enough that somebody finally noticed that I’m still more than capable.”

“Sir,” a softer voice spoke up, interrupting the conversation between the Champion and Betaal. When Link turned his attention to the bowed form of another Zora, he immediately recognized the violet complexion of Dunma, even before she straightened to speak.

“Uh,” Betaal verbally stumbled for a moment, her posture going rigid as her top fin flattened against her head, making her look maybe just a tiny bit less intimidating. “Guardsman,” she uttered, acknowledging Dunma in order to allow her to speak further.

“I noticed that I was only assigned a half shift.” The young, violet Zora spoke simply, her tone odd and vacant, her eyes not raising to Betaal’s or even Link’s, but rather bleakly staring off into nothing. For a horrifying moment, Link felt a painful spark of recognition in Dunma’s expression. He swallowed dryly, trying to fight off the whisper in the back of his mind that looked on Dunma and found a mirror image.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Betaal spoke up, her firm tone slipping away and turning into something fumbling and confused. Link quickly turned his regard back to her at the unusual wavering of her otherwise stern character. She seemed as though she had no clue why Dunma would even be bringing this concern to her, or what to do about it.

“I just wanted to make certain it was not simply a mistake, sir,” Dunma explained, though it was clear that she was expecting further explanation, because she didn’t leave when her question was answered.

“It was not,” the deep blue Zora nodded awkwardly as she reaffirmed. “I just thought.. You might want to take it easy.”

“I see..” Dunma quietly spoke. She may have been disappointed but it wasn’t entirely evident from her tone or body language. No, everything about her was blank and unreadable when she finally bowed and walked away.

Betaal watched as Dunma slowly rejoined the chaotic bustle of the camp, just sluggishly moving around everyone and everything else present, allowing herself to be carried wherever was easiest, no real care as to where she ended up.

“She’s so sad,” Betaal whispered, an odd tenderness to her tone that Link definitely thought sounded unusual, though perhaps he had merely been making another one of his shallow judgements. Maybe it just so happened that people weren’t actually as two-dimensional as he tended to read them? “I don’t know why she volunteered for duty here. She shouldn’t have been made to come back to this
It actually sounded like Betaal was speaking quietly to herself, unaware that her words were entirely audible. The Hylian Champion sighed, then spoke up. “She’s trying to stay busy in order to distract herself from her loss. So, by giving her a half shift, you’re just leaving her to the dark place inside her own head.”

“What?” The Zora warrior uttered in confusion and concern, her hands pressed into the crest of her brow as she shook her head. “No, I wanted to make things easier for her. What should I do? If I change her shift now, she’ll think I’m being wishy-washy or too demanding. I really want to try and.. comfort her or something, but I’ll just seem insincere or I’ll make things worse.” The Zora’s hands moved steadily downward until her face was hidden beneath her palms. She allowed herself to remain concealed by her hands for a few moments, her tension only continuing to grow until she forcefully exclaimed aloud, her hands falling away as she did. “Ugg! I’m so terrible at touchy-feely stuff.”

Link was busy trying to decide if the right word to describe his own feelings toward this scenario was ‘amused’ or ‘bemused’. He decided that both worked. “I can’t tell if you’re asking yourself or me..” the Champion spoke up, the sound of his voice a quiet invasion into Betaal’s apparent dilemma. “..because if you’re asking me, that’s a huge mistake.”

“Oh?” The deep blue Zora looked on the much smaller Hylian, her red fin idly fluffing again as she spoke in a rather dubious tone. “Yet you seemed to show a great deal of moral support to our Prince.”

“I would say it was the other way around,” Link quickly responded, though he was oddly surprised that this topic came up or that people actually noticed his relationship with the prince, whatever it may have been.

“It looked mutual, from my perspective,” Betaal said. She was used to the notion of comradery and support between fellow warriors, so it certainly wasn’t odd. She was just forced to acknowledge that she, herself wasn’t particularly good at it, though it also might’ve had to do with Dunma being... Dunma.

“I didn’t realize you were watching so closely.” The Hylian’s brow was gently furrowed at this bizarre revelation.

“Sidon is our future King. Everyone is watching closely, Hylian Champion.” As Betaal spoke, Link peered up at her, thinking her gravelly voice managed to hold a tone of slight warning. Then, when she continued, he was made sure of that. “You’d do well to keep that in mind.”

“Hm. Thanks for the tip, then.” Link was still unsure as to what it meant. He supposed he could take it to mean that if he broke Sidon’s heart, the entire Zora race would hate him. Possibly hunt him down, spear him like a Hylian bass and roast him over an open flame. It wasn’t like he hadn’t experienced plenty of that in Eldin, so at least he knew what he was in for. In any case, he now felt obligated to attempt advice in return. “If you want to help Dunma, don’t lighten her load if she’s using it to cope. And if you really want to be there for her, try.. Maybe talking to her?”

“Talking?” Betaal repeated with a nervous tremor, visibly gulping as she nodded her head. “Right. So.. Should I expect that you wish to stay with us, Champion? We can offer you shelter here, if you wish.”

“No thanks. I have another destination in mind, and I should get going.”
“Where are you headed?”

“Zora’s Domain.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, friends. I owe you all an apology. I did say that Link and Sidon would be back together in this chapter, but the process of getting them back together went longer than expected. Sorry about that. Hopefully the shenanigans with the horse makes up for it, since you lot seemed to like Crazy girl? SO, they obviously will be back together in the NEXT chapter, so nurse the thirst for another week.

Also, I've gotta ask- the OCs have gotten a bit more central. How are you guys feeling about them? Are they likable? Possibly hateable? What about Sidon's scenes with Mipha? I have a few more ideas for scenes with small Sidon and Mipha, but what do you guys think about young Sidon and the way I've written Mipha so far?

Other than that, thanks for reading and I hope you all enjoyed! Have a great weekend/week, depending on when you're reading this. :)}
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

After nearly a month away, The Hylian Champion at last reappeared in Zora's Domain. It didn't take him long to seek out the Prince, however, the reunion didn't quite go as Link had imagined. It left him to wonder, what was it about Sidon that brought out the worst in him?

Prince Sidon, still hopeful about his plan to 'speak' with the Lynel, was preparing for the worst, even so. He almost immediately came to the conclusion that somebody as experienced with fighting Lynels as his dear Hylian Champion, could offer him valuable advice. It was by Link's suggestion that 'advice' come in the form of a spar. The Prince's Knight, of course, had something to say about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It really wasn’t that Link was trying to intensify his ‘man from the wild’ image everywhere he went, but he wasn’t about to leave his fresh kill behind, so strolling into Zora’s Domain with an entire boar over his shoulder couldn’t be avoided.

When he found his way to the Seabed Inn, he sauntered in as though everything were normal, not paying too much heed when Kodah stood gaping, her cheeks flushing the color of swift violets. “Wow, Linny,” she uttered in amazement, “that’s quite the kill.”

“Mmhm,” the Hylian hummed his response, moving quickly beyond the cooking area to where the beds waited. He was beyond ready to throw down every bit of his gear and the pig that he assumed was to be dinner, so that’s precisely what he proceeded to do, with Kodah tailing him all the while.

Link selected an empty bed for himself and tossed one of his two packs down upon it, letting the pig flop to the floor. A moment later, Link threw himself upon the water mattress in much the same manner, his back and shoulders aching from effort. As the water bed wobbled underneath his weight, he pressed gladly into the cool surface, the thought idly occurring to him that, the damn pig was the lucky one. He wished he’d been the one getting carried around.

“Mmhm,” Finley watched from a nearby table, giving her head an approving nod and playfully poking her own Hylian lover. “Sasan, you should definitely try to be more like Link. He’s a truly rugged man.”

“Oh uhh,” Sasan looked on from where he sat, at Finley’s side. He let out a pitiful sigh, then spoke up in a tone that was just as dejected, “I’m sorry to say, I don’t think I could ever be on his level.”

“I’m kidding. Anyway,” Finley said with a little laugh, “you’re perfect the way you are, of course. I just don’t plan to let you live down being a Hylian catfish.”

“Right,” Sasan mumbled, taking a sip of his drink as though to have an excuse not to say anything more.
“I’m back.” The voice of Kayden echoed from the entrance and he walked in carrying a small package and looking very pleased with himself. “I went and got food for dinner. Chillfin trout for everyone!”

Letting out a deep sigh, Kodah’s attention wandered from the collapsed Hylian and his immense prey, to where her husband stood holding the tiny package of fish he’d rustled up from the market. “Yes, dear, nicely done.”

The Zora woman walked over to the table where her daughter and Sasan waited and she took the chilled pitcher in hand, pouring a glass of water that she took over to the collapsed Hylian in concern. “Linny?” Kodah’s voice was cautious and as gentle as the hand that laid upon Link’s still form. “Here, Linny, drink this. You have me concerned that the heat outside did you in.”

Groaning, Link firstly pushed his face more firmly into the mattress, though he soon relented as he was prodded. He dragged his tired frame back to a sitting position, taking the glass from Kodah’s hand and pressed it to his cracked lips. The Hylian was certain that this summer heat wouldn’t do him in if the heat of Eldin alone could not, but nonetheless, the drink was refreshing. It was the first cold thing he’d had since returning and he downed it with desperate haste.

“I thought so,” Kodah nodded knowingly. “Linny, you’re so wild. When are you going to learn to take care of yourself? If Mipha were here, she’d be worrying over you like she always did.”

The Hylian had to catch his breath after he finished off the drink and he sat softly panting, his hand lowering to his knee, fingers loosely holding onto the empty glass. From where he sat, he could still faintly see the statue of Mipha just outside, and it occurred to him that, despite how often he’d seen her soft, luminous silhouette watching him with melancholy, tearful eyes, he’d finally grown numb to the thought and sight of her.

Had his petty revenge really been so fulfilling or was he just growing more emotionally vacant?

“So, Linny,” Kodah bent herself slightly and reached down to take the glass from the quiet Hylian’s hands. “Does this mean you’re staying with us?”

Link slowly nodded his head, combing his mussed fringe to the side, as it had become so long that it was hanging in his eyes. He needed to cut it soon but it was such a minor annoyance that he consistently put it off. It only fell back into his face as he looked downward, reaching to unfasten his rupee pouch which was beginning to feel light again. He’d spent far too much on stone-grilled meat and that stupid flamebreaker armor while he was in Eldin. He dumped a few colorful gems into his hands, fingering through them as he counted the amount and handed them off to Kodah.

Kodah, in turn, also counted the rupees as she carried them over the check-in desk. “Really, Linny? Four nights?” Her voice held a tone of suspicion, the amount of time Link had paid for clearly striking her as odd. She turned a narrowed gaze to him after she placed the money away, and crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s going on? Since when do you not find your rest in the Prince’s bedchamber?”

The Champion’s head snapped up with quickness to rival a lightning lizalfos’ movements, a vehemently confused expression wrinkling his face. It only left Kodah giggling at the reaction her words had produced.

“You’re wondering how I knew about that?” The Zora woman winked slyly, padding over into the doorway between the rest area and the kitchen, intent on checking to see how the dinner was coming along. “I spoke with Bazz recently. His guards say that you venture up to the Prince’s tower often. But you’re here now, so something must be wrong.”
Betaal was right—everyone was watching. These Zoras were as bad as the people of Hateno Village. Alright, maybe not that bad, but they really did keep their prominent brows poked right into Sidon’s business, didn’t they? In any case, Link figured that casually showing himself into the Prince’s private space and bed would be inappropriate, given the circumstances.

Link gave his head a shake, his shoulders softly raising in a casual kind of shrug, which he hoped made him seem unconcerned but also as though he’d never even heard such rumors. Thankfully, it got Kodah off his case and she went on her way to help her husband with the dinner. Finley, meanwhile, was still grinning and whispering something about how Link had the same good taste in lovers as Sasan. That was more than a little awkward and uncomfortable a comparison, so the Hylian just laid over on his side, burying his head in the pillows to drown everything out.

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Sidon only realized as he was consistently pummeled and caught off guard by the quickness of his Knight, just how very difficult it was to fight while weighed down by full armor. His sight was also somewhat limited by the helm he wore, forcing him to lean more of his attention into his electrical sensory skill, focusing everything he had onto the golden blur that was Brivere.

Brivere moved as rapidly as a storm wind, every step a graceful one, every strike so brutally powerful, the Prince wondered if the other Zora was indeed channeling a lynel. The only edge he had in this encounter was a deep understanding of how his Knight tended to fight; Brivere was a rare soldier among Zora, a warrior who specialized in use of the silver longsword. The more curious detail was that he almost managed to rival the speed of a typical spear-wielding warrior, despite the heft of his weapon. Even on land, he was a force to be reckoned with.

Luckily, Sidon’s goldenscale trident had the advantage of the range it offered. Paired with the difference in size that he had over his Knight, it evened the field regarding the strength of their strikes, despite his lighter weapon. Even so, Brivere always managed to keep the Prince on the defensive, sneaking into Sidon’s vulnerable range, and darting back out just as quickly.

Every second of movement was calculated and precise, the blows between them savage and without restraint. Typically, there was at least some measure of gentleness and care when the two warriors practiced, like the slow, smooth caress of a whetstone as they sharpened themselves on one another. Today, something was different and Sidon wasn’t so sure that it was the armor he wore.

Brivere, like any Zora, possessed a very powerful jumping ability, thanks to a flexible, light-weight bone structure, and the same strong musculature that made them such fine swimmers. When he fought, he took it further, using his giant weapon to vault himself here and there, jumping, landing, rushing in to attack wherever and whenever Sidon left himself open.

Finding the openings in Sidon’s defense, even with him weighed down as he was, was a complicated matter, however. The Prince’s twirling trident shifted position with rapid grace that whipped and sliced the air around him. He hurried on his feet, backing away when Brivere came in too close, adjusting his range, making quick jabs which sent the Knight back for a few short moments.

That was the scene Link came upon, when at last he managed to locate the ever-busy Prince. He approached, his boots quietly treading over the short grass of the open area but he remained at enough of a distance that he wouldn’t become caught in the potential crossfire.

He’d never seen Sidon in anything other than his fancy adornments that clicked and clinked with every little movement, so to pay witness to the Prince in full armor for the first time was a fascinating sight. It was similar to the armor worn by the guardsmen but infinitely fancier, as to be expected.
Upon his head, there was golden plating that protected the crest of his brow, custom fit to conceal his more intricate headfins. The piece extended along the length of his tail with linked plates that resembled a serpentine spine. Even his forefins were adorned with some rather fancy-looking armor that could have been mistaken for pure decoration.

Sidon also wore a cuirass and pauldrons, though his were more elaborately designed, his shoulder armor fiercely spiked and his abdomen concealed by glinting, golden scalemale that was crafted in the same denticled style as the Prince’s rough hide.

Link was sure of one thing; if he ever happened to see a man or beast of Sidon’s stature clad in such threatening gear, he’d definitely show at least an ounce of caution. If this was in preparation for facing the lynel, though, that creature still probably wouldn’t have any second thoughts. It didn’t look as though Brivere was sparing the Prince any quarter, either.

As fast as Sidon moved, Brivere appeared to always be just ahead. The golden Zora’s huge blade met the shaft of the Prince’s trident, pushing it aside, pinning it down before he moved in to strike. The taller Zora quickly shot back on his feet, drawing the head of his weapon back with him and capturing the sword within the forked points, pushing hard and shoving Brivere backward.

The Knight went back as though he’d planned to do so. He did not stumble, but arced into his own fall, slinging his blade back as he tumbled. The point of the sword staked into the ground, the length of the blade creating a makeshift pillar that gave Brivere leverage, which he used to vault out of the way of the attack that chased him. He flipped into the air, over the sword, then landed, ducking behind it, shielding himself there for a moment.

The head of Sidon’s trident clanged against the steel of Brivere’s blade when the Knight used it to cover himself. The golden Zora’s hands moved to the long handle of his sword and he drew it up from where it was buried, his feet moving back in graceful, cat-like steps, his golden eyes tightly focused on the massive threat that was the Prince when he began to attack again while Brivere defended.

Link chuckled as he watched; a spear-type weapon was a fucking terror against a heavy sword. He supposed he’d be forced to admit that Brivere was skilled to be handling it so well. He’d rather see the golden Zora get taken down a few notches, though.

Brivere swiftly side-stepped in the direction of Sidon’s thrusting hand, deftly taking himself out from in front of the Prince’s aim, then he charged in once more. Sidon turned to meet the onslaught, aiming to capture the heavy blade in the prongs of his trident again when the heavy sword sliced the air, hurtling toward him. The larger Zora’s aim was true, his trident successfully halting the sword, tearing it free from Brivere’s grasp and slinging it aside, leaving the golden Zora defenseless.

Sidon could have easily stopped, assuming this signaled a win on his part, but as the Knight flipped backward out of his range, he felt that perhaps Brivere wasn’t ready to surrender. He rushed after the golden Zora, raising his weapon as Brivere’s body flew gracefully through the air. Sidon took a swing, catching his opponent in a moment of defenselessness, the shaft of his trident striking the Knight and knocking him from the air.

The golden Zora hit the ground and rolled back to his feet, though the point of Sidon’s weapon was right on him, poised before him by the time he righted himself. He would surmise that the lack of gentleness had pushed his Prince to the point of ferocity or else rampant competitiveness.

“Very well, my lord. This one is yours,” Brivere declared, long, deep breaths coming from him with every word.
“Why don’t we take a short break,” the Prince suggested, lowering his weapon and extending a hand to help the young Knight back to a stand, even if he didn’t necessarily need any assistance. Still, Brivere took hold of Sidon’s hand as it was offered and he allowed himself to be lifted.

What happened after that, Link wasn’t sure because his eyes wandered off to find something more interesting; crystal waterfalls and a pink-winged heron hunting hot-footed frogs, its neck straightening as quick as a spear jab when it lunged and quickly swallowed down its prey. There was a lone silent princess growing nearby in the thick grass, softly bent as some kind of faintly glowing, blue butterfly landed upon it, its weight seeming almost enough to snap the delicate flower’s stem.

“My friend!” Sidon’s voice called out, sounding rather excited despite being a muffle from underneath the helm he wore and his hands hurried to unfasten the straps holding it in place. Link’s dull, blue eyes wandered back to the Prince’s towering form when the armored Zora approached, webbed toes pattering, even in the grass. When at last Sidon wriggled himself free of the piece of armor that hid his face, he took a deep breath, the hot, stale air underneath the helm clearly having offered little relief.

“Link,” the Prince uttered again as he stood just near enough that the Hylian could look onto his face without craning his neck. The Zora’s eyes shined as brightly as they had the fateful evening he met the Hylian champion; his expression was different, however. His eyes held fond recognition, his violet-stained visage appearing almost.. Relieved?

“You’ve returned,” Sidon spoke, looking as though he had a thousand things to say, yet he couldn’t put a single one into words. So instead, he stated the obvious. “You’ve been gone for quite some time. I..” He trailed off, some useless bit of verbiage being trimmed from what needed to be said at this very moment. “Well, I’m certainly pleased to see you’ve come back to visit.”

“How long was I gone?” Link posed this question, unsure himself. He tended to lose track of how much time had passed, days folding neatly into what felt like a few hours each time he died and returned to flesh, his quiet mind needing time to return from the blackness left behind.

“Um,” the Zora paused, this question clearly an unexpected one. Nonetheless, he attempted to take stock of everything that had occurred since his dear friend went off to run errands, then didn’t return for.. “A few weeks. Those must have been quite the errands, indeed.” The Prince laughed, humorously implying that his friend had simply misjudged how long he would need for these apparent errands, his smiles and positivity masking his discomfort and confusion with the entire situation.

Sidon’s voice was as guarded and full of false friendliness as ever and though Link had been trying to keep himself from misjudging those around him, he was sure about this, and it made his ears twitch in annoyance. “They were,” he answered, offering no explanation. Hey, he was the Hylian Champion, savior of Hyrule and Hero of everything, right? Nobody was owed any explanations in regards to his wanderings. All that was implied in him being who he was.

It was good to know that only a few moments of the Prince’s company could give life back to his angry side, though. Clearly, Sidon’s friendship was so, very healthy for Link.

He hadn’t thought this would be so damned difficult. When he rode his horse up that familiar road to Zora’s Domain, Link had sort of imagined finding the Prince lingering about in the square or near the palace, his towering, red frame gleaming in the summer sun. The Hylian would approach and Sidon would offer a warm, genuine smile which would wake whatever parts of Link’s sick head that were still dimly functioning from the resurrections he suffered all alone in Eldin. They would fall right back into the groove of easy, comfortable conversation in each other’s company and... well, either way, Link had succeeded in deluding himself, yet again.
Was it Sidon’s fault? Or was it his own? He wasn’t sure anymore. He was so used to blaming everybody else, so blaming himself was still horrendous and uncomfortable.

“May I ask,” the Prince’s voice cut through Link’s silent, bitter pondering, bringing the Hylian’s icy stare back to his own gently imploring one, “how long are you planning to stay with us?”

“I’m not sure,” Link shrugged, his gaze faltering once again, diverting to where Brivere waited, looking over his weapon to inspect its condition. The Hylian had paid for his bed at the Inn, but he wasn’t even sure he wanted to stay that long, or if he wanted Sidon privy to any of that information.

“Well then,” Sidon’s voice dropped to something softer, his tone never anything less than understanding, his own concerns placed aside for the sake of his friend’s comfort. He would not push, instead searching for the best way for him to meet Link’s needs. “...if you do still plan to be around later this evening, perhaps you and I could find time to talk?”

That was different; since when did this overly dismissive, constantly busy prince wish to set time aside to talk to Link? As hard as Link had fought to get answers from him before, it felt bizarre. Still, he nodded his head in affirmation. It wasn’t like he’d returned on a whim to completely ignore Sidon, no, he wanted to see the Prince, he could admit that much, at least to himself.

“Ah, good.” Sidon, too, nodded his head gladly, if still a bit awkward or uncertain of what terms he and the Hylian Champion were truly on. “I look forward to it, then.”

“So,” Link spoke to swiftly change the subject. It would be easier to discuss something that had nothing to do with their complicated relationship. “Is this the armor you had Dento make adjustments to?”

“Yes, indeed,” the Zora answered, his tentative manner fading away to make room for the apparent surprise that Link recalled their previous conversation about the armor. “What do you think of it?”

The Prince stood straighter, making a rather proud display of the imposingly fierce, regal suit.

“It’s impressive.” The Hylian’s blue eyes traced the details of the elaborate pieces now that he was having a closer look. The toothed scalemale was a fantastic work of precision and detail. It was difficult to comprehend how much time and workmanship must have went into crafting each tiny, golden oval, since every single one had a sharp, hooked ridge. Link couldn’t help but investigate it rather curiously, his fingers reaching out to brush one of the sharp edges.

“Careful,” Sidon softly warned, standing perfectly still to prevent incident, yet the very thing he feared occurred almost as though by some sort of jinx, or else by his friend’s constant lack of care. If the Prince knew Link and his tendencies well enough, he would say it was the latter.

“Seems effective.” Link nodded his head in an impressed manner as he drew back a pinpricked fingertip, watching as a deep red bead of blood seeped from his punctured skin. He smeared the blood away and let his hand fall at his side, then peered up at the armored Zora’s face once more. “So then, you’re still preparing to fight that lynel, are you?”

“I’m preparing to fight, if fighting become necessary.” The Zora placed great emphasis on the word ‘necessary’, hoping to remind Link that the plan was actually to reason with the lynel.

“Right.” Sharp, blue eyes glanced over at Brivere once more. The gold Zora was clearly listening but remained by the wayside, as to not interrupt. “Well, I personally don’t think this kind of sparring is doing much to prepare you. Your guard’s moves are too predictable and his style of fighting is completely unlike a lynel’s.”
“My friend, you’ve engaged lynels, yourself, yes?” Sidon naturally bent himself slightly forward as he spoke to his small companion. “Perhaps you could offer some insight?”

“I could.” There was certainly plenty Link could tell the Prince, but he had the feeling that ‘advising’ Sidon would only bolster his confidence. Maybe it was underhanded, but the Hylian still believed this entire plan was foolish, so finding a way to force doubt into the Prince felt like the best option. A devilish thought occurred to Link as he considered his options, and he immediately spoke it aloud. “Why don’t you fight me instead? I think I can help.”

“You- Really?” Sidon went wide-eyed as an excited child, and Link fought to keep from giving himself away by means of expressing whatever emotions accompanied deviousness. It seemed to have worked well enough, as the Zora was entirely convinced that Link’s intentions were to be helpful. “Don’t tease- are you serious?”

“Yes.” Despite the wicked idea he had, Link was oddly amused that the Zora Prince was beginning toward that odd peak of energetic eruption that the Hylian was so familiar with. Did the notion of taking the Champion on in combat really stoke and entice the Prince so?

“Ah, magnificent!” The Prince’s bundled fists were shaken as his mood ventured further toward utterly gleeful. The Hylian was still convinced that this behavior was something of an act, because it still never felt natural. Who actually got this happy? Nobody did. “Truly, my friend, I’m beyond honored that you’d offer your assistance and I’m quite excited for this, as well.”

There was a gleam of challenge to be found shining deep in the gold of Sidon’s gaze, his smile utterly sincere in a way Link could identify, knowing him as he did. He really was excited as he said, wasn’t he? Why? Did he really believe Link’s abilities would provide such a stimulating test? Was he so desperately hungry for interaction after their long time apart that even the idea of potentially having his ass kicked up and down the Zora River seemed like fun? Link wished he knew. Link wished he understood one damn thing about their relationship and interactions.

Still, the Hylian just chuckled in faint amusement, shaking his head at how foolish the Prince was to trust him. “I doubt you’ll feel that way when I’m done,” Link slyly confessed, the one and only indication he planned to give as to his real intentions. He then began to back away, putting up one finger as a means of asking for a moment. “Just give me a few minutes to prepare; I need to go fetch some things.”

“If you don’t mind, Champion,” Brivere spoke up, approaching from where he’d been lingering, behind the Prince. His voice was a slow, smooth tone, emotionally vacant as always. “Perhaps I could accompany you as you walk? I should like a word with you, privately.”

Sidon turned his head to peer upon the smaller form of his Knight, a certain curiosity that almost bordered concern clear enough to see. At the request, the Hylian paused in consideration, blue eyes flicking between the Prince and the golden Zora. Did Link like Brivere? Not at all. Did he care about anything he had to say? No. Did the fact that Sidon appeared almost ready to intervene strike Link as curious? Oh yeah.

Because of that, Link continued his slow, backward footsteps, gesturing for Brivere to follow before Sidon had a chance to say anything. As the golden Zora fell in line alongside the Champion, Link turned to walk normally, the pace he set just a bit more rushed than what was likely comfortable for a stubby-legged Zora.

The two made their way back toward the city structure of Zora’s Domain, nothing immediately passing between them, so that the only sound to be heard was that of boots and webbed feet pattering against the grass as they went. It was by no means a comfortable silence, but Link was the master of
maintaining awkward stretches of wordless company, so he did nothing to remedy it. It wasn’t his idea, anyway. He suspected Brivere was simply waiting until they were beyond Sidon’s possible hearing range.

As expected, Link glanced over to notice Brivere casting a look over his shoulder, checking to be sure the distance was enough before he began to speak.

“I do still have my reservations about whatever your goals may be in always returning to monopolize so much of our Prince’s time,” the golden Zora spoke up at last, making it perfectly clear that the dislike Link had for him was undoubtedly mutual, as if they hadn’t already gotten that long out of the way.

The Hylian wasn’t entirely certain what it was about him that got under this Zora’s scales, though Link was beginning to learn that these people obviously did have a clue about his relationship with the Prince and strong opinions were the natural reaction to gossip. Could that really be it?

Regardless, Link didn’t really care about Brivere’s reasoning. When he decided to speak up in response, his voice came out a bleak, hollow thing that he wouldn’t bother fixing. “It’s not really up to you, is it?”

At Link’s words, a soft, surprised sound came from the Zora; a tiny exhalation of breath passed his lips and he turned his head to regard the Hylian by his side, golden eyes moving over Link’s form in a moment of quiet observation as the Knight decided just how much bullshit he wished to tolerate. Clearly, it wasn’t very much.

“Ah- so you know how to speak today,” Brivere uttered in retort, his tone sharp. “Very good.”

“Your worthiness of being spoken to is quickly dropping,” Link didn’t even need to think. He’d been patronized far too much as of late and Brivere was the last person he planned to take that from. “..so you might want to get to your point.”

The Zora Knight was rigid with quiet, subtle aggravation but he took a deep breath and let it calmly slide from him as he allowed the matter of offense to pass. It hadn’t been his intention to increase the friction between himself and the selfish Hylian and if he was skilled at anything, it was ignoring petty attempts to get a rise from him.

Brivere cleared his throat and began again. “I believe, in regards to this situation, our opinions on Prince Sidon’s wish to face the lynel are aligned. As such, I am leaving in order to fetch Estuu, so that any injuries that result from this match can be quickly tended.”

The Zora paused, his eyes narrowing in thought. He couldn’t help the bitter discomfort prickling up his spine at apparently not being trustworthy enough to have his advice heeded by his Prince. Being forced to turn to somebody he disliked in the hopes that he may be more successful in swaying the stubborn royal just added insult to injury, but clearly, he could endure it. “What I want from you is this,” he continued, “..if you’re truly a warrior worthy of being called ‘Champion’, give every ounce of that in this fight. Attack with everything, as hard as necessary to convince him that this idea is folly. Show as little mercy as any lynel, because in the end, that is the most merciful thing to do.”

Brivere shifted his gaze to the path ahead of him, allowing a moment for his words to sink in. Unlike his Prince, he couldn’t sense the emotional reactions that laid hidden underneath expressionless faces and still tongues. As such, he sought verbal acceptance of these terms, his voice passing smoothly over his lips. “Do we agree?”

Link chuckled to himself, finding it odd that Sidon’s pompous Knight had been more attuned to the
Hylian’s true intentions than the Prince himself, sans empathic abilities; either that or this begrudging alliance was amusingly ironic.

“We do,” Link agreed.

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Chapter End Notes

Hello friends. This chapter was a bit shorter than the last two, because for unknown reasons, I've had a bizarre drop in productivity. However, I do hope it was still enjoyable. Link and Sidon had their awkward, emotionally stifled reunion after Link's long disappearance. Brivere and Link still don't get along. Those things were definitely fun to write about. Let me know how you guys felt about everything! :)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Back at Fort Boko, Betaal was making her best effort to be a kind, understanding leader, even taking time to comfort a grieving guardsman under her command. Meanwhile, the Hylian Champion set to aiding the Zora Prince in his preparations to face the Lynel.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! Whose ready for yet another 10K word chapter? I just have to say, despite the fact that I was still finishing this chapter off last night, it felt oddly short? It's strange just how much I managed to fit into what amounts to one scene. It's wild, really!

Also, before we go any further, I have to say one thing. I'm really glad you guys let me know how much you like Betaal and I'm happy that she's been so warmly received, but I honestly can't claim 100% originality with her. She is my own nod to the character Undyne, from Undertale. Undyne was my favorite Undertale character and I just couldn't write about warrior fish people without including a reference to her. As well, I found that the river Zora enemies held some physical similarities with Undyne, in regards to the blue color and red fins. It was just too tempting. Anyway- I recently posted some art of Betaal on my tumblr, as well as some art of the other OCs. If you guys are enjoying the OCs and are curious to see my messy drawings of them, go ahead and poke over there.

Enjoy the story and hopefully fall in love with my fighting fish. Thank you all!

According to the Hylian Champion, a wrong had been committed. This wrong was a blunder of ignorance that should have been far outside Betaal’s character, yet shrouded under the endless chores and responsibilities that came with her new rank, it managed to slip past her.

She could not allow this to stand. It was her duty and job to fix this mishap. However, there was also something standing in her way. Herself.

She was a warrior of feral might and bloody skill, a soldier with immutable determination, and as many knew, she was apparently very difficult to kill. She did have one great and terrible weakness, yet even so, she fought to summon up the courage within herself, to face this irrational fear.

Zora warriors had just as many men in their ranks as women, so it wasn’t as though Betaal hadn’t interacted with them equally. Inexperience was not the cause of her trouble, it was just that she was so damn bad at speaking with women. It didn’t matter how often she did it, nothing ever changed. She was only glad when faced with those as reserved as herself, because that was the only time she managed to keep it somewhat together.

She was Sergeant of the fort camp now! She had a job to do! She had to face this fear, punch it in the
throat, and stomp it to death while it squirmed and choked!

Betaal took a deep breath, letting a sense of calm fortitude wash over her. She was ready for this! She strode toward the tent that she’d been lingering near, one hand clenched into a fist, her knuckles a wash of pale blue and violet from the tightness of her grip. Her other hand held a stack of papers that she had rolled up as though she intended to swat herself like a stubborn donkey that wouldn’t keep walking. When she finally stood before the canvas shelter, she reached for the flap, her breath caught in her throat like a fluttering summerwing butterfly tangled in a skulltula’s web.

Shit! She couldn’t do it!

The Zora warrior turned and hurried away as though she expected to be caught just outside, as though she were doing something inexcusable, other than failing at her job. Okay- maybe she didn’t have to do this? She could just take Link’s advice and schedule Dunma for full shifts from now on, right? She didn’t need to ask. What kind of leader asked her subordinates what they wanted?

A good one! Damn it, a good one did! And she was going to be a good one! There was no other option! She had to do this!

Betaal turned on heel, heading back to the tent, not thinking, just walking. She pushed herself, her footsteps fast and making hard patters as she went. She didn’t pause, she didn’t reach for the tent flap, she just knocked it aside, delving into the tent like it was winter waters, enduring the shock of cold to come.

When Betaal burst inside, the violet Zora who was waiting within the cool shade of the tent jumped up, yellow eyes wide and clearly startled. If her weapon had been near enough, she might have reached for it. Maybe she would have struck the awkward, blue Zora down, and that might have been easier for Betaal to withstand.

As it was, Betaal now stood alone inside the shade tent with Dunma. She shared this rest space with a few other warriors during the day, when the sun was most intense, but they were currently all on duty. Betaal was aware of this, given that she made the duty roster, and it had been her plan all along, though now she felt foolish for it.

“Uhh...” The nervous Zora woman immediately began to stumble over whatever thoughts were in mind to be spoken, actual language getting lost somewhere along the way. This shouldn’t have been so difficult! Dunma was younger than her, less experienced, lower in rank, though Betaal wasn’t sure why she thought those things would comfort her. She cleared her throat, straightening herself, though her topfin remained flattened in an unthreatening way. “Guardsman.”

“Yes, Sergeant?” Dunma’s voice was soft and serious, her own posture righting as she stood at attention. She looked less vacant than earlier, if only because she was still a bit surprised at her superior’s bizarre entrance.

“Ahh, no, I-” Betaal stumbled yet again as she attempted speech. She was utterly convinced that her tongue did not belong to her because it was completely weak and useless. As she tried to get herself together, she began fussing with the rolled up papers in her hand, which now refused to unroll, thanks to her tight grip. “I mean, at ease, there’s no need for such stringent formality. I just wanted to ask, I mean, well, I wanted to take your opinion into account before I started working on the new duty roster.”

Managing to raise her eyes above her nervous hands, the blue Zora at last got to the point of her visit, her gruff voice trembling less, but maybe sounding a bit too serious. “You brought up the half shift earlier, and it occurred to me that perhaps this type of shift wasn’t ideal?”
Dunma blinked, her expression vague and not at all telling of her internal struggle; did she want to take her superior’s offer of less formality up or did she want to remain serious? Did she really want to say anything other than whatever few words were necessary? Her yellow eyes regarded Betaal; she was a warrior worthy of admiration, somebody that Dunma had looked up to. Did she want to risk looking weak in front of her?

The younger warrior let out a quiet sigh, her gaze drifting downward before she spoke up. “Are we speaking freely then, Sergeant?”

“We are,” Betaal said in reassurance.

“I thought working the fort camp would be better, but,” Dunma raised her hands up in frustration, her ulnar fins flaring as her emotions did the same. Her yellow eyes searched the ground before her feet, confusion and annoyance written over her features. She was so sick of the overly soft treatment, the averted eyes and looks of sympathy as people silently passed her by. “..Captain Bazz even tried to insist on me taking time off, but I just want to work. I don’t know, I guess everyone just expects my performance to suffer, but it’s not. I always do my best at everything.”

“I um..” Betaal was really, really bad at this. Luckily, she had the Champion’s advice to go on and just as he said, Dunma seemed as though she needed a distraction from her loss while she was still struggling to process it. When she attempted a response, her voice came out much softer than her usual hard, strict tone. “..I doubt the guard captain wanted to give you time off because of your performance. He was most likely just trying to give you time, you know, to mourn. Nobody wants to force you to work when you’ve got that on your mind. We’re trying to be kind.”

“But-” the younger Zora interjected with something of a huff, her tail giving an offended flick, “Bazz and my dad were best friends! They always spent so much time together, on duty and off duty. But Bazz went right back to work, even though he’s also still healing from his injuries. Nobody told him to take time off! And Gramps- he’s so busy working on the Champion Festival, you wouldn’t even think he just lost his son!”

“Umm..” Betaal wasn’t certain why she couldn’t just get herself together and say what she needed to. It wasn’t as though she didn’t understand this kind of loss, and exactly how it felt. It wasn’t as though she didn’t see now precisely why Dunma was disappointed over the shifts she’d been given. The Sergeant took a breath, doubtful that it did much to steady her, then she proceeded to speak again. “Well, that’s exactly why I’m asking your opinion,” she offered. “I won’t coddle you if you’d prefer full shifts. I uhh, I know you’ll still perform well.”

“Yeah, I would prefer that. I’ve always taken my duty super seriously!” Dunma’s voice still held a pinch of ferocity, her sharp canine teeth flashing as she spoke. Her aggression was but a veneer to conceal an overwhelming sadness, very like the fire of her father’s pyre; consuming flames that stretched to the sky but dimmed away, leaving nothing but ash. The young warrior’s flicking tail stilled and flopped against her back as her head dipped low. “..do you think that people believe I’m just too weak to handle it?”

Betaal’s mouth fell momentarily agape as this suggestion was uttered, her red topfin flaring slightly. How could Dunma believe such a horrid thing? How could she think herself weak while she was working and dealing with her father’s death, and yet surviving? The blue Zora shook her head, her tone dropping back to its normal, serious sound, but gentler. “I never assumed that.”

“I’m sorry, Sergeant,” Dunma whispered, turning her back with the intention of going back to.. Whatever she’d been doing. In reality, that wasn’t too much other than just thinking. “I shouldn’t dump my frustrations on you. You came to ask a simple question and I’m taking up all of your time.”
“No!” The older warrior crinkled the papers in her hand that much further with her intensity, her voice jumping a bit higher in volume than intended, startling Dunma all over again. She really needed to get that under control. “I mean, no, it’s fine. I have some time, if you’d like to talk.”

“I guess.” The violet Zora reached up to pull her tail over one shoulder, running her fingers idly along it to calm herself, then she gestured at the mats laid out on the floor of the tent, moving to sit upon one. It really didn’t matter where they sat, as the mats didn’t belong to anybody in particular.

“Dunma,” Betaal began as she sat across from the other warrior, trying very hard to keep her tone even and sincere, “I don’t think you’re weak at all. What you did at the service- I know I’m going to fail miserably at putting what I saw into words.” She placed her papers aside, her hands immediately forming vague gestures that stood in the place of words she couldn’t very quickly find. “You seemed so broken that day, yet so strong at the very same time. It was moving. Admirable.”

“You make it sound like a story,” Dunma replied with a morose sigh, her voice dull and unexpressive, “like some kind of heroic tale.”

“Uhgg,” Betaal’s face flopped right into her hands in disgrace, her fingers bundling just beneath the crest of her brow. She continued to speak, but her words were a muffled mumble. “I’m sorry, that’s the opposite of what I wanted to do.”

“I wasn’t trying to be brave or strong that day.” Dunma gave a shrug, her gaze venturing elsewhere, though it was vacant as she stared. The blue Zora raised her head again to look on Dunma as she spoke, her golden eye full of concern. “I just wanted to feel pain, or some kind of punishment for being the reason that my dad is gone.”

“No, it wasn’t your fault,” the older warrior spoke up in immediate certainty, her head shaking in vehement denial.

“Yes, it was,” the young woman reasserted with a bitter chuckle, her head shaking as she refused to hear any reassurances. “Prince Sidon even told me as much- my dad was thinking of me when he swam into the arrow. He did it to.. ‘save my life.’” Dunma pronounced this phrase in a mocking tone, flicking her hands as though to swat these meaningless words away at the very same time.

An exasperated sigh came from the violet Zora as she bundled her hands on top of her lap, her gaze following them as she did. She quietly studied her folded fingers for a moment, her forefins hanging down as her head drooped low. She was biting at her lip, her eyes hidden but shining with tears that she was actively fighting. “I just.. I wish he hadn’t told me that. It would have been easier to just assume my dad was being his normal, dumb self and just happened to get hit. Then I could be angry at him, like I always was.”

“I have a feeling that nothing could have made this any easier,” Betaal replied gently, unsure what more she could say. It was probably better for her to just listen, anyway.

“I don’t even know why he would do such a thing for me,” Dunma hissed, her folded hands tightening into clenched fists, her sharp fingerscales piercing into the flesh of her palms. Still, her mouth pulled into a joyless smile as she raised her head just slightly, her eyes glassy with the pain of her loss. “He used to joke that I was actually Bazz’s daughter, because of how intense I could be,” she uttered with a tiny, broken titter.

“I would criticize him all the time for not taking things seriously enough, for not caring enough. I always said that he could have been guard captain just as easily as Bazz, if he weren’t so lazy and irresponsible.” Her voice turned sharp as she spoke, though her shoulders rose in a shrug, as though these thoughts and feelings could so easily slide from her. “But he didn’t want to.. He just wanted to stay in his same, easy position and hang out with me while on duty.. He just wanted to spend his
No matter how hard she fought herself, Dunma’s tears finally fell, pattering softly on the skin of her arms and her knees. Her hands unfolded, fingertips hastily moving to swipe the wetness away from her cheeks; she didn’t deserve to cry. She sat here now, safe and sound, while her father, who was never good enough, was dead and gone. He probably really took that arrow and suffered through such awful pain because his own daughter had made it so blatantly clear that he was worthless. How could she cry?

“Why did he even want to be anywhere near me?” Her voice was a weak, tremulous whisper. “I was so terrible to him.”

As Dunma sat, her shoulders trembled with sobs that she wouldn’t allow to wrack her frame and rebellious tears continued down her cheeks despite how she fought, not making even one tiny whimper. Betaal knew she needed to say something, though she was sure her words would only make things worse.

“He did it…” the blue Zora began, catching Dunma’s soft, golden gaze as she raised her eyes to regard her superior, “…he did it for the same reason that he gave his life without a second thought. Because you meant the world to him.” The older warrior knew that these words were likely weak and cliche and utterly transparent but she persisted, nonetheless. “And though you say that you criticized him, I’m sure he was.. actually happy, in a way. You pushed him because you believed in what he could be. He must have known that. Maybe.. Of all people, you believed in him more than anyone else. It’s amazing what just a bit of faith in someone can empower them to do.”

A quiet sniffle came from the weeping Zora, a loose fist lifting to wipe at her cheeks and her wet nose as she composed herself. “..You’re talking about yourself, aren’t you?”

“W-wha, no.” Perhaps she was drawing from the relevant experience she had, but she wasn’t actively attempting to talk about herself, and she hurried to amend the misunderstanding, probably only making it worse. “No, I would never make this about myself.”

“No.. It’s fine.” Dunma batted her hand to brush off the other Zora’s concerns. “Honestly, that would be easier to talk about, to think about. I’d rather just.. forget about what happened for now. It’s too hard.. It would be better to just listen to you talk.”

“Alright,” Betaal awkwardly agreed, her voice rough and unsure. She was quite used to deflecting questions about what she knew was bound to come up now, but she couldn’t find it in herself to brush off the mourning woman.

“It’s probably gonna sound weird,” the violet Zora began, her quaking falling back to stillness, her voice calm once more, “..but I was really rooting for you, in the tourney to get into the Royal Order.”

“Right,” said the Sergeant, her own single-eyed gaze diverting to elsewhere as she was reminded of that, yet again. When she looked back at Dunma, seeing her calm, she let out a relenting but regretful sigh. “Yeah, I guess I let you and everyone else down.”

“No, no,” Dunma weakly tried to reassure, though her attempts fell short and she simply gave up. “Well, sure, but it must have been harder for you. It was so unfair, but everyone still thought that you would win or that Brivere would do the right thing and forfeit.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted him to do that,” Betaal shook her head, though it was difficult not to glower. “I’m glad he gave his best. He’s probably the only person that still took me seriously after.. What happened.”
“I think he was just afraid of you,” Dunma said, remembering the tourney like it was yesterday, despite that it was several years ago. She had only just joined the guard at that time and Brivere wasn’t much older than her, whereas Betaal was far more experienced. “He was afraid of what you were going to do to him if he gave any less than his best.”

“And he was right to be.” The Sergeant gave a chuckle, her sharp teeth shining as her lips drew into a lop-sided half grin. She felt that if she had a chance at a rematch now, her performance wouldn’t be so poor. It was difficult for her not to envision such a thing; it would allow her to wipe away that day of bitter shame, when she stood fighting before all of Zora’s Domain, half of her sight freshly stolen and the shaft of an arrow still embedded in her skull. The shard was still presently lodged there to this day, but she had healed and adjusted since then.

“Betaal, I have to ask..” the violet Zora’s placid curiosity interrupted the older warrior’s inner musing, “..everybody thinks the same thing but nobody ever says anything. It just seems like it was too coincidental to be an ‘accident’. Do you think Brivere made his brother do it?”

“I don’t know..” Betaal quietly spoke up in response, shaking her head as she did. This question had been asked a hundred times, but she had no answer to it. She knew as little about those brothers as any other Zora seemed to, despite being forever tied to them. “Whether he asked his brother to do it or not, I know only one thing for sure..”

A pause stole Betaal’s voice, a painful flash of recall flickering to the forefront of her mind; it was the last memory she had that she’d experienced with two eyes. She had been spearfishing that day, standing with her weapon poised and ready to strike as a shadow passed near the gently wavering surface of the water that stretched before her. She hadn’t realized that she, too, was being hunted. She remembered when the sound of a bowstring being drawn taut came unexpectedly in the serene silence of her surroundings, the noise immediately capturing her attention. Her head snapped instinctually up, her eyes searching for the source of the sound; that was when she saw that boy, that ever expressionless boy, standing there seconds before he let his arrow fly, a small smile on his lips.

“...the boy did it happily. If Brivere is cowardly enough to have coerced his brother into it, fine, he can live with the shame. But the boy- he’s worse than a coward, he’s a monster.. They always said he would be cursed.” A begrudging scoff came from her at just the thought of that child. “He certainly lived up to it.”

“I’m sorry, you probably didn’t want to talk about it, huh?” Dunma uttered, still wiping at her eyes and cheeks, though she looked almost wary of how intense her superior had turned all of a sudden. “..I mean, I’ve heard that it’s impossible to bring it up to you without you looking like you want to choke someone. I can’t say I blame you for that.”

“Hmph.” The blue Zora shrugged it off. She actually really, really hated talking about it but she would downplay that a bit in this particular instance. “I don’t like to talk about it, but if it gave you something easier to talk about, it’s fine.”

“Thanks, Sergeant,” said the younger Zora, softly nodding her head, just a little bit of relief clear enough on her features to assure Betaal that she’d made at least a small difference. “..and, for asking me about the scheduling, too. That was kind of you.”

“I’m just.. Trying to do the best job possible. I know that you get that,” Betaal began to stammer again, almost as though her anger had faded away and now she was suddenly reminded, oh yeah, Dunma is a lovely, young woman. She quickly reached for her discarded work, gathering up the crinkled mess, thinking it was an ideal time to get out while she was ahead. “Uhh.. Well, speaking of, I should get back to work.”
The Sergeant scurried to her feet, still sifting through her messy sheets to make certain nothing was missing. When she felt sure that she had everything and also sure that she had probably came across more like a disorganized secretary, rather than a formidable warrior and leader, she cleared her throat and spoke again. “Let me know if you need anything, alright?”

Dunma nodded to her superior, the same look of quiet calm that newly painted her pretty features still readily apparent. Betaal offered a smile in return, her own cheeks likely as purple as the entirety of the younger Zora, then she pushed the tent flap aside and showed herself out.

Once Betaal was gone and Dunma was left once again in solitude, the young warrior’s eyes shifted from the now stilled entry flap, to the remaining depression her superior had left in the mat before her, then slowly further to a stray sheet of paper, which was rolled into a tight cylinder and stealthily escaping. The violet Zora reached out to grab the paper, thinking it must have rolled into Betaal’s blind spot.

If it weren’t rolled up as it was, it wouldn’t have so easily gotten away. Dunma shook her head as she straightened the page out, pressing it to her knee as she forcefully unrolled it, golden eyes idly looking over the words that she found printed there as she did.

However, it wasn’t simply a report or part of the unfinished duty roster as she’d expected, and as she read over the words, the sentences, the paragraphs, she began to feel that this sheet of paper was not only interesting, but familiar in a way she couldn’t immediately place.

Did Betaal write this?

The Prince actually still looked excited, and Link knew it because he could see the gleam of Sidon’s grin, even beneath the helm he wore. Those sharp teeth were bared and sparkling, as evident from the tiny glimmers visible between the cracks meant for ventilation. The Zora was bouncing back and forth on his toes, idly twirling his trident as Link laid down the rules.

“If you want to strike, be sure you hit me,” Link began, one hand stroking the mane of the horse he was astride, causing her to twitch in irritation. “Don’t hit her. Actually, you should just be more worried about what she’ll do to you.”

Crazy girl rumbled lowly as she shook her head about, her long mane messy and untended. Link was just lucky to have managed to trim her forelocks, so that she could actually see where she was going when she went running like boulder down a mountainside. She was already stamping her hooves impatiently as Link spoke, making it seem quite likely that she would start bucking if they didn’t do something already.

“I don’t have a lynel weapon on me at the moment,” Link continued, taking his new toy in hand, “...so I’ll use this.” The Champion hoisted his recently acquired Boulder Breaker into sight. He hadn’t thought he’d have any real use for such an encumbering weapon, but now he was glad he’d accepted it. It was going to be great fun knocking the wind out of the Prince’s sails. Oh, and out of him, too.

Link probably should have been asking himself why he was so stoked at the idea of pummeling Sidon into next week, but he didn’t feel like thinking too hard at the present moment.

“The last thing is this.” The Hylian carefully returned the weapon to the custom holster on his saddle and he drew out an arrow from the quiver on his back. “The lynel will have shock arrows, which you’ll clearly want to avoid. The best way to avoid them is to not give it reason to use them, which you can do by staying within its melee range. So, in order to give you a good idea of what that is,
I’m going to fire these at you whenever you get too far away. The points have been removed, but these are fire arrows and still have their effect intact. Hopefully that’s still threatening enough so you’ll be motivated to avoid them.”

Brivere and Estuu sat a fair distance away, just close enough to have a good view, but hopefully far enough back to avoid being accidentally hit or trampled. The younger Zora looked on in interest that was maybe not entirely clear on his face, but his excitement remained plain to see in his focused gaze and his flapping tail. Brivere, on the other hand, appeared intent on analyzing Sidon’s every move, so to later make the Prince aware of whatever weaknesses became apparent as he spectated.

“Are we all clear, then?” Link called out to the Prince, watching Sidon shift himself into a powerful fighting stance. He supposed that was enough of an affirmative answer, yet even still, Sidon’s voice issued forth, strong and musical as he gave his answer.

“Give me your best, my friend!” The armored Zora’s toe claws gripped at the grass under his feet and he gave his trident a twirl, then pulled it back into a defensive position, the shaft tucked just above his hip with the head pointed in the direction of his opponent.

“Very well,” Link laughed, pulling his bow from over his shoulder, quickly nocking the arrow to the string and drawing it back. “First lesson; lynels almost never approach to melee range on their own. They shoot first.”

The Hylian let the arrow fly without any hesitation, the fire magic tearing across the field and lighting the grass to immediate, blazing flame along the arrow’s path. Sidon tensed, having not even expecting his friend to be so utterly relentless so quickly, but he leapt out of the arrow’s path with relative ease, taking the lesson as it was presented, and shifting to an offensive strategy.

The mounted Champion drew another arrow with practiced quickness, his fingers nimble, his aim a smooth, natural movement that came with little effort. Another arrow shot across the field, which the overconfident Prince side-stepped and flicked aside with a quick, precise swing of his weapon as he bolted toward the stationary target.

Link could already see and predict what was about to happen; Crazy’s nostrils were flared as she nervously sniffed at the smokey air, her weight shifting on her feet while she resisted the urge to go running at full speed. The horse’s ears flicked forward, listening to the rapid footsteps of the approaching threat, then they flattened aggressively in response to the perceived enemy racing toward her, her teeth loudly chomping on the bit in her mouth.

In a blur, the Prince ran before his opponent, his weapon drawn back, his legs bending into a crouch as he prepared to leap and take a swing at the man astride the horse. He must have thought this would be easy.

The Zora launched himself into the air, and it was then that the wild horse would no longer contain her desire to strike back. As Sidon leapt, Crazy girl reared with a bellow of warning, her front hooves swinging and jabbing, completely ignorant to the concept of fighting for practice. She lashed out with all of her strength, her front hooves striking the Prince’s breastplate with a painful clang that left even Link wincing.

In a clattering heap, the Prince rolled backward across the ground, an audible sputter coming from beneath the helm than concealed his features. The Hylian, meanwhile, held tightly to his horse’s mane, his weight held upon the stirrups while his body leaned into Crazy’s reared position. When the angered equine fell back to all fours, Link screamed out at the motionless Zora in warning, his voice as aggressive as the snort Crazy girl gave her opponent.
“Get up!” Link hollered, “No lynel will wait for you to catch your breath! Get up!”

The warning came within moments of the horse’s continued attack; she sprung forward with the strength in her back legs, her front hooves stamping furiously, aiming to trample the fallen Zora. To her, he was no different than any hapless boar. Sidon wisely began to roll out of the way, his body moving with the kind of fearful desperation that made it clear that he’d realized just how serious this match was to be.

Entertained as the Hylian was, he did his friend the service of pulling back on the wild horse’s reins, offering the suggestion that she cease in her relentless attack; she chose to heed it, though she turned round and walked a frustrated circle as Sidon was allowed to scramble back to his feet.

That small bit of mercy was the last Link planned to show, however. He slid his bow back over his shoulder, then gave a loud, quick clicking sound, essentially setting his bloodthirsty steed loose on the Zora Prince now that he was standing. As Crazy made a mad, stamping dash toward where Sidon waited, the Champion took the Boulder Breaker in hand, ready to make that foolish Prince suffer for his idealism.

Despite Link’s first bit of instruction, Sidon clearly still hadn’t recovered from the first blow and he shifted into a defensive position, either unsure of his next move or too breathless to do so. The Hylian felt no remorse; he’d warned him to take care against the horse, yet Sidon must have thought it was a bluff. The mounted Champion wouldn’t go easy. He’d pummel the Zora to dust before he let him fight a lynel without any reasonable idea what to expect.

When the charging, mounted duo came into range of the Zora, Link’s weapon clashed against Sidon’s own, knocking the lightweight trident aside and he took a swing at the Prince, missing only because Sidon leaped back, jarred by the brunt of the horse’s charge. Crazy didn’t care how deftly her enemy dodged, however, her hooves cleaving the ground beneath her as she sharply turned, lunging at the retreating Zora with vicious jaws.

The horse’s teeth audibly snapped together as she chased the opposition. She needed no direction from her rider, taking the fight to the established enemy with a bizarre kind of tenacity for a creature that might otherwise be considered a prey species. Maybe she could sense the carnivorous--leaning diet of her enemy and was bitterly offended?

Crazy chased as Sidon dodged, jumping back again and again to avoid the horse. Link leaned his weight into the right stirrup and the horse diverted to the right, running past the overwhelmed Zora but just close enough for Link to draw the Boulder Breaker back, swinging the great heft of it and striking his target.

Sidon raised his weapon to parry, though the force once again sent him flying backward, and rolling across the hoof-furrowed grass, only just barely keeping hold of his trident.

“That’s not going to work,” Link called out, his tone the same one might expect from a disappointed instructor. His horse continued after Sidon, leaving him bent and scrambling, turning suddenly much more fleet-footed and flighty than he usually was when he fought. Crazy girl galloped like she was the Calamity, thundering across Hyrule and ravaging everything in her path; she diverted, then circled, not slowing down for an instant, charging, ramming, striking before her enemy could even grasp that she’d come for him again.

“You’re used to being bigger than your opponent. You’re used to having the strength to parry and block every move, but that isn’t going to work against a lynel,” Link spoke with as much tenacious fury as his horse’s attacks. As Crazy circled and lunged, he took another swing at Sidon, his Boulder Breaker slamming into the Prince’s shoulder. It would have been a strike to the chest, had Sidon not
The Prince fell back, though he curled his body in the air and reoriented just enough to land on his feet. He was already severely limited, almost certain a couple of ribs were bruised or perhaps broken, and now his weapon arm had suffered a powerful blow, a sharp aching pain flaring in that shoulder and down. He tightened his grip regardless; his arm had been broken against the hinox, yet still he fought. He could endure the pain and win, even so.

“Lynels are both faster and larger than you. Not only are their weapons heavy and their stationary blows powerful, but they also use speed to their advantage. They will ram and attack at the same time, and every bit of their running force will increase the devastation of their attacks,” Link called out as his horse puffed, stamped, flicking her tail and swinging her head about in fury before she bolted into a full run for the Prince yet again.

The watchful eye of Brivere stayed set upon his Prince, his protective instincts placed aside and shunned for this once. Still, though he’d encouraged this merciless onslaught, he also hadn’t expected the Champion’s horse to play such a vital role in making this fight utter hell. He calmly unbound his long forefins, gently shaking his head. “That horse is mad,” he softly uttered, to himself or his nearby sibling. Either way, he’d get little response. “I can see why it’s named as it is.”

Estuu glanced over his shoulder at the sound of his brother’s voice, tittering quietly at the acknowledgment of how wild the Champion’s horse was, but little else. His eyes wouldn’t leave the action for long, this event possibly the most exciting thing he’d witnessed in a long while. His fingers fiddled with the soft tassels of the shawl that wrapped around his tail and neck, his blood racing as he wondered what it felt like to be on the back of such a powerful beast?

“Come on!” Link continued to taunt as his horse carried on her attack, leaving the Prince unable to even find an opening, the entire match just a mad dash to stay out of Crazy’s reach. “You may as well be a staminoka bass, as far as any lynel is concerned. You’re nothing but a plump fish in the eyes of a predator much stronger than you. Go ahead! If you think you can reason with the lynel, try it on this horse and see if you can!”

Link could see some of the Prince’s boisterous spirit beginning to fade, whatever excitement he’d had dying out and leaving him. His movements were becoming tired and sluggish and he certainly couldn’t keep up the pace at which he was dodging and running out of the way. It also wasn’t in his favor that Brivere had softened him up prior to this.

Sidon held his weapon lower, his arms less flexed and weak. His stances were becoming clumsy, his movements no longer practiced nor perfect. The thought of attempting to reason with the enraged animal, however, hadn’t occurred to him until his Hylian opponent mentioned it.

What did it hurt to try?

The Prince crouched and leapt, his body tucking into a tight curl as he flipped back. As he expected, the horse followed after him with blind determination, yet he still had just enough time to reach out to her with his magic, his mind touching hers and feeling the color of her innermost expression.

An animal’s driving forces were a difficult matter to comprehend but when Sidon connected, the horse slowed her gait, then stopped, puffing in momentary confusion, her ears flicking here and there as though she were trying to locate the true source of the whispering in her mind.

Sidon could feel and smell tall grasses, gently swaying in a soft, cool breeze. It was the very first thing. It was wet all over his skin, he could feel it. His head ached, he coughed, choking, trying to climb to his feet but it was unsteady. He was small, alone, abandoned and wandering for a very long
He saw Link; he supposed that wasn’t odd. A Hylian was a strange creature. A strange creature was
a threat. A threat had to be trampled in order for safety to be regained. Fight. Run, attack. Oh.. He
could see Link looking surprised, afraid, being struck by a flailing hoof, falling, bleeding. The smell
of blood was as familiar as the smell of grass and the wind across Hyrule Field. Yes, the Hylian was
dead because he wasn’t moving and there was blood coming from everywhere. His eyes looked
vacant. Leave now. Come back later to make sure it stays dead.

Wait.. That didn’t make any sense.. Link wasn’t dead. How could this horse remember such a thing?

He had to focus. He could feel the horse slipping away as he lost focus. Sidon took a breath, digging
deeper, trying to force his own thoughts and feeling inside. Calm. Friendly. Gentle. There’s no need
to fight any longer, because I’m not your enemy. Was that what he would tell the lynel? For all his
talk of trying to communicate peacefully, had he actually considered it? What might he feel if some
bizarre creature approached him and asked him to leave his home? Would he starve, deprived of the
resources he knew? Would he end up someplace dangerous and be killed because he made himself
vulnerable? Would he perish, exposed to the elements?

Now was hardly the time for such uncertainty. As the Prince began to doubt himself, the horse shook
her head and pulled free of his magic, all the more incensed, as though she could understand that
she’d been manipulated.

Crazy leapt into a full gallop, shooting toward the enemy before her. The Champion astride her held
his weapon at the ready, unsure whether he should be disappointed or snide to see his friend’s magic
had been unsuccessful. They thundered past the Zora, the horse’s aggressive biting and kicking
sending him dodging aside and out of range of Link’s weapon.

Link held steadfast to his swerving steed as she turned round, the speed at which she veered into her
turns unsteadying the Hylian in the saddle, but he hung on his Crazy girl’s back like the fate of
Hyrule clung to his own. Once she faced the Zora again, Sidon saw her about to run for him and fled
in the opposite direction.

‘Is he running for the water?’ This was what Link was thinking as they gave chase after the fleeing
Prince. The Hylian swapped the Boulder Breaker for his bow once more, pulling an arrow from the
quiver on his back. Didn’t Sidon know if he attempted to flee into the water against a lynel, he would
only make himself more vulnerable to shock arrows? Surely he did.

Just as the Hylian nocked the arrow to his bowstring, he watched Sidon come to a quick stop and
turn back to face the horse thundering toward him. The Zora gave his trident a defiant twirl, running
in the direction of his opposition, charging them back as though he could simply spear the horse and
stop her in her tracks. Perhaps against the lynel that was possible, but not an entirely good plan if it
had an arrow nocked and ready to shoot as Link did presently.

It was to be a game of cucco, and that was not a game Crazy girl was willing to lose. Maybe she
really was a cucco in a horse’s body.

Crazy lunged for the armored enemy, but Sidon knew well enough how the horse moved by now to
flawlessly dodge out of the way, leaping into the air, tucking himself into a ball as he flipped overttop
of the horse’s back much more quickly than she could follow him with her eyes. Link, however,
followed every quick second of the Prince’s devious maneuver, feeling that for a single instant, his perception of time began to slow. Sidon’s form unfurled as he flew through the air directly above the Hylian, his body straightening, his momentum carrying him into a vertical twist that brought his weapon down, straight at Link.

A surprised breath was caught in Link’s throat and he swore he could see the glimmer of that smug Prince’s smile shining from underneath his helm. With reflexes as sharp as the Zora’s gleaming fangs, the Champion laid backward, flattening himself as much as he could against his horse’s back in order to dodge the blow. As he did, he pulled his bowstring back, determined in this moment to shoot Sidon out of the air as rebuke for his cleverness.

The arrow flew, striking the vulnerable Zora at point blank range. In the same moment, the blow intended to knock Link aside, instead, swiped across his abdomen. The forceful, fiery explosion from the arrow burst against Sidon’s armored frame and sent him toppling in a plume of smoke and embers. The Hylian rolled off the side of his horse from the strength of the mere glancing blow, one hand clutching at his middle.

Watching the exchange, Estuu leaned forward on his knees in excited disbelief as he witnessed both the Hylian Champion and the Zora Prince land decisive blows on one another, both warriors being flung to the ground at the exact same time. The boy turned to peer in his brother’s direction, as if to say, ‘did you see that!’

A small, rare smile appeared on the golden Zora’s countenance at his younger sibling’s excitement and he offered a nod in reply. “A stalemate, it seems,” he commented.

“Nnn,” Link groaned softly as he laid curled in the grass where he landed, his entire body a bit battered from the fall, but nothing he wasn’t used to. The pain blooming in his abdomen was sharp and unwelcome, and he peeled his bloodied palms away from the now torn tunic to investigate the injury. The edges of the trident Sidon used were not as sharp as they may be in actual combat, but the force of his strike was enough to cause real damage. The skin of his middle was deeply gouged, the muscle underneath slashed in a jagged, uneven way. The good news was that his organs were still intact and inside him. He probably wasn’t going anywhere for a moment, however.

He wished he’d thought to use that stupid shield magic he’d received from Daruk. He just wasn’t used to it, so he really hadn’t developed an instinct toward it yet. That and he was honestly worried that if the Goron’s spirit followed him around as Mipha’s did, he probably wouldn’t remain silent. Link could imagine it now- he’d probably say some dumb shit like, ‘I gotcha little guy!’ or ‘Daruk’s protection is ready to roll!’

“Damn it,” the fallen Champion groaned, unsure if he was cursing the haunting thought of Daruk or the feeling of cold sweat that came over him as all of his warmth bled out from his sliced belly. His trembling hands were placed back to the gash while he waited for the expected outcome to occur.

“Link!” came a cry from the Prince once he dragged himself up from where he’d fallen. It hadn’t been his intention to injure his dear friend so severely and he tore the helm from his head in haste, dropping it aside as he dashed to where Link lay unmoving with a deep, red stain slowly spreading out from beneath where his hands were tightly pressed.

No, no, no! The Prince hadn’t meant for this to happen. He hadn’t ever wanted to see Link like this again, with his delicate flesh torn open, his hands desperately trying to cease the trickle of blood as it escaped between his fingers. Sidon nearly tripped over his own feet in his rush, his legs unable to close the distance between himself and the Hylian quickly enough.

Sidon’s mind rambled in fearful uncertainty even faster than he ran, his heart pounding in dread that
quickly overcame logical thought. How could he do this? How could he allow such an awful thing to occur? He never wanted to hurt his precious friend, he never wanted to cause him any pain, and yet it seemed that was all he was capable of. Would this be the end? Would he watch Link’s life wane, while so many things remained unspoken between them? No, no, that couldn’t happen!

He was almost there! His legs were shaking from all the running and dodging he’d done, but he ignored all of that. The Prince could see that the Champion was still alive and conscious, yet the reality of his injuries appeared to be just as bad as he’d expected. He’d felt the echo of the slice that had left Link grounded and bleeding, not just in the shaft of his weapon, but in himself as well, his sensitive magic perceiving the pain which he, himself, inflicted.

Yet before the Zora Prince could make it to his friend’s side, a surge of energy shot through his senses, striking him from the edges of his headfins, shivering down his tail spine and his back, paralyzing him where he stood, breathless and fearful. He knew this energy he was sensing. He recognized it. He remembered it with fondness that melted into anxious dread in this moment.

He felt as though somebody were standing directly before him. He could feel their presence, their energy buzzing and uncomfortably warm, the same as if he were standing too close to a blazing flame. He took a step back, peering through the invisible presence to where the fallen Hylian lay.

Link heard the rush of footsteps approaching, his own perceptions becoming faded and hazy, his head feeling as though it were twirling and twisting like a piece of steel being manipulated with magnesis. Still, heavy as he was, he still managed to lift himself up on one elbow, biting his tongue to restrain any quiet sound of pain as he did. He blinked in an attempt to chase away the fog descending over his sight, but even through the blur, he could see enough.

Sidon stood petrified, his cheeks touched violet from the exhaustion of the match, his features pinched in alarm. Directly before him stood the dim, evanescing form of Mipha, her transparent body barely visible in the harsh light of the sun. She had her head inclined so that she could look up at her younger brother’s face, but Link couldn’t tell what sort of expression painted her features. Was she glad to see her grown, younger sibling?

“Can you.. See her there?” Link uttered, his voice a roughened whisper. It hurt to speak, it hurt to breathe. Still, it was odd- he hadn’t thought anyone else could see the spirits, save for himself.

At the same time, both Sidon and the silently looming ghost of Mipha, turned their attention to Link. The Prince peered upon his friend in concern, slipping intentionally around the very place where Mipha hovered, in order to come to Link and kneel by his side. His eyes looked apologetic and almost tearful as he reached out to the injured Hylian, only for Link to push his hand away.

“Stop,” Link whispered, averting his gaze from the Zora’s face as it was written with confusion that borderlined hurt. There was no need for any of that. He only needed to lay still until Mipha’s healing magic chased away his ails and restored his vitality. Sidon’s guilt and pity offered nothing. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“I didn’t mean for this,” the Zora explained, the concern in his voice chorused by the echoing jingle of the jewelry that adorned Mipha’s slowly drifting form. When she moved nearer, then paused at Link’s side just beyond his reach, Sidon appeared momentarily distracted; he could tell she was there. Maybe the Hylian was less crazy than he’d begun to assume. Still, the Prince refocused on Link, his nervousness apparent as he continued, “My intention was to strike you with the shaft of my weapon, not to injure you like this.”

“I know. I know that.” Of course he realized that Sidon hadn’t meant such a thing. How could the Zora Prince think Link believed it was anything but unintentional? Even his fading mind still
possessed that much awareness. A shallow, ragged breath was forcefully inhaled, his body going rigid in discomfort as he did. It felt as though his middle was one tiny rip away from everything spilling out, though he was also sure his senses really wanted to deceive him. He laid back in the grass; even that was uncomfortable. Mipha sure was taking her damn time.

Link turned his head, dry blades of grass scratching at his ears and cheeks as he did. He hoped his expression was bitter and impatient, though it was probably brokenly imploring as he looked toward Mipha, who was still hovering a bit away from the scene before her. She looked almost as concerned and melancholy as her brother, like she alone didn’t, in fact, hold the key to the injured Hylian’s recovery.

As Link began to look more and more pale, his body only falling that much more still with every passing moment, Sidon nervously looked up to where Estuu and Brivere stood, noticing that they had begun to approach. His big, gentle hands reached out once more, a bit more insistent than before, yet as he did, Link shoved at him and bristled like a feral dog.

“Stop fussing, I said I’m fine!” Link spat with what little breath he could manage. He didn’t want this shit again! He didn’t want this big, idiot Prince sitting by his side, holding him and comforting him like he did every other dying soldier! Link didn’t need this emotional confusion! He’d only just managed to slice and rip away the tangled threads in his confounded state of feeling that Sidon left behind when they faced Vah Ruta together.

If only Link could just say, ‘I die all the time. I don’t need you to soothe me in order to get through this.’

Mipha closed the distance at last, the hazy light of her gentle hands hovering over Link’s slashed flesh, knitting it all back together and replacing the pain with a shroud of warmth. It was a familiar, appreciated comfort that was offered again and again, without words or emotional baggage attached to it.

“How can you call this fine?” Sidon spoke, confused and afraid, though his voice somehow maintained some tiny edge of calm. He already knew about how Link’s injuries were healed time and time again, as it had been long explained to him. That was surely the only bit of knowledge that gave him any reassurance in this situation. Still, that somebody could just accept these circumstances, that part eluded him.

“I’m just..” Link took a deep breath in order to speak further, though his words died somewhere along the way, likely ending in the graveyard he held in his heart. He was used to this. This was nothing. The injury, the pain, the blood; that was nothing. Sidon’s concern, though- his careful touch and warm gaze.. That was too much to endure.

“It’s already healed,” Link said, brushing his stained hands along the grass to wipe away the blood before it dried and crusted. He pushed himself upright like a hungover person dragging themself out of bed the next morning. He was aching and in physical disarray, but he would survive.

“Link, I..” the Prince uttered weakly, only barely restraining the urge to help the Hylian to his feet, even knowing it would be rejected. There were so many things he needed to say and yet, not one moment seemed appropriate. Was their relationship in utter shambles, he wondered? His Hylian friend unexpectedly left, staying gone for weeks, then returned seeming completely vacant and nonchalant, like nothing at all happened and nothing at all mattered. And then the first thing Sidon did was nearly gut him; no, he needed to sort his feelings out before he said anything.

As the Zora stood with the Hylian in flustered, frustrated silence, the sound of hooves pounding the ground with fury became the one and only sound that mattered or made any difference. Crazy girl let
out a wild whinny as she charged indiscriminately at the two, and Sidon, who was still on edge in regards to the horse, pushed Link aside, just barely moving himself out of Crazy’s path.

“She still thinks you’re her enemy,” Link spoke, his voice a tired, hollow sound. His eyes idly followed his horse as she galloped a wide circle and began back in their direction. “Actually, everyone is her enemy. It’s probably best if I just get her out of here for now.”

A soft, pattering sound was utterly masked by the rumble that resounded across the entire field from the rampaging horse, so when Estuu wedged his tiny form between the Hylian and the Prince, for a moment, neither noticed. Actually, Sidon likely had noticed, but made no mention of the boy’s sudden closeness, so it was only Link who peered down with a start when he found the small Zora by his side. Just like old times.

And just like old times, the young boy watched the action while tucked in the shadow of his elders, his expression mostly neutral, minus the fearless glimmer in his eyes. The way his golden gaze followed the wild mare with loving interest that couldn’t be dissuaded by her violent temperament— that was a look that Link recognized well enough. He supposed he was glad somebody else could appreciate his bizarre taste in animal companions.

Once Brivere made it to the group, he reached out to nervously take hold of Estuu’s arm, clearly a good bit more uneasy about the situation than his younger sibling. The smaller Zora didn’t tolerate even a second of the touch, however, ducking and wriggling free, so that Brivere essentially just gave in and released him. Link only glanced the interaction, but it made him wonder about Estuu’s age and maturity all over again. Zoras grew slowly, but the boy was taller and therefore probably older than Finley, yet she was already involved in a relationship. It left a lot to question, anyway.

When Crazy looked just threatened enough by the group to actively charge through the center of it with the intention of breaking them down like a crumbling fortification, Link broke off from the others, running toward the one horse stampede closing in on them. His hands were raised at his sides, just level with his head, and he slowed to a stop as she galloped toward him. She might have trampled him to death as she’d been waiting to do, but the fearless Hylian unflinchingly stood his ground and the mad horse skidded to a stop at the last possible moment.

“Alright, alright,” Link spoke, as though he could gently reason with his horse. Her head was raised, her ears flicked forward to listen and her pale, blue eyes regarding her rider with a look of consideration. “It’s alright, my lady. The fight is over and you were the last one standing, as to be expected.”

Crazy poked her pink muzzle fractionally nearer, tiny puffs coming from her as she warily sniffed the air surrounding the man before her, unsure whether or not he was to be truly trusted. It didn’t take long for her to decide that, no, he wasn’t and she stretched her neck, lunging to bite the Hylian that was, somehow, still a threat to her.

By now, Link knew all of her tricks and he zipped easily out of the way of her snapping teeth, climbing up into the saddle before she even realized he was up there. Maybe this was why she still hated him? Because, no matter what, he always seemed to win. A low, angry rumble came from the offended equine, her head ducking down low as she kicked her back legs out a few times before eventually falling still with a puff of begrudging acceptance. It was as though she didn’t actually care any longer, but just had to offer some resistance for the sake of appearances.

“Hmm,” the golden Zora hummed, unimpressed and quite certain that the Hylian Champion’s choice of mount only more clearly reflected his own unstable nature. He was only thankful that the horse appeared to be under control, for now. With that done, he set aside his own sense of protective vigilance and turned his attention to the armored Prince. “My lord, I’m certain you require healing,”
he said, looking over the taller Zora, “I can tell you’re injured from your standing posture and the way that you’re carrying your arm.”

A faint smile found its way to Sidon’s lips, and he chuckled quietly as he gestured to something before them that had somehow slipped Brivere’s notice. “I don’t think that’s going to be possible at this moment, my friend.”

Brivere turned his head just in time to notice his younger brother rushing across the field at a full run toward the Champion and his insane steed. All breath escaped the overprotective Zora, his pupils shrinking to horrified slits and his mouth forming a tight, straight line. It was probably the most shaken Sidon had ever seen the Knight and certainly the most frantic he’d ever felt him be, despite how he still managed to keep it all concealed.

“That Estuu is a handful,” the vibrant, red Zora spoke up, placing a hand upon Brivere’s shoulder to calm him. “Don’t worry, I’m certain that Link wouldn’t let any harm come to him.”

“Oh yes,” Brivere kept his tone even, though his words were uttered through clenched, sharp teeth, “you’ve said that to me before. Remember the hinox? How could I ever think to trust that careless Hylian with my brother’s safety, after that?”

Estuu was a reddish-orange flash as he skipped and bound freely across the dry, summer grasses. Crazy girl certainly noticed as he came near, but she offered him as little regard as she may any grassland fox flitting about underfoot. One ear flicked in his direction as he approached, tipping the Hylian off to it just in time for Link to violently gesture for the young Zora to abort his apparent death wish mission.

It was not enough time to dissuade Estuu, however, and like any other Zora, he turned out to be a very strong jumper; he crouched, a little sound of effort coming from him as he leapt and landed with a rather graceless plop with his belly against the horse’s back, clawed fingertips searching for something to grab onto and sending Crazy into a mad dash.

Link hurried to grab onto the boy as the horse streaked across the field like a bolt of lightning had struck her in the ass. Estuu clambered up and righted himself astride the horse quickly enough, holding onto Link’s tunic for dear life. Actually, his hold was tight, but knowing him, it was more likely determination driving him, rather than fear of any kind.

“That was such a bad idea,” Link hissed, though it was actually difficult for him to be angry with the boy. He was a fellow reckless, adventurous spirit, so far as Link knew. Although, that wouldn’t stop him from lecturing; from what he could recall, Mipha always did the same to him. “Do you think anything through?”

Clearly pleased with himself, Estuu let out a laugh, his tail flapping in the giddiness of his success. He spared a glance in the direction of Sidon and Brivere, just enough to notice his brother’s disapproving stare, which satisfied him all the more, then he looked away, his eyes finding other much more interesting things to observe as the scenery rushed past them. It felt like no time at all before the other two Zora were out of sight completely.

“Where in Hylia’s name are they going?” Brivere mumbled in frustration and worry, trying his hardest to keep it all restrained as it became more and more insurmountable.

“They may be out of your sight, but not out of mine,” Sidon attempted to reassure. “Brivere, answer something for me, if you will, please? With how determined you seemed in our earlier match, and how very difficult Link made this one, were the two of you simply attempting to forcefully tear me from my goal of facing the lynel?”
“My lord,” the golden Zora peered up at his Prince with betrayal tucked subtly underneath the otherwise calm mask of his face. He knew to show caution, but was unsure if Sidon simply read his mind to figure this out. If that were the case, denying it would brand him untrustworthy. He let out a relenting sigh, then spoke his answer. “My disapproval has never been a secret, so it isn’t something you need to question. However, harsh as the Hylian Champion was, I do believe he made it difficult for good reason and my hope is that you learned something from it.”

“Maybe all I truly learned was to be grateful that the two of you don’t seem to get along,” the Prince responded, nodding his head with a teasing titter. “They’re circling around and coming back now.”

“Good,” Brivere grumbled, though he did so with a certain touch of relief.

When the sight of Sidon and Brivere began to grow clearer in the distance, Estuu let out a disappointed sigh, his few minutes of freedom over much too quickly for his liking. He’d grown accustomed to the bouncing gait of the horse, the sharp, rhythmic puffing of her breath and he reached one small hand out to feel the wind as it whipped past him. It was a contented feeling, being on a horse’s back. He didn’t want it to end.

“Maybe someday I’ll get you a horse of your own. Preferably a calmer one. Then you can ride as much as you like. Or as much as your brother will allow you to, I suppose.” Link somewhat rambled, remembering the easy time he’d had doing so in the company of the silent Zora. Maybe he shouldn’t have been promising such things, but what did it hurt? It wasn’t like it would be a difficult matter for him. If it served to bother Brivere, perhaps that was motivation enough.

The boy audibly groaned when Link brought up his protective older brother, which left Link laughing in true amusement. Was Brivere Estuu’s only family, he wondered? Was that why the yellow Zora was so damn clingy?

“Don’t worry so much,” the Hylian attempted to perk the young Zora up, likely failing in that task. “You’ll be grown someday.”

Link carefully steered his feisty mare nearer to where Sidon and Brivere remained waiting, looking like their own mounts had left them behind, not that they had any. He wouldn’t take Crazy too close to the grown Zoras, just in case she got stirred up all over again. When they came to a skidding halt, Estuu swung his short legs over one side of the horse and pushed himself back down to the ground, tipping forward a bit clumsily, but catching himself as he did.

As expected, Brivere hurried to retrieve his brother, shooting Link a look which left the Hylian uncertain and questioning its meaning. He looked as pinched and snobbish as ever, sure, but there was also a certain questioning to it, as though he were considering something otherwise unknown.

Link didn’t stick around for the answer to that question. He rode off to find some place more suited to his beloved Crazy girl’s needs.

Chapter End Notes

How was it, everyone? Does it seem like Link and Sidon can’t be around each other for two seconds without causing one another mad angst? I apologize for that, I sincerely do.

Oh- I wanna say a huge thank you to my friends StupidBlackCat and Pigeon-Princess on tumblr! You guys’ artwork is so awesome and the drawings of my OCs that you’ve
both done are so wonderful and amazing. I've already freaked out at you both individually, so I'm gonna keep this relatively calm, but seriously, thank you both so much. It makes me so excited that the two of you enjoy this silly story so much. Thank you! Everyone else should go check them out. <3
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Communication between the Hylian Champion and Prince Sidon hadn't improved even slightly, but that wouldn't stand in the way of them attempting a true heart to heart. Maybe progress could only be made with constant effort.

And while Prince Sidon had an obligation to meet with the committee planning the Champion Festival, Brivere had matters of his own to discuss with Link.

Chapter Notes

Hey there, Friends! Whoa, did I scare you all with my lateness? Gosh, I'm sorry. So, it's actually Saturday for me now, but I haven't been to sleep yet, so we're gonna PRETEND this is still Friday. Hopefully this big chapter will make up for it. Also! Sidon and Link actually talk! So I know you all will like that. :)

Another thing; this chapter will officially put my word count beyond 100K. Friends, this story could be a book in the HP series at this point! I'm sweating very hard, haha. So, to celebrate, I threw together a juicy playlist for all those SidLink feelies that this story is bound to give you. Find it below and give it a listen. And thank you to Lulens/Stupidblackcat for the album art. It's wonderful!

https://8tracks.com/banishedone/coma-baby-2

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Link wasn’t sure how Zoras managed to keep the inside of their dwellings so refreshingly cool, but it was definitely a relief to be back inside the Seabed Inn. He was absently considering that perhaps luminous stone had actual cooling properties, but it might have also been the fact that he’d stripped out of his tunic, boots and bracers, all of which had been grossly moist with sweat and blood.

Kodah damn near had a panic attack with Link walked in looking like he’d died and come back to life. He’d never seen a Zora get so frantic that they somehow managed to suddenly forget how to breathe air, but that was now on the list of things Link had witnessed.

He had also managed to learn one other useful thing in the process of almost literally scaring the life out of Kodah- Zoras had small, portable basins that they used for washing. Link’s first instinct was bitterness toward Sidon for not explaining this sooner, and generally being too overly polite for his own good, and the good of his ignorant, Hylian friend. In any case, Zoras washed in this manner, because it was considered unhygienic to sleep in the same water they bathed in.

This fact made almost perfect sense, except for the fact that these uppercity Zoras disposed of their bath water by pouring it out into the pool underneath the city. As Link understood, the lower class members of the population lived down there, so they were still apparently expected to swim around in bath water.
One epiphany began to lead to another and the Hylian started to realize why the city was layered as it was. Those at the top received water that was completely untouched and pure, then the standard slowly degraded on the way down. Then again, maybe the sheer amount of water beneath the city made the bath water inconsequential and he was overthinking Zora classism.

Kodah had filled a basin for the Champion while he stripped off, then she took his clothes in order to wash them. Link wasn’t sure having the inn keeper’s wife dote on him was part of the services they offered but she wasn’t having it any other way.

At this moment, his hair was still dripping and he was lounging about with only a towel wrapped around his waist, but he was clean and relieved. The water mattress he perched upon softly wobbled beneath him, unsteadying his posture slightly as he attempted to mend the slashed front of his formerly new tunic. He really couldn’t keep anything nice and it was a damn shame.

A great, red shadow predictably came to eventually shroud the doorway of the Inn; Sidon had to duck lower just to enter the structure and Link found himself smiling over that. He was the Prince of these people, yet every doorway in the city was unfit for him.

When Sidon began to make his way into the back where the beds were situated, he quickly found his path blocked by Kodah, who stood with her back straightened, her head raised to glare up at the towering Prince, and her hands on her hips like an enraged mother.

“Your Highness,” she hissed, sounding just like an enraged mother as well. The taller Zora appeared genuinely confused and peered past Kodah, in Link’s direction, as though he expected some kind of assistance.

Link, of course, did nothing.

Confusion quickly evolved into actual nervousness, as was made apparent by the way Sidon began to slump ever so slightly. He could probably feel Kodah’s anger and shrunk away from it as though it were burning and intense as the summer sun this very day. Too bad for him he’d taken all of his armor off already. He looked like he expected to need healing all over again, too.

A very threatening finger was stabbed into the Prince’s vision, so close that Kodah’s sharp fingerscale could have poked him right between the eyes. “Linny just showed up with his garments ripped and covered in blood, and I heard that you were responsible! Your Highness, if Lady Mipha were here, she would have your hide for being so reckless with Linny!”

“Ahh,” Sidon uttered rather meekly for a man of his size. “Then I suppose it’s good that she has you here to handle that, in her stead.”

“You bet your pretty, red bottom it is!” Kodah spat, clearly unconcerned as to who it was she was yelling at, or who saw her do it. Link was having a very difficult time keeping himself from snickering in amusement. “You listen to me, Prince or no, you will face my wrath if I find out that Linny has come to harm again because you were careless!”

Sidon’s pale palms were raised and exposed in a gesture of submission as he smiled nervously and nodded his head with such intensity that his forefins flapped about with his movement. “Then, of course, you have my word that I will be most cautious in the future.”

“You had better,” Kodah growled, her tail flicking in very serious agitation. She finally withdrew her finger from the Prince’s face and went back to her duties. She was well out of the way before Sidon even dared to continue to where Link waited.
Once he did make it to where his friend was seated, he awkwardly cleared his throat, trying to settle himself back down before speaking. “One of your friends from 100 years ago, I take it?”

Link quietly nodded his head, accidentally pricking himself in the finger with his mending needle when the Zora distracted him. He withdrew his finger, which beaded with a tiny ruby of blood, and he rubbed it away so to not dirty his tunic all over again. Sidon, however, started to look nervous once more, as though he expected Kodah to come running with a meat cleaver at the slightest scent of Link’s blood.

“Oh, uhh,” he mumbled, glancing over his shoulder. “That’s good! Very good! It’s excellent to see that you still interact with people who knew you so long ago. I’m sure it’s a great comfort to you. I’m glad that our comparative longevity could offer that to you.”

“Mmhmm,” the Hylian hummed, nodding again, trying harder to focus, so to not leave his fingers sore. It wasn’t like Mipha would heal something like that.

“Link..?” The uncertainty returned to the Prince’s tone suddenly, though it had little to do with Kodah any longer. Sidon’s head dipped lower, his back bending slightly as he sought eye contact with the oddly vacant Hylian. “..I apologize again for what happened earlier, though I suppose I wouldn’t blame you if you’re still terribly upset.”

The Zora’s tone was gentle and unsure as he attempted to make amends, reaching out in the dark to locate a problem he couldn’t be certain of. There was a questioning intonation to his words that made it clear that he didn’t even know if Link was ‘terribly upset’.

“You’re the one who can sense the emotional states of others.. Do I really seem upset?” Link asked, shrugging as he did, while keeping his eyes on the garment in his hand, despite how he could tell that the Zora wanted him to look up.

“Well.. It’s actually difficult to discern,” Sidon explained. “As always, reading you is like trying to study the minor details of the surrounding mountains in the wet season. When the accident occurred you seemed strangely calm about the injury itself, yet frantically upset at the same time, especially with me. I can only surmise that you were simply very angry at me for causing it, and again, I’m very sorry. It wasn’t my intention.”

“I’m not angry. It was an accident,” Link spoke, turning his tunic over in his hand to investigate his work. The hole seemed securely stitched, so he tied the thread off and bit at it in order to cut it. “You just overreacted.”

“Overrea-” Sidon began to blurt, an odd edge to his voice that immediately caught the Hylian’s attention and left his ears twitching. At last, Link peered upward at the towering Zora standing before his bed, watching as Sidon cleared his throat again and calmed himself enough to keep his tone light and even. “My friend, I’m quite certain there was no overreaction on my part. You were severely injured. That same injury could have been fatal to anyone else.”

“But it wasn’t and I knew it wouldn’t be,” Link spoke, wadding up his repaired tunic and placing it aside. Sidon had overreacted, and he was still doing it. Link didn’t even need magical empathic powers to sense the emotional distress coming from the Zora. He had no reason to be like this and it bothered Link that he was still making such a big deal of it. “You should know this by now. This wasn’t the first time you’ve seen me recover from an injury. There was no need to be so..frantic.”

“Then I suppose I’m sorry that I can’t simply feel nothing when I cause you pain. I can’t just put the guilt and worry from my mind so easily.” That sharp edge returned while Sidon spoke.
He was upset. He probably wanted his emotional ills soothed, but he was naive to think Link was capable of doing so. Why was he still bothering? Was this secretly about the terrible sex they had? Or just some other problem Sidon was having that Link lacked the emotional depth to comprehend?

Link sighed, saying, “Sidon, what did you want?”

The Prince’s eyes narrowed in confusion, almost looking hurt by Link’s tone or his words, but probably both. Still, he fought past the sting of his friend’s apparent displeasure with his existence, because he cared. “I just wanted to be sure you were alright.”

“I am,” the Hylian said simply.

“And…” Sidon’s voice was quiet and hesitant. For a moment, his golden eyes ventured elsewhere, his courage dimming, his question refusing to allow itself to be uttered for fear of the answer. Regardless, he forced his tongue to pronounce the words, his heart unable to allow the question to go unanswered. “…are we still friends?”

A gentle nod was granted in return, before Link even spoke up, though his gaze faltered and he found his eyes studying his hands, instead. The word ‘friend’ had become a painful one, much as Sidon enjoyed professing himself as such and using the word as something to call Link much more often than his name. He still used his name on occasion, sure, but the Hylian remembered a time when Sidon had uttered it with such reverence and fondness, the sound a breathy whisper moments before their lips touched in a way that was anything but ‘friendly’.

Link’s fingers tightened into loose fists as he chased those thoughts from his mind, his stare remaining pinned on his battered knuckles, too afraid to look up and see the ‘friend’ he pined for and punished himself over.

“I’m trying to be,” Link uttered weakly.

Sidon, of course, misunderstood completely. He took a step back, feeling as though he’d been struck in the chest with a barbed lizal spear. What he understood was that Link was putting forth an effort to maintain a friendship that he simply didn’t want at all.

“Then.. It’s difficult?” Sidon’s head now turned aside, his own eyes finding elsewhere to look. Idly, he reached up and pulled his tail over one shoulder, his fingertips smoothing along it.

“I guess it is,” Link said dully, shrugging. However, the Prince’s sudden silence confused him just enough to force him into looking up, out of curiosity. When he saw how dismayed the Zora seemed, it occurred to him that the meaning behind his words could have been confused. Relenting, Link spoke up further, in an attempt to soothe his ‘friend’. “…All I mean is that, sure, you annoy me to no end at times and evidently we still are only capable of talking circles around each other, but you’re still my one, true friend and I can’t help but want to spend time around you. But I’m also trying not to ask too much.”

Momentary relief poured over the Zora’s countenance as Link spoke, and at last, their eyes met. He looked into the tiny Hylian’s face with a soft, gentle smile, even though Link had flat-out called him annoying, because somehow, even that admission was endearing. The relief quickly became mixed with confusion and concern, but Sidon’s voice was a quiet purr when he spoke up in question. “Ask too much? In what sense?”

Link’s shoulders and posture tightened in discomfort, his breath becoming caught on the daggers in his chest. How could he hope to explain? He hardly understood his emotional state well enough to put it into words. “The last time we spoke, you said that it was best if you and I remain friends and
nothing more. That’s what I’m referring to.”

“I see..” A sigh of disappointment came from the Zora, leaving Link with the confused frustration of wondering if he’d been unclear again.

Sidon moved to sit near Link on the water mattress, the surface rippling around his weight and forcing the Hylian to scramble back in order to avoid falling directly into the Zora’s lap. “I had been meaning to ask about that,” Sidon confessed, his eyes now staring down at his knees, while Link looked into his face. It was easier to see his expressions when he sat down, of course.

“. . . When you told me you had errands to run, I hadn’t expected that you would be gone for such a long time. I thought I would just see you the very next day, so I was confused when you disappeared. I was quite upset, actually, but I realize I’ve no right to be so.”

“Why were you upset?” Link asked, his confusion lacing itself into his voice as he spoke. “You said that I made you feel terrible, how could you be upset when I left, after that?”

“Again- I never actually used the word terrible,” the Zora corrected, his hands forming precise, little gestures as he did.

Link’s automatic response to being corrected on something as inconsequential as what exact words were used was an eyeroll and a dismissive shake of his head. “No, but the words you did use to describe it basically amounted to terrible, so it’s the same difference. Don’t even bother trying to spare my feelings now.”

“You’re angry about it,” Sidon uttered, recoiling ever so slightly.

“Stop that,” Link hissed. He hated that. He’d hated it ever since he’d realized why this aggravating Prince did it. Probably before that, too. “Every time you tell me what I’m feeling, you only do it to make me stop feeling that way. I thought I made it clear to you that I’m just an angry person and you can’t change that.”

The Hylian bundled himself up, in a huff. He crossed his arms just beneath his chest, his back slumping inward. “I’m so tired of people trying to make me feel like I’m wrong, like my feelings weren’t legitimate and that the things I’ve experienced just aren’t real.”

A momentary silence passed between the two of them, with the Prince unsure what to say in return. He was truly quite confused as to what Link meant in saying such a thing and a bit hurt that he even believed that. “Link? How can you say that? I’ve only ever tried to understand and validate your feelings. I’ve held you in the highest regard, I’ve valued each and every word you’ve spoken and I’ve tried my hardest to aid you in any way I can..”

“I’m not talking about that..” Link sighed in bitter frustration. He was upset, and he was angry, but his thoughts and feelings were so chaotic, he could hardly put reason to anything. Maybe this was the ultimate result of everything in his life being utterly fantastical and questionably real. Did he really die? Were the spirits of the fallen Champions really there? And had Sidon done something to make Link feel as though his own emotions were irrelevant? “. . . I don’t know.”

Another hesitant silence wedged itself in the space between the friends’ various misunderstandings and verbal shortcomings, until a careful hand reached out to Link in concern. Sidon’s palm barely touched Link’s bare shoulder for a single second before the Hylian violently shoved it away, his entire body bending lower to escape the Prince’s comforting. “Stop that!” Link spat, bristled and defensive.
“You can’t just do this!” The Hylian continued, his voice a bitter growl though his tone softened just slightly as he kept speaking. “You can’t ask me to be just friends with you, then touch me all the time and offer to share your bed like that doesn’t mean anything. You can’t because.. I’m trying not to be so confused, and you just make it worse.”

“Then I won’t.” Sidon placed his hands down at his sides, his ulnar fins idly flattening against his forearms in a vain attempt to make himself smaller and less threatening. “I’m sorry.”

“Look- I’m sorry that I left so abruptly and that it upset you but I just couldn’t stay.” Link wasn’t sure if this was his way of explaining things or if he was just making the situation worse. “I know you were trying to be there for me while I was weak, but.. I don’t know, you did it too well and suddenly I felt dependent on it and that just made me feel even more vulnerable. That’s not what I wanted. You want to be ‘just friends’ and I’m really trying to respect that wish. But you’re not making it easy.”

“Is.. that really it?” Sidon spoke after a pause to think over what Link had just said to him. Slowly, a bittersweet smile tugged at his lips, his golden eyes shining as a weight dropped from his shoulders. “What a relief.”

“Relief?” Link repeated, recoiling ever so slightly in offense. His emotions were as battered as ever, but Sidon was relieved?

“I just thought,” the Prince hurried to explain, quickly realizing how it sounded. “Well, I thought plenty of things. But, when you left after that last conversation, I felt hurt because it left me to think that.. maybe, our friendship never actually meant anything to you and you were only after...” Sidon trailed off, looking around a bit awkwardly, though it was perfectly clear that he was talking about their former sexual relationship. His voice was dull and hollow as he continued, and it brought Link’s gaze back to his face and the hurt expression to be found there. “..I didn’t want to believe it but I felt that, by leaving, what I said about feeling used was only proven to be accurate- that your only intention was to use me.”

“Well, maybe.” Link confessed, a morose sigh coming from him. Sidon’s head quickly turned toward the Hylian at his side, his golden eyes widening and his mouth falling open slightly. He hovered in silent disbelief, waiting for Link to tell him that wasn’t true.

The Hylian hurriedly shook his head, raising one hand to signal that he hadn’t meant his admission the way Sidon was taking it. “It’s not like you’re making it seem,” he explained. “That first time, we both knew it was just for fun, so I guess that kind of counts as ‘using you’ or us mutually using one another. But I didn’t see anything wrong with that, because it wasn’t like I wasn’t forthcoming about it and it didn’t make our friendship less real.”

“Yes,” Sidon nodded in understanding, reiterating his former statement. “What I meant was that I’d started to think that maybe the friendship itself was fake or at least forced, for the sake of continued physical benefits.”

It certainly wouldn’t have surprised Sidon to find his Hylian friend to be yet another fake among many. Everyone the Zora Prince knew seemed to be out for a piece of him, whether it was sexual, or for the sake of favor or status. Nobody ever made any real attempts to befriend him without some unspoken use in mind for the relationship.

“That wasn’t it,” Link shook his head, though as he fell still, it occurred to him that the feelings he’d described toward his Zora friend and the dependency he’d been trying to dissuade himself from, it was no different. It all felt just as shallow and forced as a false friendship maintained like a veneer to conceal pure lust. That was disappointing, but true. “No, actually.. In a way, you’re right. I just
wasn’t after what you believed.”

“Like I said before, I didn’t like you, at first. Your energy grates on my nerves, the way you behave and interact with others strikes me as fake and pretentious, and I still think your overly positive viewpoints are naive.” The Hylian’s shoulders raised in a shrug. He couldn’t deny these things, he just hadn’t stated them outright before. “But despite all that, I stuck around and tolerated you, all because you seemed to care. So yes, I used you as a source of comfort. But again—after I left, I began to realize that my end of our friendship was based on that shallow need and for both of our sakes, I thought it was best to end it.”

Link looked over at the Zora when he finished speaking, catching Sidon’s gaze, still as calm and understanding as ever. Like always, the Prince gave his dear friend a smile, a gesture of reassurance that he was happy to offer, in hopes of filling Link’s bitter soul with warmth. “…I can’t be angry with you for that, my friend.” His hand lifted, the instinct to offer the Hylian a gentle, comforting touch still difficult to resist, though he quickly remembered that it was unwanted, and withdrew.

“I do still wish you hadn’t ran away, but otherwise,” Sidon paused, shaking his head in dismay. He wanted terribly to do more to soothe his friend, but at the same time, his hands were tied. “The fact that you’re so starved for something as simple as kindness makes me rather sad. In a way, I understand that need.. but I won’t burden you with my troubles. I’m sure they would seem minor, by comparison.”

The quiet atmosphere of the Inn softly trembled as the palace bells rang to announce the hour. A sharp ping interrupted the Zora’s train of thought, rapidly dragging it elsewhere and he blinked in confusion at the sudden realization of how long he’d been here already. In his haste, he leapt to his feet, his toe claws clicking nervously against the floor.

“Ah! Where has the time gone!” This was spoken as more of a complaint than a true question, Sidon’s sharp teeth glinting in annoyance with his ever-busy manner of living. Despite his ire, he looked upon his friend with a soft and somewhat guilty expression. “I’m sorry, Link, but I do have some other engagements to see to. May I ask, are you still unsure how long you plan to stay? Please tell me this was not the whole of your visit.”

“Hmm.. Do you know how many days are left until the Blood Moon?” He knew it had been quite some time since the last occurrence, but the Champion’s perception of time was ever skewed by the constant resurrections and overall apathy. “I’ve lost count.”

“Um, one moment,” the Prince blinked, his eyes peering elsewhere as he pondered and counted in silence. “Five days, I believe. Ah, yes, that’s right. It’s happening the evening after the Champion Festival. We’re going to be mobilizing forces to deal with any monsters that reappear, which is a hassle immediately after a festival, of course. But it could be worse, I suppose..”

“I should get back to Hateno Village before then,” Link idly commented. His plan was to ride out that terrible evening locked inside his empty house. A bed should be there upon his return, so that was something to look forward to. It was just a piss off that his first use of the bed would be during his night of complete vulnerability.

“You could stay here.” Concern was clear in his tone when the Zora spoke. He could recall what happened to Link on the night of the Blood Moon, and the idea of him being anywhere other than here filled him with worry. “You would be safe with me.”

“No, Sidon.” Link shook his head as this offer was posed. “I’m trying not to be dependent on you, remember?”
“I still don’t mind…” He wanted so badly to say that he preferred it. He wished he could simply insist, but he could see that his friend wouldn’t have it. “...but if it must be this way, then I will accept it. However, can I expect you to still be around tomorrow? If so, I can make more time for you.”

The Hylian sighed, knowing as he looked into the Zora Prince’s hopeful gaze, that he could not refuse. Even worse, he knew he didn’t want to.

“Sure.”

Maybe he was running terribly late as a result of his refusal to leave the company of his Hylian friend, but the Zora Prince couldn’t be troubled by such a thing right now. He hurried to the established place he was to meet with Council Member Trello, a strange flutter in his chest that he suspected had nothing to do with his rush.

Things between himself and Link were certainly not perfect and the Hylian was determined to remain a tiny ball of anger and mystery in the eyes of the Zora, but as long as their friendship was otherwise unscathed, Sidon was happy enough.

To him, Link was a warrior of inmeasurable caliber, of course. When they fought together to tame the troublesome Divine Beast, Link had made the entire ordeal appear so effortless. That show of immutable strength gave the Prince as much confidence as he’d worked to drum up in his companion. He hadn’t imagined that he would be the one quietly encouraged by the Hylian’s determination, but it was so.

He could remember it with a level of clarity he’d obtained by thinking on the event again and again, in nothing short of reverence; the tight hold of the Hylian’s legs around him, the uncomfortable sparking of the quiver full of wet shock arrows that could have easily been his demise, and the easy heft of the Champion’s weight when Sidon leapt to deliver him to the falls. He had watched in astounded wonder while the Hylian man swam up those falls with ease that extended so far beyond the Zora armor, it almost seemed natural. Sidon remembered the yellow light that flickered and flashed as Link soared into the air, illuminating him when he drew an arrow and fired it with accuracy even the Prince, a rather talented archer, found enviable.

Every detail of that fight had been so perfect, it left the Zora with the realization that his encouragement had been redundant and unnecessary. Link, however, without hardly even an effort, unintentionally reached out to the inconsolable young boy who, a hundred years prior, had thrown himself into the reservoir with the intention of saving his trapped sister. That boy, like handfuls of determined warriors before him, gave everything he had to approach the Divine Beast, desperate to find a way inside. But, much the same as all the others, Sidon was relentlessly pummeled by the machine’s defenses, and ultimately deterred. Worst of all, at that time, he already knew in his heart that Mipha was dead, yet he refused to accept it.

Then, with so much ease, Link accomplished what Sidon never could on his own. With Link’s aid, they conquered something that had weighed down the Zora’s heart and soul all of his life. It the very last piece of consolation he needed to finally begin truly moving on from Mipha’s death.

Sidon believed that, because of this, he’d at last stopped blocking out all thoughts of his sister, and he’d begun to allow himself to remember her as she truly was, rather than as an idealization of her heroics. He wished he could thank his dear friend for such an important gift as this, but... He wasn’t sure that Link, himself, was ready for it. The Prince would just have to quietly cherish it in the meantime, while doing whatever he could to repay the Champion.
In the meantime, Sidon had to focus on healing his people, and making sure that, after one hundred years, they finally were also made to remember Mipha, not just as the Zora Champion, but as a person.

By the time Sidon made it to the bridge where he’d planned to meet the Council Member, a small group was already gathered there, waiting. Of course, Tula was the first among them to notice the Prince hurriedly approaching, her body going rigid in excitement that she just couldn’t contain. Actually, maybe she was just relieved that she didn’t have to maintain awkward pretenses of friendliness with a ‘geezer’ like Trello any longer.

She pointed in Sidon’s direction and he raised his hand in a sheepish wave when the entire group turned to look his way. Laflat was shaking her head, and continued to do so right up until Sidon made it over to the gathering. At that point, she spoke up, her voice the furthest thing from enthused. “Still having difficulties managing your time, Highness?”

“It seems fashionably late is destined to be something that defines me,” the Prince answered, momentarily breathless, though he still offered the group a smile. “Did anything important come up in my absence?”

“Not exactly,” Laflat answered while Trello uttered a quiet, grouchy scoff. It was difficult to know whether it was being surrounded by all these youngsters that had put the elder in such a sour mood, or the fact that he simply didn’t hold the Prince in very high regard, but nevertheless, he was radiating turmoil that raked over Sidon’s senses for an uncomfortable moment before the Prince made an effort to block it out.

“Oh.” The taller Zora nodded gladly while Laflat placed the documents concerning the Champion Festival into his hands. She was, thankfully, ever prepared, because the Prince hadn’t had time to return to his chamber to retrieve his own copy. He shuffled through the papers, glancing over them in order to refresh himself on what was contained within the plans, only to become distracted when he realized that there was one person among the group whom he’d never met prior to now.

“Oh dear, where are my manners?” The Prince straightened, his golden gaze falling upon the unfamiliar young woman who stood near Trello’s side. She wore the shawl of an Apostle, which bore the crest of Naydra, designating her a Basilica Scholar. “Please know me as Prince Sidon. And who might you be?”

“Hm?” The young Apostle was momentarily perplexed that she’d become the center of attention, without doing anything at all. She quickly glanced across the surrounding faces, looking as though she were double checking, just so she could be sure that the Prince was, in fact, talking to her. When she concluded that, yes, he was speaking to her, her pale cheeks took on a soft, violet hue and she squeaked awkwardly while she fumbled for a response. “Yes your lord, my highness, er, Prince Sidon! Uh! I’m Loreen, Apostle of the Basilica. I study our people’s rich history and I document matters of historical import.”

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“She’s my assistant,” Trello asserted, cutting the younger Zora off. “Not that I need an assistant to check over the historical accounts presented during the festival. I was alive during the Calamity, I know well enough what did and didn’t occur.”

“Oh yes, of that I’m certain, Council Member.” The Prince spoke in a reassuring tone, allowing the elderly Zora to feel duly respected before he turned his attention back to the young Apostle. “So, miss Loreen, you must not come topside very often. How are you enjoying the upper city?”

“Well,” the pale, white Zora looked away in embarrassment when the Prince addressed her again, “it’s very bright up here, and hot, and there’s quite a lot of air.”
“Indeed,” Sidon spoke, a bit of a titter coming from him at the young Apostle’s answer. She was awash in nervousness as her face sank into her palms and Sidon mercifully took his attention off of her. “So, Tula, I saw the page mentioning the design scheme for the decorations. You were the one in charge of that, right?”

“Yes, Prince Sidon!” The young woman excitedly answered when the Prince called on her, though she cleared her throat and lowered her voice to a softer tone before she continued. “I decided on a blue, white and silver color scheme for decorations. The blue and white is to represent the colors worn by Lady Mipha and her fellow Champions and the silver represents the armor of our soldiers.”

“I see. I like that very much. Excellent job, as always!” The Prince flipped to the page which had been written by Tula. Just as she said, the color scheme was laid out nicely, as were the plans for all the upper city decorations. Sidon softly smiled, reading over the details; they were to line the pedestal of Mipha’s statue with silent princess flowers. Surprisingly, the workforce in charge of setup was already selected. It was quite thorough.

“It mentions that all of the food vendors will be required to sell.. A teardrop cake?” The Prince commented, flipping to the next page in search of answers. “What is a teardrop cake?”

“Oh!” Tula clapped her hands excitedly at Sidon’s question, moving in a bit closer to the taller Zora in order to point out the recipe detailed a bit further down the page. “It’s a clear, round gelatinous cake made with water and Hylian rice, then sweetened with swift violet nectar. Considering the recent return of the Hylian Champion, I thought this dessert would nicely represent our alliance with the Hylian people. Plus, a little birdie told me that Lady Mipha’s favorite sweet was Hylian ricecakes.”

Tula’s choice of phrasing drew a tiny laugh out of the Prince, his sharp teeth gleaming as he smiled; the only Zora who could have made Tula privy to such information was Sidon’s father and he wasn’t quite a little birdie at all. “I like the idea, but..”

“Hm?” The young woman glanced up at the slightest sound of the Prince’s displeasure, worry coming over her features and emanating from her.

“‘Teardrop Cake’ just invokes feelings of sadness. Perhaps call it ‘Raindrop Cake’ instead,” he calmly explained. “This ties into your theme as well, as it is also thanks to the Hylian Champion that raindrops are no longer falling on our heads.”

“Oh my! That is very clever!” Tula gave an enthusiastic nod, her hands clapping together once again.

“As for the events, the scheduling looks..” The Prince trailed off as his eyes skimmed over the schedule, quickly reading over the timetables. Each event was given adequate time for setup and completion before another started elsewhere. There was to be a mock tourney in a space cleared near Ralis Pond, a contest in front of the Veiled Falls, a game of tail tag in the reservoir and those were just the events that took place during the day. Sidon gave a nod, breaking his concentrated silence. “It’s perfect, as to be expected. However, Laflat, if you could extend the evening service dedicated to Mipha just a bit- I think I might actually want to speak this year.”

“You-” The secretary gasped quietly, her hand shooting up to her chest in surprise. Poised as she typically was, her face took on a look of concern. She was still a young woman, yet she was old enough to remember a much younger Sidon and the tumultuous grieving process he’d been through. “Highness, are you certain? You’ve rejected the offer to speak about Lady Mipha every year. There is no obligation for you to do something you’re not comfortable with.”
“No, it’s fine. I believe I’m finally ready.” One hand was raised to gently dismiss Laflat’s concern, a soft, grateful smile coming over the Prince’s pale lips. It wasn’t her job to mother over him, yet from time to time, she did anyway and Sidon had often been helpless to reject it, in his more adolescent days.

“What is this event?” Sidon spoke up in curiosity, partly to change the subject before anymore was said about the previous topic, but mostly because he was genuinely curious; the event in question appeared to be something new. “The Battle of Diviner’s Sorrow?”

“It’s a dramatic reenactment of The Battle of Diviner’s Sorrow, the final battle and victory of our people during the Calamity!” The previously shy Apostle spoke up with renewed vigor when this question was posed. When she did, the other three Zora turned to look at her, at which point her former nervousness came over her again and she fumbled to offer further explanation. “The script was written by a veteran of the conflict and I checked over it for accuracy. It’s actually very factual, as well as being wildly entertaining. The battle scenes are glorious and the interactions between the characters are a bit dramatized, but in a good way. It’s also going to be performed by children, so it lightens the tone a bit. It’s going to be great fun.”

Slow, continuous nodding was Sidon’s reaction while the event was passionately explained, yet despite the Apostle’s glee, the Zora Prince’s response was not quite so positive. He tried very hard to maintain a pleasant expression as guilt and uncertainty began to gnaw at him. A forced, neutral tone was what came from him when he uttered a concerned inquiry. “I’m guessing it features the former First Knight of the Royal Order?”

“Of course. He’s one of the central characters.” Sidon had apparently disguised his wariness well enough, as the Apostle barely paused. “The script really does him justice. It covers his deep loyalty and friendship with King Dorephan, the star-crossed romance that develops between him and one of the young soldiers who volunteered after our main forces were decimated, and it all leads up to the final battle, which he predicted the outcome of with his divining ability. The ending is solemn but also hopeful. We even timed it so that the end of the production lines up with the sunset.”

“Ah, yes, well..” Sidon tapped one toeclaw, his eyes blindly moving across the paper in his hand as his lips formed a tight line upon his features. “I’m sorry for asking this, but.. Is it too late to change it?”

“Change?” The white Zora repeated while she blinked in confusion, one bundled hand unfurling to fuss with the material of the shawl around her. “Change it how?”

It wasn’t difficult to tell what she was feeling; she was nervous and perplexed and ever so slightly insulted that Sidon would ask such a thing, though of course she tucked that part away. This event seemed to mean a lot to her, yet Sidon knew somebody else who would vehemently detest it.

Clearing his throat, the Prince returned a polite smile to the mask that was his face, gesturing with one hand to express that he was hurriedly thinking over a suggestion for how it might be altered to suit his mysterious, unspoken needs. He already knew precisely what he wished to suggest, but he didn’t want to seem so mercilessly blunt. “Can the story perhaps still work ..without the former First Knight being made into a central role?”

“Uh, but, your Highness,” the Apostle bubbled nervously, the drastic severity of this seemingly simple suggestion causing her to fidget and squeak. This script wasn’t even hers to change, and, and, “that would require the entire script to be rewritten and the children have already begun rehearsals, and-”

“Ah, then, nevermind.” Sidon raised a single hand to quiet the young woman’s concerns. There was
no need for her to become frantic, as it certainly wasn’t the Prince’s wish to overburden her, nor to seem overly picky or difficult.

Sidon closed the veritable booklet of scrupulously planned and detailed work, giving it a rather thrilled pat with his hand before he passed it back into Laflat’s care. “The plans are all very sound and you’ve all brought some wonderful touches to the festival this year. I truly appreciate all of your hard work and I’m looking forward to the festivities. Please, thank the rest of the committee for me, as well.”

“Oh! Thank you Prince Sidon. You’re always so kind.” Tula stuck around to grovel, while Laflat checked over the booklet, as though to be certain that every page was still intact before she carried on. She offered a slight bow while Tula was still unloading every word of praise she knew.

Meanwhile, Trello glanced between the Prince and the young woman who was ever so happily stroking his ego, a bitter sneer wrinkling the elder’s face further as he watched. His weathered fangs chewed at the inside of his lip, the pit of anger turning in his gut, threatening to make him sick if he watched anymore of the nonsense before him.

The elder Zora’s joints ached and his heels stung from having stood here for so long, thanks to the Prince’s apparent inability to be on time for anything. He rolled his shoulders slightly, his back feeling as though it creaked with the slightest movement. He began to turn away, intent on heading back to the Basilica, if not for the voice of the Zora Prince suddenly beckoning him to stay.

“Council Member, I’d very much like to speak with you, if you please,” Sidon said in a softened, serious tone, tuning down his showy vibrance as he addressed the elder. For a quick moment, he gave Tula a genteel smile, saying, “Thank you, Tula, but I do need to discuss some things with the Council Member, alone.”

“Go on ahead, Loreen,” Trello muttered in turn to the young Apostle, dismissing her for the time being and she gave a curt bow before hurrying away.

Once the two Zora stood alone, Sidon straightened, folding his arms behind his back in polite formality. The older Zora cocked his head ever so slightly to one side, the droop of his crest obscuring his view of the towering, young Prince otherwise. Trello’s slitted eyes were faded, but still sharp as they regarded Sidon, the furrows of his face seeming to deepen as he did.

“Council Member, I wanted to say,” Prince Sidon began, his gaze faltering for a single moment, his voice soft and compassionate, yet guarded, “I’m sincerely sorry for the loss of your son.”

“Oh?” The elder was taken aback, perhaps not in true surprise, but instead in the shock that came with the younger Zora even having the audacity to bring up his son. His teeth clenched as he fought himself, the muscles of his jaw tightening in building fury, mixed with bitter grief.

Trello’s gaze lowered with his head as he shook it, inwardly denying the Prince’s apologies, and certainly his so-called ‘sincerity’. When the older Zora looked up once more, Sidon was still standing as motionless as a statue, with that same, lying expression on his face. The elder’s lip curled, his teeth becoming bared when he could no longer hold back the roughened growl of his voice. “Are you sorry, now?” he spat. “You sent both my son and my granddaughter into that death trap fort that you decided you needed so badly, then you couldn’t even allow the families of those who died to arrange their own services.” An accusing finger pointed up at the towering Prince as Trello spoke his bitter condemnations. “You let them die for you, then you used their bodies to secure your own goals.”

“I assure you, Council Member, when I sent them into the fort, I intended for all of them to return safely.” The Prince spoke each word with care and caution, though every syllable he uttered only
intensified the elder’s bitter rage and he knew it. “I had believed that it would be a relatively simple operation, but as we both know, even seemingly simple battles have a way of quickly becoming complex and chaotic.”

“Don’t you dare try to excuse your poor leadership to my face!” Trello hissed his spiteful words, his old, bent frame straightening more than one would have thought possible, almost as though he meant to stand taller than the Prince, so to look down on him like the foolish child he was. “I don’t care how contrite you make yourself out to seem, your so-called intentions don’t excuse your actions and they never will.”

The older man’s anger raced alongside his innermost sorrows, the grief that came with his son’s death forming new wounds next to the itching, scabby injuries that Mipha’s demise had left on so many, including Trello. That lingering sorrow stagnated, lending newfound bitterness that served to justify a growing distaste for the only heir left to the throne. “Your sister was a blessed leader,” the elder uttered, his voice tremulous and filled with regret, “...she fought for every single one of her soldiers. But you? You’re a fraud, an insincere, posturing pomp who’s only out for his own selfish gain. You’re a pale shadow, compared to Lady Mipha. I just pray I don’t live long enough to see the shameful day when you wear the crown.”

Trello’s tattered fins flared as he spoke, his tail flicking as fiercely as he could manage while his body trembled in anger that he was helpless to resolve. Sidon, on the other hand, showed no sign that he was even affected by the older Zora’s words. His eyes were turned aside, and he bowed his head just a bit lower when at last it seemed Trello was finished unloading his anger and blame onto the person he believed responsible for it all.

“I understand,” the Zora Prince answered, not denying one single thing he was accused of. “Council Member Trello, I’m truly sorry to have failed you so deeply. Thank you for your time.”

The bells were ringing out in the distance to announce the hour, a low, resounding hum that vibrated throughout the entire valley of Zora’s Domain. Link had lost count of how many times they had rung since he parted ways with Sidon- Four times? Five? Either way, it was still light enough for perfect visibility, despite the hour.

Cooler air was wafting up from the water as the sun became heavy on the horizon, dropping the temperature to something more comfortable. The surrounding trees danced gently, their leaves softly rustling in the dull air currents while the heat of the day began to subside. Soon, this quiet whisper would serve to call out the frogs and crickets who would sing long into the night, but as of now, Link had yet to hear the first brave chirp of the evening.

The Hylian took a long, slow breath and opened his eyes, his vision immediately greeted by the vast, dull blue which faded to reddish orange and pink at the mountaintops. He’d been taking a rest in the thick grass of one of the many isolated meadows within the valley. The task of butchering his boar had been quite a bit of effort. He was just glad that his hunting knife was, apparently, his one and only blade that could not be broken. The meat cleaver he’d borrowed from Kodah also seemed sturdy enough. He wondered how long it would take him to learn to use a meat cleaver as a serious weapon? That had potential to be pretty interesting.

The Hylian Champion; is he preparing a meal or is he preparing to take your life? Both.

Link stretched where he laid, perhaps a bit too comfortable to actually get up. He’d created the perfect crater for himself in the cushion of the thick grasses, which was tempting enough to remain in. However, if he didn’t get moving, the meat was going to sour and then he wouldn’t be able to eat
Pushing himself upright, Link dusted his shoulders and his butt, which were covered in loose pieces of grass; the rest of him was covered as well, but it would fall off eventually.

He’d been waiting for two things; first, because he hadn’t bled the boar properly, it was a gruesome mess to cut apart. So, he’d tied the gutted carcass into a tree to let it drip for a bit longer. Nasty business, to be sure, but dead pigs still smelled better than living bokoblins, so maybe it wasn’t such a terrible job. Secondly, he didn’t want to even bother getting a fire going during the sweltering heat of the day. Roasting a pig by firelight was a night activity. What kind of wild man would he be if he didn’t know that?

The appropriate time was growing near now, so Link stiffly carried himself over to the area he’d prepped for a cookfire beforehand. He’d gathered plenty of wood and stacked it nicely so that the actual cooking process could be relatively simple and relaxing. His rotisserie was already set up as well, so all that was left was to start the fire and to truss the hog on the spit.

However, just as the Hylian was sure that he would be allowed to spend a quiet, peaceful evening alone, his pointed ears twitched at the sound of feet pattering against the grass. An immediate scowl creased his face, even before he knew the identity of the one approaching. From the flat, slapping sound of their feet, it was either a bright-chested duck or a Zora but it was far too large to be a duck, and yet too light to be the Prince.

The furrow between his brows only deepened at this knowledge, though the Hylian didn’t bother to look up from the task of arranging his firewood and spreading out light pieces of dried grass for kindling. He made it all the way to the act of striking his knife against a piece of flint before the owner of the duck feet appeared at the edge of his temporary camp. Link gently blew upon the tiny sparks encouraging them to grow into baby flames and they smoked as they slowly danced across the kindling, rapidly gaining strength until the entire fire pit was consumed by raging inferno.

This was when Link let out a deep, frustrated sigh, which, like the tiny, initial flames, grew in intensity until it was a full blown groan. He climbed to his feet, setting the icy blue of his gaze upon a certain golden Zora, who was waiting to be acknowledged. Maybe if Link decided not to talk, Sidon’s guard could just stand there all night, waiting. If only the Hylian could tolerate his presence for that long.

“What do you want?” Link asked, his tone sharp despite the fact that this was a legitimate question. It wasn’t like the Zora would come all this way to keep Link company.

“Hylian Champion,” Brivere spoke as he was addressed rather rudely. He was already considering turning his back on this bad idea and leaving. His better judgement was certainly doing a decent job convincing him that this plan of action would be best. An observant, yellow gaze moved from the wild-eyed, knife wielding Hylian standing before the wildfire, to the gruesome creature flayed and dangling from a nearby tree branch, then downward, to the scratched out pit beneath the dead animal which was near brimming with blood.

Link sheathed his hunting knife as he watched the Zora nervously glance here and there. Brivere rarely wore much of anything that could be defined as an actual expression, but Link had to say that this was probably the most bewildered he’d ever seen a completely impassive person be. A malicious little voice was quietly whispering into Link’s ear to take advantage of this.

“I thought I would kill and eat one of the Calamity’s cousins, just to show it what I’m capable of,” Link said with a sly smile, quickly regaining Brivere’s attention. The Zora did not look amused, but that could have just been his face.
“I’m certain that the Calamity has claimed many more Hylian lives than the amount of pigs you’ve eaten,” Brivere responded, unperturbed and boringly serious. At least it served to make Link aware that his intimidation factor needed work.

“It’s definitely a close race,” the Hylian said with a shrug, meandering over to where his pig was still hanging, with Brivere following at a slight distance.

“How is it that you can speak so easily about a disaster that decimated your people?” the Zora asked, momentarily losing sight of his original purpose. The Calamity had never been something to be taken lightly among his own people, especially with the knowledge that it wasn’t truly over but merely contained for an uncertain period of time. “Or were you attempting to guarantee that your character remained in questionable standing?”

“Just wait until you find out that I was so relaxed during the Calamity, I slept right through it,” Link uttered, chuckling despite his utter indifference. He really couldn’t afford to be distracted at the moment, so he didn’t plan to take this conversation too seriously. Honestly, that would imply that he took Brivere seriously, which he didn’t. Link busied his hands with trussing the boar with flameproof twine he’d picked up while in Eldin, all while trying to fasten the meat to the rotisserie spit. “While you’re here, why don’t you try holding this for me?”

“Pardon?” the golden Zora uttered, unsure what was even being asked of him.

“You see this huge pole that I’m tying this pig’s carcass to?” The Hylian pointed, his hands covered in blood all over again. “Hold onto it, so that it doesn’t slip.”

“Very well,” Brivere replied, his voice a low rumble of hesitation and thinly veiled disgust. However, he took hold of the spit as asked, which enabled the Hylian to get the meat fastened to it much more securely.

“Alright,” Link breathed a sigh of effort, one gruesome hand reaching for the hunting knife sheathed at his hip and drawing it out once more. “Now you can help me get the damn thing over to the fire. Just don’t drop it.”

Taking a tight hold of the top of the massive skewer, which erupted from the boar’s hindquarter and looked like a major pain in the ass, Link brought the blade of his knife to the rope that bore the weight of the entire roast. With a clean swipe, the rope was cut and the burden fell into the hands of the Zora and the Hylian. Brivere appeared to have not expected it, but tightened his grip as the spit began to slip through his hands and lifted it so the pole was level between himself and Link.

Together, they carried the roast over to the fire, carefully placing the ends of the spit into the nooks of the support posts. Link immediately took a loose stick and began poking around in the fire, shifting things about until they were just so, to be sure that the meat would cook evenly. Brivere, without saying a word, returned to the water he’d no doubt come from, in order to wash the blood from his hands.

Link followed soon after the golden Zora, his boots stamping along the well-flattened trails, all the way down to the edge of the placid pool that the glowing sculpture of a city rose up from in the distance. As he bowed down and reached for the water, he spoke up to address the Zora by his side. “So did you plan to tell me why you came? Was there something you actually wanted or were you just hoping to mooch a meal?”

“I have no interest in your food,” Brivere answered plainly, straightening as he stood and he looked on Link with deadly seriousness that seemingly never changed. “I came to ask a favor.”
“Too bad,” the Hylian scoffed but laughed immediately after. The nerve of this guy was honestly so beyond outrageous that it was amusing. Link shook the water from his hands, then wiped them on the knees of his trousers and gave his head a fierce shake. “I’d rather share my food than do anything for you, and that’s saying something.”

“Might you at least hear me out?” There it was- the Zora’s apathy sharpened itself just enough that his tone suddenly matched his bitchy face. Honestly, maybe the Champion was a bit gloomy, but this guy was something else, altogether.

It struck Link as decently humorous that Brivere was still attempting to swallow whatever hinox-sized pride came with his nobility, while also looking as though he believed the Hylian was just being unnecessarily difficult. For this reason, Link continued to dangle him rather than turning him down, outright. He offered little more than a dismissive shrug and said, “I suppose if you follow me back up this hill, I’ll have no choice.”

After he spoke, the Hylian did precisely as he’d indicated, turning on heel and starting back toward the camp at that same bothersomely quick pace that he’d used the last time Brivere followed after him.

“Champion,” the golden Zora uttered, determined to be heard. “I’m uncertain as to what it is that my younger sibling finds interesting in you-”

“You must not ask many favors of people,” Link quickly spoke up, cutting Brivere off. He made a ’tsk tsk’ sound and shook his head in disappointment that was a bit exaggerated. “You always start by belittling the person you’re asking. That’s not really the best plan for success.”

Brivere continued once the Hylian quieted, speaking as though Link had said nothing at all. “However, whatever it may be, Estuu does seem to genuinely like you. You must understand, it’s a very rare occurrence for him to actually like or want to be around anybody.”

“Maybe it’s because we have that in common?” Link commented with a thoughtful gesture.

“So, as it is,” the Zora’s velvet voice lowered further in pitch while he attempted to conceal his growing annoyance, “...he seems to trust you. He won’t suspect that I’ve sent you.”

“If you’re about to ask me to betray the trust of a kid who has problems trusting people..” The Hylian glanced back at the slower walking Zora, the skin between his brows furrowed, his countenance taking on a rather dubious and disappointed expression. “I’m gonna say that sounds like a bad idea and a despicable thing to do.”

“I’m not,” Brivere growled, the Hylian’s attitude an utterly impossible test for even his patience. “I’m asking you to help me keep him out of trouble and I certainly wouldn’t be bothering, if not for the fact that my brother chose you.”

As the two made it back to the camp, Link said little in response for an extended moment, the noncommittal silence comfortable and easy despite the Zora’s persistent pestering. If he said nothing, then he didn’t have to do anything. However, even as the Hylian settled down next to his cookfire, Brivere remained, hovering patiently, like a mountain crow waiting for a dying animal to take its last breath.

“Fine, what is it?” Link hissed bitterly. He could not believe he was agreeing to something for the purpose of regaining his peaceful solitude. He had half a mind to climb back up Mount Bullshit and add Brivere’s name to it. “What do you want me to do?”
“The day after tomorrow; will you still be around?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” the Zora nodded. “Estuu takes lessons in the use of magic, but he’s been sneaking away instead. Can you tail him, in secret or not, I don’t care. Find out what he’s been doing, and if it happens to have anything to do with archery, could you perhaps try to sway him? Or convince him that he shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Why?” Link threw up his hands, confounded. He had so many questions, but at the very same time, he didn’t want to know. These brothers were so bizarre. His former assumption that archery was beneath their station was beginning to slip and Link didn’t like being forced to question his own baseless assumptions. “Don’t your people consider archery a useful skill? Why would you want him to stop something so.. Innocuous?”

Brivere stiffened at the question, his neutral expression giving nothing away, and yet.. It couldn’t be any more suspicious. His yellow eyes flicked to the side as he hovered in silence, considering the question, considering his answer. Still, he eventually shook his head in response. “I can’t tell you that.”

“If you can’t even tell me why he shouldn’t be doing it, how can I convince him that he shouldn’t?”

“You’ll just have to think of something,” the Zora uttered stoically, his head tilting to one side while he looked over Link, studying the Hylian before one corner of his lips tugged upward just enough to show the slightest shine of his fangs. “You can think of things on your own, can’t you?”

“I came to the conclusion that you’re a bastard on my own,” Link snapped, his own voice dropping to a growl as his skin was effectively gotten under. However, a sly smile pushed his scowl away, and he intoned a further quip. “No wait, you’re right- I had your help with that, too.”

“Will you do it, or won’t you?” Brivere pushed, sighing and shifting his weight impatiently onto one foot, his arms crossing over his chest. He appeared suddenly very relieved that his younger brother didn’t speak, seeing now what levels of sass he could be forced to endure.

“Yeah, sure. I already said I would.” Apparently the golden Zora wasn’t a very good listener. It really was for the best that Estuu couldn’t speak; actually, maybe it was Brivere’s fault that he just didn’t bother. “It’s not like I have anything more important to do than helping Zoras raise their rebellious young.”

“If you have time to constantly distract our royalty, then you have time for this.”

“Fine, fine.”

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Chapter End Notes

This is my artist friend gratitude note! Thank you to my fabulous, talented readers for all the art! I'm so overwhelmed and overjoyed. You're all marvelous. Thank you to Lulens/Stupidblackcat for ALL of the art. You have put so much love into this story. Probably as much as me! Thank you the Pigeon-Princess, because you made even more
lovely art since my last update, and I'm still dying from it. Also, heartbrokengirlsketches! I'm pretty sure you haven't posted your art from the story yet, but I've seen it and I'm speechless. Thank you so much!

Reader friends! Seriously, you all have to see these beautiful pieces of art! Follow all of these people and come follow me because I'll definitely be reblogging all Coma Baby related art. :)}
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In order to keep an eye on his roasting quarry, Link spent the night laying beneath the starry sky, allowing the calm, warm evening on the outskirts of Zora's Domain soothe away the memories of Eldin's fiery misery. However, some other, equally fiery memories arose within him, leaving him not so soothed, and hungry in a way that his cooking pig could never satisfy.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. Okay, I have a few things to say, so here we go. I'm behind on comment responses. I still haven't responded to the comments from last week and some from the week before, I've been so behind. I'm sorry for that.

Also, this chapter is almost entirely smut, so for those of you who don't care to read it, I'm sorry, because this week is probably going to feel like a huge rip-off. There are a few parts of this chapter which are SFW, and I will mark the beginning and end of the smut within the text of the chapter, so that you'll have warning if you'd like to read over the SFW parts. Just to be safe, I marked the beginning of NSFW at the kissing, since it's pretty heavily described.

That's it! Enjoy, my friends!

The night was pleasant and calm, just warm enough for one to comfortably lay still in the soft cushion of the grass, while gazing idly upward at the glimmering stars above. The night sky over Zora’s Domain was vast and black, the visibility hardly affected by the softly glowing city.

Bitter as he could be, sometimes Link couldn’t help but let himself be taken by the beauty around him. This world only needed to exist and nothing more, and in doing so, it was a wonderful place, with rapturous sights and experiences that the Hylian senses and consciousness could only fractionally perceive with enough depth to truly, truly appreciate. It was fathomlessly complex and something in that deep mystery lent itself to a kind of helplessness that perhaps was not so terrible.

Either that, or the smokey, savory scent of the pig cooking over the softly crackling embers had just put Link in a damn good mood. The air of the entire meadow was heavy with the delectable smell and by morning the boar would be cooked through enough to eat. It wasn’t an ideal breakfast, but the Hylian suspected that if he shared his bounty with his Zora friends from the Inn, they might be equally generous in return, and offer other elements to make the meal a more balanced one.

The frogs and crickets had come out now that the moon and the cookfire were the only remaining sources of light. While the crickets sang in a constant, relaxed hum, the frogs chirped with energetic, musical vigor between one another, not at all disrupted by the scent of smoke nearby. Overall, it was a delightful, soothing sensory experience and Link found himself wondering why he hadn’t done this in such a long while. He’d learned how to keep his pouch heavy enough with rupees that he could
secure a bed somewhere almost every night, yet it didn’t have the same charm as this kind of wild, simple living.

Taking a long, slow breath, Link allowed the deep inhale to fill his chest, then he let it out, his hopeless gaze reflecting the dappled sky. In the quiet of his surroundings, he decided that, at last, he might be strong enough to allow his mind to wander.

He’d been blocking out all thoughts of that damn Zora Prince, the guilt and troublesome longing too much of a burden for his tattered mental state to handle. He supposed now that he’d made the effort to return to Zora’s Domain, and he had some kind of date with the Prince tomorrow, he’d have to face his own feelings or else everything would just stay completely and utterly confusing.

Wait. Did he actually just call his plan to meet up with Sidon a date? Link hadn’t previously realized he was such a presumptuous ass in his introspections, but that was a thing he knew now.

The entire discussion he’d previously attempted to have with the Zora was a babbled mess and he wouldn’t be able to blame the Prince if he had even less of a clue who his Hylian friend was, now. However, Link was going to do better. No, he was actually going to put real effort into something, for a change. His friendship wasn’t a battlefield and he didn’t want to treat it as such any longer.

He would try to maintain this ‘friendship’, much as he still recognized that he wanted so much more than that. He was determined to start over, to stop dumping his emotional burdens on Sidon’s shoulders and to start communicating better, despite how words were the bane of his existence.

It was time to stop depending on his ‘friend’ for simple comfort and he was going to try, really try, to genuinely care, in return. He did care about the Zora Prince, didn’t he? Yes, he already did; now all he needed to do was express it properly.

All of this made it clear to Link how selfish and misplaced his bitterness toward Mipha had been. He’d actually been angry at her, for dying, as if she really longed for or welcomed death. Or if that had truly been the case, then maybe Link had no right at all to judge her, as he’d found himself wishing to stay lost within oblivion as well, in darker times.

Surely, she had wished to live, as most people generally tend to and her death was not a fault to hate her for, regardless. Link could accept this, even if he would always believe that her loss was a waste, because it was no more fair to blame her for her failure to survive than it was for the Zora people to blame Hylians. It was the fault of the Calamity, and for that personal slight, Link could learn to hate it, instead.

He just wished he’d learned this lesson sooner, before he’d mistakenly turned his mournful viciousness on Mipha’s younger brother. The worst part of it was that the Hylian’s intentions hadn’t even been to hurt Sidon, but rather, to get back at Mipha. Sidon had simply been the tool of Link’s despicable vengeance, which took him into even less consideration and how could Link ever, truly apologize for that?

It was, only now, that Link could quantify exactly what his losses amounted to. That night, when the Zora Prince led his new Hylian companion up the spiral tower to his bedchamber, it had begun in the warm, doting way that interactions between them often were, whenever Link remained quiet and allowed the Prince to take lead. It was careful and genuine, while also being sensuous and heavy with such emotional depth, even the Hylian’s empty soul began to feel full to bursting.

The flirtations were definitely awkward, as per Link’s inexperience, but it hadn’t damned him and perhaps there had even been a possibility for his awkwardness to seem charming, in its own way. Sidon still looked at him with curiosity and desire that unabashedly burned in the depths of his
golden gaze that night, while also taking care to make certain Link was, in fact, ready to move on to intimacy.

When they’d entered the Prince’s quarters, Link slowly meandered, looking around for a quick instant before turning his attention back to the allure of his Zora lover-to-be. How could anything distract him from the magnificence that was Prince Sidon? Maybe the Hylian had rolled his eyes at the babbling of those young women who made up the Prince’s fanclub, but he supposed he had no right to deny anything he’d heard them say. Link was as helpless as a shed flower petal drifting on this Zora’s sea, unable to offer any resistance while the whirlpool of attraction pulled him in and took him under.

Link was unbuckling belts and tugging his tunic over his head with a kind of speed that came in his unwillingness to let his view of Prince Sidon be interrupted for long and it seemed almost like the Zora Prince had noticed as much. Link followed, his gait slow and smooth while he was dragged along by the Zora’s mysterious, fluid gravity. The Prince swayed softly as he sauntered, his hips the rhythmic, gentle lapping of waves on a sandy shoreline.

The Zora looked back at his hapless follower, one shoulder shrugging lower so that the gleam of the smile on his lips was made visible, the soft upturn made even more coy and impish when Sidon quickly faced forward once more. When the Zora’s attention shifted to gathering some mysterious item from one of the nearby shelves, Link diverted to where the bed waited, haphazardly tossing aside his shed garments. It wasn’t long before the curious graze of the Prince’s sharp fingerscales came to trace the soft, but battle-marked surface of the Hylian’s shoulders and back.

“Mmm,” Link hummed as one careful hand smoothed over him, touching his skin as though it were fine silk, rather than damaged leather.

“Here, take this,” Sidon spoke, his voice a soft purr while his knuckles bumped the smaller man, to gain his attention. Link’s pointed ears perked as he turned and looked up at the Prince in casual question, receiving the offering from his palm- a tablet of some sort?

It was a small, blue pill and Link rolled it over in his hand, observing it in questioning that only grew. His concern was evident enough, however, because Sidon spoke up to answer that inquiry before it was given words.

“I know you said that you possess an immunity to the drinks, but just in case you exaggerated, this will remove any effects that remain,” he said, the knuckles of his curled fingers moving along the Hylian’s forehead, brushing back the gold fringe for one single second before his fingertips came to softly grasp the delicate tip of one pointed ear in affectionate investigation.

Link chuckled softly, taking the glass of water that was held in the Zora’s other hand and he swallowed the pill without further fuss. However, after he wiped any lingering droplets from his lips, a grin found its way there. “Why did you have this in your bedroom?”

A guiltless shrug was the Prince’s response as he took back the glass of water, padding back to his desk to deposit it there. “I like for my partners to remember me. And I like to remember them. That’s not terribly complicated, is it?”

“It implies that you’ve had..” Link trailed off, his thoughts maybe not coming out the way he’d wanted. “Partners.”

Sidon laughed. When he laughed, his voice was light as air, yet lush as velvet and he gave a simple nod. “It is true, and I made no secret of it, did I? I may be a Prince, but I am still just.. a person. My needs are the same as any other.”
“Hmm,” the Hylian nodded, backing up slowly, his palms locating and pressing into the surface of the Prince’s bed before Link heaved himself up on it. “Good enough for me.”

The Hylian made himself only more comfortable on the waverimg water mattress, the softness of the sheets sliding beautifully against his skin while he reclined, still watching the Zora with a stare that was both fascinated and hungry. The Prince stripped out of his various adornments with quick, practiced ease, each item placed aside with more measured care than Link had shown his own things. Once it was all removed, Link was surprised to find Sidon’s bared body an even more wondrous thing to behold. It was odd, considering Zoras didn’t actually cover their bodies in the same modest way Hylians did, yet even so, when Sidon wore nothing, there was nothing to distract from his splendor.

The Hylian gaped much too obviously when Sidon approached the bed, the golden gleam of the Zora’s eyes partly hidden beneath his dark lids, the rich, red shine of his scales turning the color of wine in the faint, blue glow of a lamp. His tail flicked idly, thumping softly against the back of his shoulders, the movement a show of impatience that grew steadily with his interest as it was stoked.

“You’re beautiful,” Link uttered when Sidon stood at the edge of the bed, to which the Hylian received an amused titter in return.

The Prince almost shrugged, his shoulders moving delicately while he allowed the compliment to drift past. “Or so I’ve been told,” he spoke, these words having clearly been thrown about so many times, they held little sway any longer.

;NSFW WARNING;

Sidon crawled upon the bed, the mattress becoming tight and tense beneath his weight, expanding and raising Link up, as though in offering, a sacrifice for his sexual appeasement. Having a person of the Prince’s size hover just above you brought on a rather helpless kind of intensity that had Link falling back onto his elbows, a soft hum of anticipation purring in his throat as the Zora’s shadow consumed him.

When the Prince, himself, descended, it was not to consume, but to explore. He laid by the Hylian’s side, his body curling around Link’s own and drawing him near as their lips at last were pressed together. They pushed carefully into one another, their kiss a languid, subtle touch, one trying not to overwhelm the other, while the other searched for the most comfortable angle to fit himself into the anatomy of his partner.

It wasn’t difficult at all, nor did it feel even momentarily unnatural. They found one another in the soft, wet touch of their lips, the pace slow and easy as they moved into the contact in a way that was wordlessly needful. The tips of their tongues grew bold and greeted each other politely, warm and slick when they bumped for a quick instant.

Sidon drew back, just enough to focus on the flush of the Hylian’s countenance, his palm moving to touch Link’s face, only for Link to lay himself into it so that his cheek was cradled. Their gazes met, the Prince’s eyes searching Link’s own in silence, his magic-aided senses finding what he needed with no need for words. He connected just enough to feel Link’s experience, side-by-side with his own. The patter of the Hylian’s heart was a warm, rapid flutter, tightly concealed beneath his breastbone like a summerwing butterfly, flapping helplessly in the palm of someone’s grasping hand.

Their hands roamed as they kissed again, Sidon’s palms indeed able to swallow up the Hylian’s chest, the pads of his fingers taking stock of each scar, the swell of muscle built from battle after battle, the soft areas where a bit of fat managed to hide away from the Hylian’s fearsome metabolism, and the shallow furrows between Link’s ribs where his flesh stretched thin. The Prince’s sharp
fingerscales delicately caressed these soft dips as though they were another Zora’s gill slits, though it did not produce the same squirming reaction.

Link was unable to touch much more than the broad expanse of the Zora’s robust chest, though the pliant muscle was satisfying enough beneath his fingers until the point that his hands fell away, moving, instead, to the button on his trousers. He tried to move his head to one side, to peer down while he shuffled free from his remaining clothing, but the Zora’s continuous kisses sprinkled upon his head and cheeks disallowed it.

Once he successfully kicked free of the restricting material and pushed it over the side of the bed with his foot, Link laid bare by the Zora’s side, moving to return his kisses, only for Sidon’s mouth to move down to his neck, the tip of his tongue tracing the rapid beat of Link’s pulse. The excited click of the Zora’s teeth was audible and Sidon cautiously grazed Link’s skin with the sharp tips, applying no pressure though he trembled with want to show his desire in bitemarks.

A delighted sigh came from the Hylian as his hips were grasped at, the Prince’s attention straying further and further downward, his mouth exploring every inch of skin that his palms had previously studied. A small, calloused hand moved along the Zora’s headfins, an odd, rare sight that Link took in while his lover became utterly fascinated by his belly-button, something a Zora did not possess.

They were both a festival of differences for the other to indulge in, the innocent moments of observation quaint and quick, with soft, endearing laughter and few words spoken.

Those moments swiftly passed by, the Prince’s hands gently splaying Link’s legs, his fingers lightly squeezing the supple flesh while the heat of Sidon’s mouth came seeking after the wet excitement he found between his partner’s thighs.

“Fuck,” Link uttered aloud, interrupting the quiet ambience of the wilderness that surrounded him, his thoughts having wandered much, much further than his original, intended destination. Now, he found himself flushed with feverous warmth, his heart thumping beneath his breastbone as his blood raced in unintended excitement.

The Hylian tried to focus on the chirp of the crickets, or the crackle of the embers that likely needed a good poking as much as he did, himself. Yet clearly, his mind refused to put itself back onto a wholesome track, so he had no choice but to relieve his body’s insistent ache.

Quick, nimble fingers strayed to the Hylian’s waistband in desperation, tugging the button undone with such haste, it was a wonder he didn’t send it flying off into the grass. His hand dove into the warm confines of his trousers, a sigh of beginning relief passing over his lips while he moved his legs further apart, giving himself better access.

What had been the original intention behind these thoughts? To measure his wrongs, his mistakes? Had it been for him to look over the details in his mind, so that he could know for certain that he’d been given a real chance and he’d ultimately blown it?

He’d wanted from Mipha what Sidon had been there freely offering, but he supposed even his numbed state of emotions could be fickle.

The Hylian’s fingers smoothed over the ache between his legs, his touch coaxing it to further excitement as he remembered the heat of the Prince’s breath ghosting over his skin, his tongue a slow, wet tease, exploring Link’s most sensitive flesh and getting a taste of his heady arousal. He gasped, his breath coming in quick, desperate pants while his neck stretched and his head fell back.

From Link’s perspective, a loss that was not only a hundred years over and done, but that he could
hardly remember enough to even mourn over, was as good as an ailment with no cure in sight. He needed something to mask the pain, or to force him to feel something, instead of nothing.

In Mipha’s absence, the slighted Hylian thought he could entertain his needful body with her younger sibling. It was a selfish, wicked thought, the notion that he could force his fallen lover to watch him fuck her brother, but Link was apparently a selfish, wicked person.

It hadn’t taken long for Link to come undone when he’d been pleasured by that charming Prince’s silver tongue. Sidon held his hips steady against the mattress, Link’s body arching and quivering in release. Once he’d fallen still, his body laid flat and motionless, apart from the quick rise and fall of his chest, and the Prince carefully bundled him up, lifting Link from the bed, and into his embrace.

Everything he did was so cautious and gentle, every movement given extra thought, taking Link’s smaller frame into account. The Hylian laughed, the sound hollow and bitter while he pressed his face into the smooth scales of the Zora’s chest. “I’m not going to break,” his voice came out a breathless whisper, but Sidon had heard him, nevertheless.

The Prince grasped his lover by his pert behind, his fingers squeezing lightly in appreciation that was still measured and cautious. He pulled Link nearer, his own head ducking lower, the graceful column of the Zora’s long neck bending so his lips could be brought down softly upon the Hylian’s. The kiss was unhurried and tender, with Link loosening so that his weight was supported by the other, his hands a slow caress over Sidon’s shoulders until his arms were wrapped behind his neck, holding onto him.

Their lips were warm and wet as they parted, yet they still remained near enough to exchange breath and Sidon spoke up quietly. “I know that. But what fun will it be if your discomfort becomes the price of my pleasure?”

“You’re underestimating me,” Link breathed, leaning in to quickly kiss the Prince again.

“No,” came the Zora’s utterance, which was quieted when the Hylian’s lips were pressed to his again, his head pulled down further by the hold of Link’s arms around him. His hands squeezed at his smaller lover’s rump again, before moving along the soft skin of his thighs, infinitely fascinated by the silky feeling of him. When he drew back from the kiss, he spoke up again, to finish his previous statement. “I don’t think you’re weak or breakable, but limitations do exist and I simply don’t wish to test them.”

“You’re already doing that,” the Hylian said with a chuckle, “by being with me. So don’t worry so much.” Untangling one arm from where they’d been folded behind the Zora’s neck, Link brought his palm to rest upon the Prince’s cheek for a reassuring instant. “It’s okay.”

The Hylian placed both hands upon the Zora’s shoulders for balance, softly moving his hips, pushing himself into his partner, his arousal whetted and stirred all over again. The dribbling mess of his previous orgasm beaded and fell upon Sidon’s thighs like raindrops, lacing into the slick wetness of the Prince’s own excitement, which had swollen until they protruded.

Link’s fingers itched in curiosity, coming down from where he’d grabbed on as he reached for the exposed organs that rested just between his legs. One of the two had plopped heavily over to one side and laid against the supple skin of Link’s thigh. They were certainly more than the Hylian expected, but who was he to comment? It would have been ignorant of either of them to assume a man of a different species would have a body that was predictable, not that either of them was particularly displeased.

A breathy moan came from the Prince when Link’s fingers encircled one of the rigid members,
pumping in slow, easy movements. His other hand grabbed and gently tugged at one forefin, pulling the Zora down so they could kiss again and the Hylian could feel the purr of Sidon’s moans as they vibrated against his mouth.

Those quiet, lusting sounds grew in intensity, deepening until they were breathless and guttural. When their lips parted, the Zora’s teeth clicked together, his hips shifting in his want to lunge into the pleasure offered by the Hylian’s hand. “Ahh,” Sidon moaned, his voice laden with need, “Link.”

The smaller male gazed over the flushed desperation on the Prince’s face as he stimulated him, his pointed ears pushing forward at the sound of his name on Sidon’s lips, an unexpected shiver passing through Link at the reverent intensity that he was sure he would taste lingering on Sidon’s tongue when he pressed another hungry kiss to his mouth.

Experimentally, Link drew back from the kiss, his mouth moving downward along the Zora’s beautiful neck, licking and suckling where his scales were smooth, then finally he bit down, immediately eliciting a surprised gasp from his Zora lover.

Sidon’s body jolted, going suddenly taut as though the feeling of teeth against his skin was electric, and his hands shot up to grab at Link’s shoulders, the sharp tips of his fingerscales poking against the Hylian’s skin, though not enough to draw blood. The way he grabbed at Link, both pushing and pulling, left it uncertain as to whether he was attempting to stop him or encourage.

Link gave the bitten skin an apologetic lap of his tongue, laughing softly and drawing his hands back momentarily before he spoke up in question. “You like that?”

“Yes,” the Zora answered frankly, his voice suddenly a thing that stumbled over his tongue, a shiver still ghosting through him.

“I had a feeling.” Link attempted to nod, despite how his head rested against Sidon’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure, however, if this was something Zoras enjoyed, or something that Sidon, personally, enjoyed. “Do Zoras.. Like to bite, then?”

“We do.” There was a heaviness to Sidon’s voice that made it apparent that this answer was not as simple as the answer he offered and he paused while he thought on how he could simplify. “Sometimes lightly, in flirtation, and other times we do it a bit more aggressively, during foreplay or intercourse.”

“Hmm,” the Hylian hummed in intrigue, kissing the area of skin he’d bitten once again, before locating a new place to nibble. He’d climbed this tower of a man and now he would conquer him. Link pinched the skin just above the Zora’s collarbones teasingly between his teeth, setting free another sharp gasp from the Prince, then he moved the heat of his mouth to Sidon’s chest, biting down with unrestrained pressure, so that the Hylian’s jaw ached, yet he was ever-goaded by the pleasure-filled sounds that grew in volume with each bite.

Then, Sidon pushed Link to the mattress, a quiet huff coming from the Hylian as his back fell upon the sway of the water bed and it wobbled beneath him. The Zora’s hands were grasping at his thighs, pushing him and turning him onto his stomach, then grabbing at his hips and pulling with fervent haste, getting Link up onto his knees.

His knees sank into the mattress while Sidon bent over his back, kissing the indent of Link’s spine and tasting his skin, the moisture of his wet excitement bumping against Link’s backside. His parted lips came to rest against the crook between his lover’s neck and shoulder, his breath adding to the humidity on Link’s skin. Sidon opened his mouth, his sharp teeth grazing the Hylian’s tender skin in wanting, yet he knew so much better.
“Why don’t you just do it?” Link uttered. “It’ll be alright.”

“No, I don’t think so,” the Prince responded, surprised at even the suggestion. “A Zora’s scales could endure the punishment. Your skin, however, could not, much as I wish it were so. It would be unwise.”

Sidon straightened, sitting more upright on his knees as he continued to tug at his Hylian partner’s hips in desperate tension that needed some kind of release. He pushed his slick excitement between Link’s thighs, shallowly thrusting while the Hylian squeezed his legs more tightly together. The space between his legs was wet enough for the Zora to comfortably buck his hips into it, his sensitive parts squeezed pleasurably tight as he did.

“Ahh,” Sidon moaned, his hips wetly smacking against the Hylian’s fleshy backside while he pushed himself into the grip of Link’s muscular thighs. He was a tightly wound bundle of arousal and sensitivity, his body hungry for relief, though a quiet whine from his partner slowed him to an immediate halt. “Link?”

“You can go inside,” the Hylian answered, his hands gripping the sheets when he glanced over his shoulder at the Zora, pushing himself back against Sidon as he did.

“Are you..certain?” Sidon uttered in concern that masked an underlying excitement. “I fear the difference in size would make it.. Uncomfortable.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Link answered, pushing back again in insistence.

“Nnn,” a quiet purr escaped the tempted Prince, his hips pulling back, withdrawing his hardened members from the space between Link’s legs, and his hand took hold of one, maneuvering it so that it aligned with the Hylian’s wet entrance.

The idea itself was arousing beyond measure, as the Hylian’s narrow frame promised to be the tightest crevice Sidon had ever squeezed himself into. Link could feel the Zora’s wariness, however, in the way he bumped himself just outside the waiting heat, his size something Link’s body vehemently rejected, at first. With each attempt to slide himself inside, the Zora pushed harder to enter, still cautious that his partner may suddenly gasp in pain at the stretch.

A forceful pull at Link’s hips at last aided in one of the Zora’s members popping past the initial tightness to successfully penetrate the bowed Hylian, and Link grunted at the sudden intrusion, his head falling lower so that his face pressed into the sheets.

“It’s alright?” the Zora asked, breathless from the squeeze that tempted him to thrust into it, though he politely refrained, dipping in only shallowly, to test the waters.

“Yes,” Link mumbled into the sheets, “keep going.”

Sidon pushed himself deeper, his initial thrust a means of searching for the limit. When he found that limit, he kept his movements measured so to not surpass it. The buck of his hips was slow and languid, but the heat of the Hylian welcomed him back again and again. He could feel the tremors of pleasure passing through his partner with each stroke, the ache being stoked and satisfied, the want being fulfilled.

“Unn..” Link groaned at the deep stretch that was delivered to him in a gentle, lapping rhythm. This was his first sexual experience, to his memory, but the tears that pricked and squeezed out from beneath his clenched eyelids were in pleasure, not pain. The thick intrusion dipped smoothly inside, filling him out, filling him up, so that he couldn’t catch his breath and could scarcely even create
coherent words inside his own mind any longer.

“Ahh...” Soft vocalizations escaped from the Zora as he sighed, still tugging and grabbing at the smaller Hylian, discontent with the disconnect, despite being tucked inside him. He was seeking something further, something closer, and the movement of his hands served to distract Link just enough for him to glance back.

“What is it?” the Hylian asked, the sound of his hurried breath punctuating each word with a quick pant.

“I want you closer,” Sidon uttered, withdrawing himself slowly, the sudden emptiness eliciting a surprised gasp from the Hylian. The Prince shifted, laying over onto his side and pulling Link tightly to himself, so the Hylian’s back was flush to the Zora’s belly. One arm tucked just underneath Link’s head and around him, with Sidon’s palm coming to rest upon Link’s chest and holding him near.

With the adjustment, the Zora was forced to curl his torso around his smaller lover, his hips having to reach for the access he’d been previously granted, then he slid himself back into it, the cool wetness that clung to him longing for the warmth held within the Hylian’s core. Link let out a quiet noise when Sidon pushed inside once more, though this time he slipped in with greater ease. The Zora’s free hand came to Link’s hip and continued to tug him back, holding him steady as his own hips flicked upward, pushing his rigid arousal deeper.

“Mm, this is better,” the Prince whispered, the point of his brow dipping down to nuzzle his partner’s soft hair, then he rested his lips upon the flesh where Link’s neck met his shoulder again.

“Is this another Zora thing?” Link uttered, his voice caught between tiny exhalations with each thrust of the Prince’s hips.

“I can’t speak for my people on this one,” Sidon said with a titter. “Full body contact seems to be more of a personal preference of my own.”

“How cute,” the Hylian mocked, though in jest, his body arching to better receive the intrusion as it was thrust into him, in oddly accurate timing with the pounding of his heart just underneath the Zora’s palm. “Nnn, fuck.”

“Ahh, good for you, then?” Sidon murmured softly against the skin of the Hylian’s neck, kissing away the warm moisture his breath left behind.

“Yes, ahh, just.” Link stretched again, straightening his back only to arch himself again, pressing against the Zora behind him as he sought further stimulation. “You can go deeper, it’s alright.”

One of the Zora’s leg bent and reached, his webbed toes oddly capable as they bundled the sheets, his single, hooked toeclaw gripping them for leverage while his body arched and his hips snapped upward, pushing him further, deeper as requested, yet still he couldn’t hope to be fully sheathed. A quiet moan vibrated softly against Link’s neck, which the Hylian chorused with a pleased gasp at the sudden, delightful fullness.

With Sidon pushing himself further, fitting himself ever closer to the Hylian, his second member managed to push into the space between Link’s legs, which his lover used to his best advantage. Link reached down, his hands guiding the slick flesh that tucked between his thighs with each thrust so that it rubbed and stimulated his own overflowing excitement, his sensitivity coming to its plateau, his body trembling when his pleasure wound tightly somewhere in the pit of his belly, spring-loaded and ready to fire.
Link could tell his Zora partner was teetering as well; the movement of his hips was no longer smooth and timed, but an uneven, desperate lunge. Sidon’s breath against the Hylian’s shoulder was deep and rapid, the grip of his hands tightening so that if it were possible for Link to be absorbed into his lover’s massive frame, he’d be bundled in Sidon’s stomach like an infant, or maybe a large meal.

An unabashed vocalization escaped the Hylian with each thrust, his mounting pleasure hot and radiant, coiling up his spine and twitching down to his toes. The wet sound of Sidon pushing into his tight depths drew the explosive tremor up his back, his scarred skin wet from the heat of his racing blood, his muscles taut as his entire body tightened around his focused ecstasy.

“Ahh! I’m going to, I’m going t-” The babbled words spilled from Link in as much a rush as his inevitable peak, his orgasm echoing through his body in blissful tremors. Sidon held onto him, keeping him from squirming to the point that he escaped, still flicking his members up into the Hylian’s tight spaces, his partner’s pleasure an enticement that he could reach out and hold, feeling the ecstasy like it was his own.

“Nnn,” Link’s body raised momentarily off the ground, then fell flat again as his release overcame him, his fingers wet while he rubbed himself to finish, his surroundings nonexistent, the world around him irrelevant. Someone could have approached his camp to watch him pleasure himself and he wouldn’t have noticed, at this point.

Pleasure shot through him, burning through his blood like kindling bursting to flame and leaving ashes behind moments later that drifted away in the lightest breeze. It came and went, leaving him panting and sweaty, flat on his back in the grass, a dull ring swimming through his head as his senses came back to him.

Link dragged himself upright, his body tired and heavy, yet he sluggishly reached for the branch that laid nearby, for the purpose of poking the embers of his cookfire. In his distraction, it had nearly burned to nothing and he prodded at what glowing, red hot bits remained before adding more wood and hoping it didn’t suffocate the flame.

He watched the dull red light, leaning into the soft warmth, his spent form as physically still as his mind was quiet in the lonely afterglow. Things could have been different right now, if the Hylian had taken the great sex and left it at that. Things would be different, he was sure.

But what business did he have pondering what could have been? His life was just a collection of lost possibilities, relationships that were lost to time, and so far gone, he couldn’t even manage to hold onto any recollection.

Sidon, however, wasn’t gone. Link had no business longing for the possibilities he’d shoved off the table, but he could grasp tightly to those possibilities that still were there.

A tired breath escaped the Hylian and as the flames sparked back to life, he tossed more wood on, feeding it with care and keeping it from dying out. Once he was satisfied that his cookfire would last for a few more hours, he laid back into the imprint his body had made in the grass, unable to keep himself from further reflection while his eyes peered blindly up at the vast sky above.

Link’s orgasm had been like electricity on the Zora’s skin, and now the Hylian realized why it was so. Sidon trembled as his partner did, a breathy moan hot against Link’s neck, yet Link found himself surprised at that time and questioning why he didn’t feel the warm, wet sensation of the Zora finishing inside him. He was perplexed because he thought his partner had conveniently come at the same time and the envious realization only now dawned on him- Sidon could simply establish a mental connection in order to experience his partner’s orgasms. Lucky bastard.
Still, he supposed it only made the Zora that much more giving, when his partner’s pleasure was equally his own.

The Hylian’s climax was a binding force that pulled Sidon in and the Prince rushed passionately to meet it, absorbing it, letting it wash over him then he ceased any necessity to save his stamina and he left Link’s spent pleasure behind to finally chase his own. The Zora thrust himself into his lover, his movements shallow and rapid, his excitement built up like a tower onto the foundation his partner laid down.

It was good, it was so good, but then, before the Hylian even let himself have a chance to relax in the Zora’s grip, to allow Sidon to fuck him to finish, his hand lifted above his head, bumping Sidon’s face in a blind search before his fingers tightly grasped one of the Prince’s forefins and he gave a forceful tug.

Sidon’s mouth already rested against his partner’s shoulder, yet Link yanked at him as though to bring his lips to where they presently lingered and the Zora grunted in confusion.

“Do it,” the Hylian blurted, his voice bleary but insistent. “I want you to and I know you want to.”

“What?” the Zora uttered, mumbling breathlessly against his lover’s shoulder.

“I’m telling you to bite me,” Link said, “I can feel your teeth snapping together, I can feel them bared against my skin. So do it.”

“I said that I didn’t wa-”

“Yes, you do. It’s fine,” the Hylian pressured, disallowing the Zora to utter any excuses. He had a purpose in mind, and he hadn’t allowed it to escape him in the enjoyment of their intimacy. “Sidon, it’s fine. Do it.”

“Link,” Sidon mumbled, kissing the tender flesh, tasting it with the tip of his tongue and shivering at the delightful notion. Maybe Link’s words weren’t serious? Maybe this was just an effort to goad him, excite him? Or maybe the Hylian felt he had to do this, to assure his partner’s pleasure?

“It’s alright,” the Zora said, “I’m almost there. Don’t worry abo-”

“I want you to bite me like you would if I were a Zora lover,” Link spoke, pulling harder at the Prince’s forefin as his demand remained unmet. He continued to pull, tugging with every thrust of the Zora’s hips, until he felt the sharp edges of Sidon’s teeth graze his skin, the Prince’s body shaking in the last moment he spent battling his own sense of restraint, then at last, he bit down.

A grunt turned into a breathy hiss when the razor edges dug into the soft, sensitive flesh, the Zora’s teeth burying into Link’s skin and muscle with ease. Link may have well been a ripe fruit under the edges of a hundred freshly sharpened blades, yet even so, some fractional amount of gentleness must have remained, or else the Prince could have easily bitten down to bone, taking a chunk out of Link for all the trouble.

Sidon’s jaws clamped onto Link while his hips gave a few final, uneven thrusts, his own climax finally overcoming him, an audible yet muffled grunt accompanying the hot, thick spurt of his peak spilling between the Hylian’s thighs and into him.

The moment the Zora released his hold on Link, however, the damage left behind became frightfully apparent. His teeth had sliced deeply into the Hylian, the wounds no kinder, no gentler than a blade’s slash or the bite of any other predatory beast, with full intent to kill. The skin was cleanly cut through, the muscle gouged, but Link quickly placed his hand over the bitemark, as though he could
hide it from view while blood streamed and dripped between his fingers.

Before Sidon could utter a single word of worry or regret, a faint blue light encompassed the severe wound, knitting the flesh back together, ceasing the blood flow and sealing it shut again as if it never even occurred.

“It’s fine,” Link spoke, a certain satisfied ease to his voice that wasn’t there to comfort the Prince, but rather in the accomplishment of his cruel and petty revenge. He drew his hand away from the bitten skin, his palm stained a deep crimson and his fingers trembling from the sharp pain that still lingered. “It’s fine, as I said it would be.”

“This magic..” Sidon’s black pupils widened as an anxious feeling climbed up his spine, dread coming to suddenly yank him by his sharp senses. As it did, he pushed himself away from the Hylian, withdrawing his sated members which shrunk until they tucked back inside. He sat himself upright, his gaze tracing over the disheveled Hylian that laid naked before him, spattered with blood and come. Sidon’s countenance was written in trepidation and confusion as he implored some further explanation from his partner. “This energy, it’s..”

;END NSFW;

“Yes, Mipha.” Link spoke to answer the question that hovered, too awful to be spoken aloud. He was comparatively unbothered and unworried, cold blue eyes staring directly at the luminous specter of the Zora Champion, who stood quietly backed into one corner of the room, her head turned aside, her face wrinkled in bitter hurt, or so Link could assume it was so. The tiniest itch of a smile tugged at the corners of his lips, a show of pride at his most awful deed.

“Mipha?” Sidon repeated, his voice tremulous and wary, his head turning to one side so that he could nervously glance over his shoulder, yet there was nothing but the empty space of his chambers. Still, he pulled his legs to himself, his arms crossing over his chest.

“When I set her spirit free, she left her healing power to me.” The Hylian, satisfied with his accomplishment, turned his attention back to the Zora Prince, crawling nearer to him and reaching out to lay his hands against Sidon’s arms in reassurance. “That’s why it was fine for me to indulge you.”

“She left her power to you?” he repeated Link explanations once again, “and you used it to.. No, it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have done that.” The Zora whispered his words as though he were uttering a secret, the tip of his tongue tracing the red stain left on his lips. “Are you.. Are you certain you’re alright?”

“More than alright. That was excellent,” Link said, looking into the Prince’s face and into his distant, distracted gaze. He couldn’t, at that time, discern what had taken the Zora’s focus elsewhere and he lifted up one hand to place upon Sidon’s cheek. “But I’m tired, of course. Is it alright for me to sleep here? If not, I can go back to the Seabed Inn.”

“What?” Sidon uttered, his golden eyes searching the Hylian’s calm expression. “No, no, you mustn’t do that. Of course you may stay here, in fact, I insist.”

“Will you stay?” the Hylian asked, his blue gaze momentarily flicking to where Mipha still hovered, quietly watching the scene as it played out, before she evanesced and was gone.

“I can,” the Prince answered, a sense of calm at last washing over him and he leaned down to press a kiss to one of his lover’s pointed ears. “..if you’d like.”
Link gave a tired nod and Sidon immediately began to draw back and straighten the tousled sheets, welcoming the Hylian to make himself comfortable underneath. When Sidon, too, tucked himself beneath the blankets, his company shifted to lay near him, resting his head against the other man’s chest.

Then, in the moments that preceded sleep, an unusual sensation began to overcome the Hylian as he drifted toward unconsciousness. For that peaceful moment, the empty shell of his body was unexpectedly full of something he couldn’t touch, he couldn’t materialize, but that he could feel. Suddenly, something was real to him, rather than a faded memory from times long, long gone. Something felt like it was beginning, rather than all the endings that had taken place while he slept.

And even now, as Link’s consciousness faded to rest beneath the stars, he swore he could remember that the Prince leaned down to kiss him that night before they drifted off to sleep, entangled in one another.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The newly appointed Sergeant of Fort Boko very quickly set to work training her even newer troops. These recruits from the Undercity were a benchmark of success in her mind, so long as she could whip them into shape in time for the Blood Moon. Betaal didn't plan on letting her people become fodder, and she would resort to ruthless training regiments to make sure it never came to pass.

The Prince, despite how he should have been overjoyed by sunny weather and the placid peace of the reservoir, found himself contemplating one of his most painful recollections: the death of his beloved sister. But even as his heart sank into a melancholy place, the warmth of gratitude drew him back to a safety and comfort.

Sidon owed the ability to calmly mourn his losses to his dear friend, the Hylian Champion. The two companions contentedly shared a more easy interaction, for once, followed by a genuinely playful afternoon together.

Chapter Notes

OKAY. I am, yet again, running horribly late with this chapter, however, I have a good excuse. This chapter is actually the longest to date, at 12K words! I normally wouldn't run myself late in this way, but I felt that the last two scenes of this chapter simply HAD TO be posted together so I got stuck finishing up. I hope you all enjoy the long update and your weekends!

Happy Canada day, to my fellow Canadians, by the way! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Maybe the Zora people couldn’t fit 300 soldiers into the fort they’d reclaimed, but the force they had managed was still an impressive one, to be sure. A feeling of pride and general excitement swelled just underneath the blue heart-shaped marking upon Betaal’s chest as she approached an assembly of recruits. They had spent the last month training and performing fort duties and were soon to be made into fully-fledged soldiers.

“Alright, listen carefully,” she spoke over the group, a satisfied smile coming over her features while the soldiers straightened under her intense, single-eyed gaze. “This fort garrison, if it becomes permanent, will be the first of its kind, as established by our people. That means that being stationed here is a special opportunity. This is history in-the-making and as such, I want every one of you fit to fight like you plan on making history.”

If anything, the soldiers had learned to keep a neutral front while they stood at attention, but Betaal knew better than to assume that the new recruits would all be able to maintain that same level of
disciplined calm when they saw their first battle. She slowly walked along their lines, looking each of them over as she did.

About half of the new recruits were clearly from the undercity, or in other words, they were lower class; it was obvious just looking at them. Undercity Zora were a head or two shorter than the uppercity classes, with smaller, spiny fins and duller scales. They also weren’t considered to be as capable as others for a handful of nonsense reasons but Betaal was happy enough to have been handed this group of ‘disposable’, ‘low quality’ recruits, because she was going to enjoy shattering all of the outdated, unfair, unfounded stereotypes. Quite frankly, she was entirely done with the general bullshit of her society and she was going to kick as much ass as necessary to produce real change.

Betaal wanted more than anything to prove the worth of Zoras who weren’t hailed as ‘Goddess blooded’. However, this wasn’t something she could personally accomplish, but a goal that every one of her troops had to fight toward with fearless tenacity. Her part was seeing to it that these soldiers were actually capable of doing so.

“There are four days remaining until the evening of the Blood Moon. On that evening, we will be required to fight the monsters that respawn, whether it’s a few or an army’s worth. Either way, we will be ready.’ The warrior’s roughened voice maintained a stern, yet determined tone as she spoke. “The Apostles and engineers have all finished their work and returned to Zora’s Domain. As a result, we now have greater space available for more complex training regiments, which we will complete over the next four days.”

“Today, you’ll be drilled on the offensive and defensive use of spears as your primary weapons. The veterans will work with you, then at the end of the day, I’ll be personally putting each of you to the test.” Betaal stopped before one of the uppercity recruits, peering up into the face of the taller Zora with a wicked grin. “Will that be a problem for you, guardsman?”

“No sir,” he spoke, his head raised, his eyes looking straight ahead.

“Good,” Betaal hissed, continuing her slow peruse along the lines. “Because if any of you don’t meet my expectations, then you can kiss your Zorana Guard stipend goodbye and believe me, that’s my way of being merciful.”

The silver shine of one young warrior’s eyes met Betaal’s when she began past, causing the Sergeant halt in her tracks, facing the slightly shorter woman. Her single, yellow eye gleamed with intimidation but this young soldier kept her gaze locked with her superior’s. “What is your name, guardsman?”

“Tetra, sir,” the young woman answered, the pitch of her voice as silvery as her scales.

“You look like an undercity Zora if I’ve ever seen one,” Betaal hissed, grinning as the shorter Zora’s clear fins puffed at her words. “What does your family do for a living?”

“They’re fishermen, sir,” the young soldier answered, her tone fierce and steady.

“Fishermen, of course,” Betaal repeated with a nod. “Then are you sure you can use a spear for anything other than fishing?”

“Yes sir!” Tetra raised her voice in determination as she answered, her gutsiness eliciting a small laugh from her superior. Much as Betaal enjoyed the recruit’s eagerness, the ones that came in making a show of their courage were usually the first to break under real pressure.
“Good,” Betaal uttered in reply, “I’ll look forward to seeing what you’re made of at the end of the day. Let’s just hope you have skills to match that attitude, because I don’t plan to send any fishermen onto the battlefield. A lifetime of providing food is more important to our people than ten minutes fighting monsters before an untimely death.”

The blue Zora folded her arms behind her back, straightening herself proudly while she sauntered along, finding that no other recruit dared to meet her eye after that. “In the days that follow, you’ll also be drilled in the use of a bow as a secondary weapon, as well as the various combat strategies you’ll need to face bokoblins, moblins, lizalfos and hinoxes. Again, if any of you don’t meet my standard, well, we always need miners and fishermen.”

Betaal handed control over the recruits back to one of the veteran guardsmen, leaving them to begin the drills she had described. Yet no sooner than she walked away, when one of the tower guards from outside the fort marched along at her heel. “Sir?” he spoke.

It seemed that work was never done, or rather, some work couldn’t get done because other work came along. She came to a quick stop, so that the guard following almost bumped right into her; he stumbled slightly and jolted back by a few tiny paces. “Yes, guardsman?”

The young warrior cleared his throat, straightening himself before he spoke. “Sir, a Hylian merchant approached the fort, claiming to have some kind of supplies she believed we would be interested in.”

“We’re well supplied here,” Betaal responded, inwardly questioning the audacity of Hylians who still seemed to believe that they were the most powerful force of trade in all the land. “What could some Hylian merchant think they have to offer?”

“I told her something similar, sir, and sent her away. However, she mentioned that she was staying at the camp on the other side of the wetlands for a few days, and asked me to mention her offer to my superior.”

“Hmm...” The Sergeant paused to think the suggestion over; her scouts had reported that a camp had sprung up recently. It had grown quickly as word spread that the way to Zora’s Domain was now clear and that the Zora presence in the Lanayru Wetlands also offered a sense of security. From what Betaal had seen in those reports, the camp consisted mostly of Hylian merchants, though there were other races mixed in, and most were armed as a simple necessity that came with traveling across dangerous country.

The way Betaal saw it, this camp could present a problem, or an opportunity. Either way, it was something she’d been meaning to look into.

“Take this.” The blue Zora handed off a sheet of paper that contained guard rotations and assigned duties. “Find three guardsmen who are currently available and tell them to meet me at the gate. I want that paper back, so don’t lose it.”

“Yes sir.”

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It should have been easier for the Zora Prince to look out over the East Reservoir, now that he knew Vah Ruta was no longer under the control of Calamity Ganon and the spirit of his sister was, apparently, set free. It should have gotten easier, and perhaps it was true that some tiny piece of the weight he’d been holding on his shoulders for more than a hundred years had at last been chiseled away, but it certainly wasn’t removed entirely.
His pupils narrowed to tiny slits in the harsh white of the afternoon sun. The light danced in tranquil wiggles on the gently wavering surface of the reservoir. The peaks of the surrounding mountains shined a deep, rich navy blue where the stone showed from underneath the foliage. In the colder months these same mountains would be lined with frost, yet as summer reached its highest temperature, all snow and ice from higher elevations had melted away and trickled down, maintaining the cooler temperature of the reservoir.

The surroundings were calm and placid; it was so quiet that the only audible sounds were the occasional, secretive splashes of fish quickly breaching the surface to grab some morsel before ducking back into the safety of the murky depths. It was so unlike that day, so many years ago. In fact, it was almost the complete opposite of that time, despite how the anniversary of the Calamity grew near.

It was so different now, yet it still wasn’t any easier. Back then, the deep, dark waters of the reservoir were turbulent and trembled when the Divine Beast began its rampage. The only light that shined across the choppy surface was the glow of the reddish orbs upon Vah Ruta’s back, and those tiny flickers of color splashed upon the crests of the surrounding waves in ominous warning.

The beast trumpeted in alarm, a low rumble shaking the surrounding mountains so that they cracked and crumbled as Vah Ruta’s mournful wails turned into pitchy screeches. It sounded like it was in real, true pain, but the young Prince of the time couldn’t spare empathy for the machine, when fear for his sister’s life had overcome him.

The sky was dark, then. Clouds of black smoke hung low from the devastation that had seemingly swallowed Hyrule in its entirety; it smelled of destruction and death, even in Zora’s Domain. The dust of cracked stone and structures reduced to rubble was swept up into the hot, summer air. The heat was intensified by fires and the smoke of burning fields, forests and homes, only faintly masking the scent charred flesh just underneath.

The ground shook with the echoes of Hyrule’s destruction and the marching monster armies that spread out in all directions, killing everyone and everything. Those horrid guardians did not fail to find their way into the winding canyons that would lead them to Zora’s Domain, yet King Dorephan led his forces against the threat while the civilians evacuated to the underwater safety of the Basilica.

At that time, no Zora warrior had seen battle like what the Calamity brought upon them. They were unprepared; however, maybe it was unfair to expect anyone be prepared for the kind of warfare required to best those rampaging guardians. The Zorana Guard suffered such immense casualties at the front, civilians were called upon to fight in desperation. Handfuls of untrained soldiers took up arms against the threat, led into hopeless battle by the tenacious veterans who’d clung to life against all odds, and the Goddess Order Knights, who fought in the name of the Basilica and the Goddess, Hylia.

While that war raged, one wayward Prince had escaped the watchful eye of Muzu, who’d been left in charge of his care. Prince Sidon, who stood no taller than a bokoblin, climbed the falls to approach the reservoir, determined to aid his fighting sibling in any way he could. He’d stood at the edge of the water, his pupils blown wide until they resembled great, black pearls, yet they saw nothing of the scene directly before himself.

Instead, he’d stretched his magic out much further than he ever had before, his mind connecting to Mipha’s as she fought. He’d watched, whispering naive encouragements into his sister’s mind while she faced a malevolent entity. The mucky goo of the beast’s mass hovered, towering over Mipha, lunging at her, the cold, vibrant glow of some kind of guardian weapon slicing at the air just short of her heels as she ducked and swam away, weaving around blocks of ice as she went.
The fight was not completely one-sided, and young Sidon’s heart pounded in rapid tandem with Mipha’s as she fearlessly fought the creature. Its screeches were horrid, deafening sounds when the Zora Champion landed a blow, be it by trident or bow. Sidon had felt the shake in his sister’s fingers when she stabbed at the beast, dodging hurriedly on her feet to avoid it when it recovered and chased her tailfins with attacks that only grew in tenacity. He had felt the heave of her gills as she paddled away, desperate for a single moment to catch her lost breath.

However, it didn’t take long for Muzu to locate the missing Prince, but by the time he did, it was already over. Sidon had been there when Mipha ducked low in the water, prepared to land a finishing blow on the wicked creature. He’d seen through her eyes as she looked up toward the water’s surface, focusing on the blue shine of the beast’s center eye while she took aim. He’d felt the icy water rushing over her scales when she kicked off the bottom of the pool, paddling with ferocious intensity and erupted from the water like a carnal beast in pursuit of prey, her trident drawn back to make the final strike.

Yet the final strike was not made by the Zora Champion. Instead, it was stolen in a flash of speed and cursed luck, and Sidon had been there, watching, when the Water Blight monster’s own glowing spear caught Mipha mid-strike, impaling her tiny body as she leapt through the air.

He’d been there; he’d felt the sharp pain of the blow as it pierced his sister’s frame. He’d felt the rush of fear when it spread through his helpless sibling. He’d known that, even as Mipha’s blood trickled free and left her cold, her only thoughts were of her family, her people, her friends and her beloved. He’d felt the shame and disappointment, along with the warmth of tears tracing the cold skin of Mipha’s cheeks.

He’d been there, tearful and desperate, pleading with Mipha not to give up, telling her that she would be okay when he knew otherwise. He’d been there and he could remember the sensation of Mipha’s trident slowly loosening from her grasp, until it dropped down to the water below. He’d felt it as though his sister’s hand were his own, and when she took her last breath, his consciousness began to fade alongside hers.

“Sidon..” Mipha’s voice was weak. “Go. You have to go.”

“No.” The Prince refused, unaware of the danger he was in, stubborn and frightened while his magic reached out, his spirit taking hold of his sister’s, latching onto her as though he could force her to stay, though he only succeeded in nearly being dragged down, himself, when Mipha’s mind drifted away in death.

The rest was a blur, yet he still had some vague recollection. His small body was limp in Muzu’s arms, his breath a shallow whisper and his eyes were faded and distant. The older Zora’s voice came like a quiet echo, the sound of his words blurring together.

“Prince Sidon!” the older man hissed desperately, his hand carefully cradling the boy’s head as he shook him. Muzu peered helplessly from the unresponsive Prince, to the rampaging Divine Beast where Lady Mipha was trapped. The man’s shoulders quaked and he chewed at his lip while fear and sorrow threatened to overcome him.

“He’s using his magic to connect with his sister,” came a gentle voice. The sound of it was soft and calm, with a rich, warm timbre that could soothe the soul, even during such a horrid disaster as the Calamity. Muzu glanced over his shoulder to see the Divine Oracle of the Basilica approaching from the direction of the falls.

“Your Grace,” Muzu uttered in shock that could have easily turned to panic. He held the young Prince only nearer as the ground shook beneath them, the air itself quivering from the explosions that
came from the canyons just outside of Zora’s Domain. “Your Grace, you should be with the others, in the safety of the Basilica.”

“As should you, Grand Magistratus,” the tall, elegant Zora spoke. The Divine Oracle held tightly to their shawl as a gust of warm, smoky air rushed past them. From underneath the sheer material, a red, eye-shaped marking shined upon the pale Zora’s crested brow when they kneeled and gazed down on the still form of the Prince. “Alas, I predicted need of my skills and so here I am. We mustn’t lose both heirs in one day.”

“Can you help him?” Muzu questioned, a waver to his voice at the suggestion of Sidon being taken, and the certainty of Mipha’s demise, as promised by the Divine Oracle’s words.

“Yes,” answered the head of the Basilica. Their long, delicate fingers reached out, smoothing across the Prince’s brow and feeling the magical energy that was outstretched from him, yet held him in a deathly stranglehold. “If I forcefully sever his connection to Lady Mipha, he will survive.”

The Divine Oracle’s powerful, magical strength unfurled, like wings or perhaps long, gracefully flowing fins. The process, itself, was invisible to all that paid witness, yet this blanket of magic enveloped the Prince, slowly working to cut him off from his connection and pushing his magic back into his tiny body.

“Manually manipulating his magic like this won’t harm him, will it?” Muzu asked, his mouth forming a worried grimace while he looked over young Sidon and the way the boy softly squirmed as his energies were taken hold of. The older Zora’s hands tightened on the small body in his grasp, so to keep the Prince secure while the Divine Oracle worked.

“I’ll show the utmost caution,” the Oracle responded, their voice a whisper through the intensity of their focus. “It will drain his strength and leave him stunned, but otherwise unharmed.”

“Nnn.. Mipha,” the Prince quietly uttered as his consciousness slowly returned fully to his own body. His small frame was weak and heavy in Muzu’s arms, but his tail flicked and he wriggled, reaching for where Vah Ruta sat, crying out in the distance. “Mipha, no! She was with me. If I don’t hold onto her, she’ll go away forever. No, no, Mipha!”

“I’m sorry,” Muzu uttered, hugging the distraught Prince to himself and restraining him. Sidon quickly began to quiet as he did, too weak to keep up such a fuss. Once the Prince stilled, a morose tremor came over the older Zora and he couldn’t keep himself from weeping at the words the boy spoke, at the knowledge that a young woman who was like a daughter to him had undoubtedly taken her final breath.

Muzu looked in the direction of Vah Ruta once more, shaking his head and biting his trembling lip. If any tenacity remained in him, underneath his sorrow, he would have cursed that terrible machine and the Hylians responsible for the awful tragedy. All he could do, however, was apologize for his own, personal inability to aid Lady Mipha. His wisdom had never counted for so little, and he’d never, in so many, many years, known such helpless sorrow.

The deafening reverberation of the explosions through the canyon only came nearer and the Divine Oracle placed their hand upon Muzu’s shoulder. “Most Just One, we must return to the Basilica, lest we shall all meet a wretched fate here, today.”

“Yes,” Muzu sighed, his voice gravelly and weak, and he stumbled awkwardly to his feet, the ground shaking beneath him. “You’re right, your Grace.”
“Sidon?” Link spoke the Prince’s name in order to get his attention, yet the Zora’s gaze remained fixated on the water that stretched far beyond where he stood. Confusion was the Hylian’s first reaction. His second was a questioning that sought to give answer to his confusion; was this how he looked, whenever his broken mind decided to bring his memories back in flashes that stunned him?

“Sidon,” Link spoke again, raising his voice ever so slightly. When Sidon’s attention still could not be gained, he reached out to press his fingertips to the rough scales just above the elaborate, silver cuffs that the Prince wore on his wrists. This simple touch was what, at last, brought the Prince out of his apparently very deep musings.

“Oh, Link!” A sharp breath was drawn in and a hand leapt to Sidon’s chest, his eyes widening when his golden gaze peered down upon the smaller man, looking at him as though he’d simply appeared there. “Ah! My apologies, I didn’t notice your approach.”

“Or my voice,” Link stated, confused as to how the Prince’s attention could drift so far that it truly seemed like the Hylian had snuck up on him intentionally. “I thought you had... some kind of sense that allows you to locate people? How did you not know I was here, if you have that?”

“You’re speaking of our electroreceptive sense.” A quiet note of surprised intrigue was audible in Sidon’s tone. He surely hadn’t explained to his friend that his people have additional senses not possessed by Hylians, yet somehow Link had discovered this information. “I’m afraid it’s all the same, if one simply isn’t paying attention. You’ll have to forgive me, I was.. Reflecting on some things.”

Sidon’s head turned, raising so that his gaze fell upon the place where Vah Ruta now sat, high above the reservoir, its laser aim slicing the horizon. “I’ve been thinking about Mipha a lot lately. More than usual, actually, and I feel like the thoughts I’ve been having are more free and honest than they ever were before. At first, I thought it was because of the Champion Festival but now I’m starting to believe that it was because of you.”

“I don’t know what I could have done, especially not to make things better,” the Hylian answered dully, his shoulders moving in a shrug. How could he have? All he’d done since remembering his fellow Champion was disrespect and spite her.

“It maybe wasn’t your goal or your intention, but nonetheless, you did help,” Sidon answered, still staring up at the Divine Beast in idle wonder. Link watched, feeling that it was odd to see the Prince so calm and still.

“Can you explain?” Link’s tone was the usual quiet as he, too, stared in Vah Ruta’s direction, wishing he could connect with the Prince’s line of thought. Personally, it was difficult for him to believe a show of gratitude was true, when the one expressing it appeared so melancholy. It was even more difficult to believe that his presence in Sidon’s life had any positive effects. “It just.. It would be nice to know about something I did that was actually right.”

“Why ever would you say such a thing? You’ve done so much to aid my people and undoubtably other people beyond here.” The Zora at last turned his gaze from where it had been set, his golden eyes widened in disbelief. Still, a small smile found its way to his face, to accompany the soft look of pity he was giving his tiny companion. “Do you have some sort of problem with allowing yourself to take credit for things?”

“Only positive things,” the Hylian remarked, returning the smile offered to him and allowing his words to be painted as humorous. All the ‘good’ he did in this world typically involved slaughter, and similarly monstrous behavior. He wouldn’t have thought those things could be so morally subjective, which led him back to his original subject- he couldn’t accept positive feedback.
“I’m just fishing for compliments,” Link uttered after a moment of silence. He was partly joking this time, as he often deflected Sidon’s praise. For some reason, though, today he actually wanted to hear it. “Come on. You’re usually so good at that.”

The Prince chuckled, his tail idly flicking at his friend’s light-hearted banter. His magic reached out, his guard lowering ever so slightly while he gingerly felt the Hylian’s emotional state. It was like stretching out one’s hand in the darkness, not knowing what to expect and finding a previously roughened surface now smooth and cool underneath his fingertips. “If all the times I’ve told you that you’re amazing haven’t filtered through yet, then I have serious doubts that they ever will,” he spoke in jest, his voice a lively sound, though it quickly softened as he continued. “If only ‘amazing’ were enough to truly explain how much you’ve done for me. No, there are no simple words that can properly describe how much your aid and presence has meant to me.”

“Now I’m just even more curious,” the smaller man spoke in intrigue, his behavior relaxed and friendly, maybe even oddly so.

“Well, your handling of Vah Ruta, alone, meant so much me, personally,” Sidon uttered, turning once more to look to where the Divine Beast sat, still and placid. But was it selfish for him to take personal comfort in something that was never about him? “Yes, you helped us avoid a disaster that could have easily destroyed our entire way of life and that’s no small feat, but..”

A pause stretched into a silence as Sidon considered his words, so many, many words, and they all fell short of expressing what he felt. How could he unveil his weaknesses before someone whose strength and resolve he admired so deeply? How could he admit that he’d felt like a helpless child for so long, hiding himself and parroting uplifting nonsense to cope with something that had wounded his heart and soul and left him incomplete? He couldn’t. And especially when his own emotional wounds were tiny scrapes compared to the hurt of others. At last, the Zora sighed, “I’m sorry, my friend. I’ve always had difficulty speaking of these things.”

“About that discussion we had about Mipha,” the Prince attempted again to string together something sensible. He wanted Link to know how he’d helped him, how he’d healed him. “It truly had been easier to just say that my sister was a hero, that she did what was right, that she fought and died gladly.. And you were right to point out the flaw in my way of thinking.”

“No. I was just angry and bitter over Mipha, remember?” The smile that came to Link’s face was present if only to belie his confusion with what he was hearing and he shook his head in denial. Every word he’d uttered that night had left Sidon cringing and hurt, he remembered that much. “I was just lashing out.”

“Yes, but you were also right,” Sidon nodded, his dark lids lowered slightly, his countenance thoughtful and intense. “It took somebody with fresh pain to tear down all the defenses I’d spent a hundred years putting up to hide my suffering, rather than just facing it or allowing others to see it. Now that those defenses are gone, I’ve been allowing myself to remember my sister as the person she was, rather than the person we idealize her to be when we try to make her death something easier to come to terms with.”

“What do you remember about her?” Link asked, the sound of his voice quiet and solemn, but not as hollow as it had been in the past. He supposed now that he was done hating Mipha and blaming her for not being here, it didn’t hurt to try and recall more about her. “I don’t remember much, but.. I’d like to.”

“Oh!” the Zora exclaimed, one fist pounding into his opposing palm. “I’ve been preparing a speech about Mipha for the Champion Festival, but it’s not quite ready.. However, if you wouldn’t mind waiting for that, I’d much prefer if you heard what I have to say, once I have my thoughts and
feelings in proper order.”

“It really is hard for you to talk about her, isn’t it?” Link questioned, looking up at the Prince, the skin between his brows softly furrowed. It was difficult to imagine what it must have felt like to love somebody as much as Sidon loved his sister, and then to lose that person. Link wouldn’t bother comparing his loss to Sidon’s own any longer.

“Yes, it truly is very difficult, I’m afraid,” Sidon agreed, though he kept his emotions even and controlled with ease. “I learned many, many years ago that expressing my feelings, when they were real and genuine, just wasn’t acceptable. As the only heir, for me to be overwhelmed by anger or sadness, it just couldn’t be tolerated. Even as a child, I couldn’t allow myself to be overcome. I had to be strong for reasons I couldn’t comprehend.” The Prince let out a sigh, which seemed to carry with it the echo of a suffocating weight that rested on his chest. “I suppose it was for the best that I could be such a withheld child.”

“Why?” Link hissed, “What the hell is wrong with you being a normal person, with feelings?”

“Well, in our culture, there’s something of a stigma regarding kings who are weak,” the Zora’s voice was soft and resigned while he explained. He shook his head, his forefins swaying from side to side as his golden eyes were downcast. “All it takes is one mishap for you to forever be known as ‘the weak king’. Even my father, despite how he fought personally during the Calamity, and despite how he put himself ahead of his soldiers and ultimately triumphed against impossible odds- even he could have easily been regarded as weak, if his show of mourning had been too emotional. Can you imagine? Fighting a war, slaying guardians with your bare hands, then coming home and not being allowed to weep for your own daughter? It’s preposterous.”

“So you can feel everything, yet you’re also not allowed to feel.. anything,” the Hylian commented, shaking his head and peering blankly out across the water. “Feeling nothing doesn’t make you strong. I would know. Do you want me to tell your people that?”

A laugh bubbled from the Prince at his companion’s offer, the utter hopelessness of such a suggestion striking him as amusing. “Telling them anything is impossible, my friend. I’ll spare you the frustration. But, maybe now you’ll understand, this is likely the cause behind the ‘fake, pretentious’ way I behave. Trying to present myself in a way that is acceptable is a habit now..” Sidon’s chin fell into the crook between his thumb and forefinger, his other arm crossing over his chest. “I’m still unsure if I ever quite got the hang of it, however.”

“Ugg, I’m sorry,” Link’s face fell into his hands as he mumbled his words of apology. “I’m sorry for saying those things.”

“It’s fine,” Sidon said when he turned his head to regard his friend again, his sharp teeth shining as he beamed down at the Hylian with a warm, genuine smile. “Silly as it may be, when you tell me all the things you hate about me, at least I know you’re being honest. Every comment I’ve ever received about my behavior has been for the purpose of making sure I meet expectations, even if it means my personality is more act than action. But you, your only grievance is that I’m not being myself..” Sidon trailed off for a moment, his gaze faltering though his smile did not. “It’s been a long time since someone asked me to be truer to myself. I suppose that’s a lesson you managed to teach us both.. In any case, you are perhaps the most honest person I know, and I enjoy that about you.”

“I’m not sure if I’m honest so much as I just don’t care enough to be pleasant or civil for show, like everybody else,” Link responded with a snide laugh.

Narrowing his eyes, Sidon turned a dubious expression to his friend, a slight grin upon his lips. “You really can’t take credit for anything positive, can you?”
“Told you,” the Hylian said, laughing softly as he did and combing his fingers through the blonde hair that draped over his forehead. He turned his face upward, to peer into the clear, cloudless blue of the sky, where the sun outstretched its golden rays, as merciless as any guardian. Link squinted, quickly lowering his head but brushed his long hair back from his face again when it began to stick in the sweat on his brow.

“Sidon,” Link said after a hesitant moment, his courage needing time to build, “I’ve been kind of ‘thinking’ about things, too, and there was something I wanted to tell you..”

“Hm?” the Zora said curiously, watching as Link began to untie his hair. “Yes, go ahead.”

The shorter man’s fingers were brought to the back of his neck once his long, blonde locks hung free, and he rubbed nervously at his skin before he pulled the length of his hair over one shoulder. He let out a deep sigh, as though to fight off a nervous clenching in his chest, then he began to speak, his words spilling across his tongue like they simply had to be forced over his lips in order to be spoken at all. “When we talked about the night that we were together, you made it clear that what I did was wrong and that I hurt you.. But I just made it about myself and my feelings, rather than owning up to what I did wrong. So, I’m sorry for that, and for what I did.”

“Oh,” Sidon quietly uttered, his slitted pupils flicking back and forth while he looked over the Hylian, finding Link’s own gaze averted and his shoulders slumped. “My friend, I am.. Glad to hear that, of course, and I had already long forgiven the awkward ending to that experience. But, I was under the impression that you were still upset and that you felt your own feelings weren’t taken properly into account?”

“Maybe so..” Link spoke softly, his head raising ever so slightly, his eyes glancing to his side so that he could easily see the lovely shades of color to his companion’s shining scales, but he couldn’t look him in the face. Was he still angry? Yes, he was, but not in a way he could properly explain. Furthermore, he needed to expel the guilt clouding his judgement before he could hope to logically think things through. All of his guilt meant nothing if he did nothing to resolve it, anyway.

The Hylian gestured with one hand to dismiss the Zora’s concerns, at least for now, then he elaborated. “Don’t worry about it. If I manage to find a coherent way to explain my own feelings, I will. For now, my apology needs to stand alone, so you will know that I’m sincere.”

“I believe you, Link. Thank you, for that.” Sidon’s voice was a soft, gentle purr, as rich and smooth as honey. Link felt a tremor pass through him when that simple sound enveloped him, the Prince’s words offering relief and warmth. It felt nice, to say the least, and Link found himself lost in his own silence while he decided whether he should allow himself to take pleasure in his dear friend’s limitless forgiveness or not. Was this another one of those times when he was using Sidon’s comforting kindness to soothe his dependency? Maybe. Maybe not.

“So.. These errands that kept you away,” the Prince began again, his voice returning to a more casual tone with ease. Link edged himself nearer to the Zora by his side, his ears softly twitching upward at Sidon’s tone; it was calm and friendly, but not in the usual exaggerated way. “..can you tell me about them? I want to hear about the places you’ve traveled and the things you’ve seen. I want to hear of your adventures.”

“It wasn’t all that adventurous, at first,” Link explained, his own mood finding a quiet equilibrium with greater ease than he’d come to expect. “I basically just did chores in Hateno Village. After that, though, I rode into the Eldin Region.”

“The volcanic region?” Sidon questioned, his golden eyes wide with surprise and interest as he looked down at Link.
“Yes,” the shorter man nodded.

“No, Hylian skin very susceptible to high temperature?” the Zora asked, incredibly impressed, though he never once doubted his friend’s resilience. Still, curiosity got the best of him. “How ever did you manage?”

“At first, with potions, kind of like the one you gave me,” Link explained. “Once I made it into Goron City, though, I bought a special suit which protected me from the high temperatures.”

“What is Goron City like?” Smiling, Sidon fired out his questions with a kind of rapid intensity only rivaled by shock arrows. Being highly educated about the world, yet never having a chance to truly see it, really poked and prodded at one’s thirst for experience. He let out a nervous laugh as he realized how desperately inquisitive he was being, speaking further to explain himself. “Of course I’ve never been to the Eldin Region, so I’m quite curious.”

“It’s hot and dusty,” the Hylian’s voice came out sounding no different than a groan of frustration. He laughed about it, even so, recounting his suffering happily enough, since Sidon seemed interested. “I can’t even attempt to be polite about it. I was covered in sweat the entire time. Also, the constant mining operations does nothing for air quality. It’s just full of dust and dirt, on top of smoke and ash. It’s awful. They have hot springs, but even those aren’t very enjoyable because the air is just so hot, it just feels like you might as well be bathing in sweat. There is no relief anywhere. I won’t even bother telling you about the massage I had. I would guess that I needed healing after it, but I don’t even know because I just.. Passed out.”

“It sounds like a dreadful experience,” Sidon spoke, horrified yet utterly intrigued. “Why ever did you stay so long or at all?”

“They were having trouble with a Divine Beast as well,” Link said, shrugging as if to say, ‘well of course they were.’ “I mean, I had a feeling they were having trouble before I even headed up there, because you could see the machine crawling around anywhere within a decent view of Death Mountain. You could feel the tremors it was causing, even on the outskirts of Eldin.”

“Oh, I see.” Sidon nodded, a degree of his usual vibrance coming over him again, though now it was because he was truly quite interested. He was as invested in hearing about his friend’s adventures as he was curious about the world that existed beyond his own personal experience. “What sorts of problems was the Divine Beast causing them?”

“Random eruptions and rock slides, mostly. It got in the way of their daily lives, too, I suppose, but they actually seemed to be tolerating it easily enough.” Link somewhat laughed, now that he was thinking about it. “No offense to you, but the Gorons handled it much better, by comparison.”

“Oh, is that so?” Sidon crossed his arms over his chest, straightening while his tone took on a certain sound of offense. It was momentary and entirely playful, as both himself and the Hylian laughed it off, then he continued with his endless round of questions. “And what did you do to placate their Divine Best? I’m assuming you did, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” the Hylian scoffed. Hadn’t anyone informed this silly Prince that he was the only one capable of doing anything? “I had to hike up Death Mountain to reach it, then I leapt down into the mouth of the volcano and glided to where the Divine Beast waited. I entered it and..” He paused, reflecting on the experience in his momentary silence. Even with his newly acquired armor, his skin had begun to blister when he drifted deeper into the volcano. More than half of the downward sail had been done blindly, as the heat was too intense for him to open his eyes. His flesh was a cracked, blotchy crimson by the time he scurried inside Vah Rudania and he sat for an indeterminate amount of time, shivering from the sheer intensity of the pain that flared through every inch of him. “Uhh..
Well, similar to Vah Ruta, their divine beast had been overcome by some kind of malice creature, which was also responsible for killing the Goron Champion.”

“I understand..” the Prince spoke, his voice a softer, more somber sound as the Goron Champion’s death was mentioned. Sidon couldn’t help the way his mind drifted back to thoughts of Mipha, flashes of her horrific demise leaping, uncontrolled, to the forefront of his mind. He quickly pushed those thoughts away, leaving them somewhere more comfortably vague, reflecting instead on a certain sympathy that came forward immediately after. It was saddening to think that another group of people had suffered as his own had and he truly wished it hadn’t been so. “Curious. I wonder if the Champions of each race met a similar end..”

“I’m starting to suspect that.” That truth was clear enough in the simple fact that, to Link’s knowledge, he was the only Champion apparently left. He was yet to discern what happened with the other two, but even if they had survived the Calamity, the years would have claimed them by now, surely. Another burning question came to him, though, and he shot the Prince a curious expression as he posed it. “Don’t you know? Don’t you communicate with the other leaders?”

The Zora blinked, going quiet for a hesitant moment in embarrassment. He sighed, giving his head a disappointed shake while he forced himself to speak the answer, and it came out sounding just like a confession. “You would be surprised how secretive we can all be about these things. We may all be allied nations, but more often than not, we keep our troubles concealed, so to avoid appearing weak. We can be particularly secretive about our struggles.” Maybe Sidon couldn’t speak for the Gorons, Gerudo, Rito or even the fallen Kingdom of Hyrule, but he knew his own people to be incredibly stubborn and reserved. They were surely a strong, capable people and he was proud of them, but they also put their own strength and self-reliance on a pedestal until it just felt inordinate and boastful. “You recall how much fuss my people put up, just at the thought of asking a Hylian for aid? It was their dislike of Hylians as much as their wounded egos.”

“Hmm..” Link nodded idly, disappointed but not surprised at all. He would say that, while Goron pride presented a bit differently, it was just as insurmountable. More than half of the time, Link had to go out of his way to help the Goron people, simply because they didn’t believe he could and actively attempted to sway him from doing so. What did all this pride amount to, if their entire race died out for it?

But Link supposed that it was the fall of his own people that had led to this bizarre isolationism. The Kingdom of Hyrule had probably maintained trade, communication and cooperation between the other nations and itself, essentially amounting to a great and powerful babysitter. Yet now Link held the responsibility of preventing the extinction of his helpless people in his hands.

“I’m already tired at just the assumption that there are two more divine Beasts out there, rampaging and waiting for my divine intervention,” the Hylian groaned. Vah Rudania had been no easier for him to deal with and he didn’t suffer any less. It was more of a new flavor of suffering, just to keep things different.

“Why, I wonder?” Sidon said, gazing down at his Hylian friend with sympathy. In his mind, Link was a Champion and it was that title that placed this burden on his shoulders. He assumed that his friend was prepared to face these challenges and had no reservations about it, given that his perception was that Link became the Hylian Champion willingly. However, he recognized that this job was not one to be taken lightly, if Mipha’s death in the line of duty spoke of the dangers involved. Not only that, but with the others gone, Link was alone.

Facing such adversity with only oneself to rely on, all while knowing that the world could descend into chaos if one were to fail.. That seemed too much for any person to bear, regardless of how
willing they were to try. It wasn’t right. That was precisely why a desire to further assist Link burned and itched under Sidon’s scales in a way he couldn’t ignore.

“Our people could not tame Vah Ruta, because of our weakness to electricity, true,” the Zora uttered in frustration that was bitter yet left his spirit exhausted and his tone falling flat. “..but do you really think that no other race has been capable of solving these problems on their own?”

“Probably not,” Link responded, the certainty and bleakness that made his voice a hollow sound only serving to bore into Sidon’s conscience that much further.

“We did try, Link,” the Zora uttered, mournful and apologetic. “We spent years attempting to enter Vah Ruta and when it began causing an endless rainfall, we attempted to solve that problem as well. In resolving to gain the aid of a Hylian, we would have taken anyone strong and willing enough. We- I had no idea that I would be adding to your already sizable burden.”

“I know. It’s okay, Sidon.” There was not an ounce of animosity nor blame in the Hylian’s tone as he spoke. If anything, there was reassurance. He raised his head to peer upward at the Prince, finding that Sidon’s face was flushed enough that he was beginning to look like a swift violet from the heat. With a hesitant motion, Link reached out to the Zora, his fingertips pressing against Sidon’s hand for a quick moment. “It’s not the fault of you or your people... It just has to be me.”

“Who decided that?” the Zora spoke with immediate frustration, though now it was not so calm and serene, but quietly seething, bubbling up like a cookpot getting ready to boil. Sidon’s sharp fangs flashed as he spoke, his lip curling while he spat his question, the words coming out like a demand that would not be denied an answer. “Who determined it?”

“I don’t know..” Link shrugged, though he’d asked that same question hundreds of times. A better question was, what did he get out of it? Peace? Security? A warm fuzzy feeling? To be hailed as a hero? What motivation was meant to be great enough to convince him to save a world that wouldn’t even try to save itself..? He wondered, would a man who was also born into a responsibility he had no choice about judge him for wanting to turn his back?

In the end, Link said nothing of his true feelings, attempting to answer the question presented, instead. “The Goddess, I suppose. Fate, destiny... bad luck,” he scoffed, a bitter, broken laugh coming out under his breath.

Today was a beautiful day, however, and Link had spent enough time brooding over these exact stupid, pointless questions. He didn’t want to let it spoil his mood, and as he watched his Zora friend, seeing the sour expression that came over Sidon’s pretty face, the Hylian became immediately certain that he didn’t want it to ruin his mood, either.

“I got a magical shield from the Goron Champion after I released his spirit, though,” Link spoke up, his mouth attempting to form a smile. At the light tone of Link’s voice, Sidon turned his golden eyes back in his friend’s direction, a twinkle of curiosity shining on the glassy surface.

The Prince’s face just wasn’t right without a smile to light his features, and Link would be damned if he let his Zora friend’s smiles vanish over him and his problems. “Well, do you want to see it?”

“Uhh..” The Zora hesitated, blinking in uncertainty, unable to figure out how it was that Link could just.. Move past the previous topic? Was he trying to prove how brave he was? As if Sidon didn’t already know and thoroughly believe that to be true. “Sure,” he weakly agreed.

“Alright, just let me try to summon it,” the Hylian spoke, stepping aside a bit and shifting himself into a fighting stance. He bent his knees, his feet sliding apart with his dominant foot placed slightly
forward. Sidon watched, waiting for something to happen, and quietly judged the Hylian’s form; it was actually all wrong but he would never say so. If it worked for Link, the Prince wouldn’t criticize.

“Hmm.. Just a moment..” Link uttered, confused frustration seeming to give way to embarrassment as seconds quickly became minutes and nothing happened at all. “Yeah, I’m just.. I haven’t used it very much, so I’m not used to it.”

“Is it..” Sidon grinned at his companion’s difficulties, though he hurriedly cleared his throat and chased the smile from his face, lest he’d risk insulting or embarrassing the Hylian. “Is it similar to how Mipha ‘left’ her healing abilities to you?”

“Yeah, a bit,” Link warily answered, his words weak and uncertain, because he knew these two abilities were nothing alike but really couldn’t say so. Daruk’s ability had been left to Link in the truest sense, for the Hylian to use and control as he pleased, whereas Mipha’s spirit actively haunted Link, appearing at any point that he required healing. It was an unusual difference, but Link hadn’t really questioned it. He merely assumed that it was because Mipha had been his lover that she wouldn’t leave. She wanted to stand by her promise to protect him, and even death couldn’t stand in her way. “Mipha’s power is a bit more.. automatic. Hold on, I promise I’m trying. Just let me try to think about.. rock hard defenses or whatever a Goron would think about.”

Sidon chuckled, watching while the Hylian took a deep breath and closed his eyes, really intensely focusing on his goal of thinking like a Goron. “Yes, be the Goron,” Sidon uttered, laughing as he did.

“Mining. Making money. Being tough more than 100 percent of the time,” Link recited every stereotypical Goron thing that popped into his mind, thinking that this would actually be incredibly offensive if Gorons didn’t actively make it a point to live up to every stereotype about them. “Listening to the Chief. Hmm, eating delicious gourmet rocks.”

The Prince’s laughter only grew from a tiny titter, to a chuckle that he smothered beneath his fingers, to a full blown laugh that had him tipping his head back, his sharp teeth shining in the sun while his tail flapped in amusement.

“Oh, oh...” As the Hylian watched his Zora friend’s amusement grow, his concentration was surprisingly unbroken by the laughter and instead, he was sure he felt something warm tingling in his veins, an unfamiliar energy vibrating up his spine until the skeleton of the Goron shield began to come together around him.

Sidon watched in fascination that turned utterly impressed when a glassy light shrouded the Champion. Link’s brilliant, blue gaze was lifted to look up at Sidon from behind the shining, magical barrier, the light reflecting on his eyes so they gleamed like Zora sapphires. He looked so proud of himself and Sidon gave an equally proud smile, nodding his head to acknowledge his friend’s inherent greatness.

“There it is! I’m doing it. Aha!” Link cried out in triumph as the delicate-looking fractals danced around him.

“Yes, you are doing it, and it’s rather amazing, in fact,” the Zora praised, genuinely awestruck as he stepped nearer, his golden eyes moving along the beautiful lines of the magical shield. Carefully, he reached out to touch it, the sharp tips of his fingerscales tracing the delicate details. “It’s like a shimmering gem, though that sounds right, considering it’s from a Goron. It’s beautiful, Link.”

“It’s also very useful,” the Hylian uttered slyly, backing up from where Sidon stood though the Zora
had this clueless look on his face, as though to say, ‘of course it is. What’s your point?’

Link’s eyes moved across the Zora, looking over his beautiful form; his graceful curves, the strength of his frame. He fought himself for a single second, forcing thoughts of their intimacy to the back of his mind, while wondering if Sidon also thought about it at times, or at least the good parts. Right now, Sidon’s pale scales were tinted with violet flush, his body shining and wet from the heat.

He looked like he needed to cool off and Link planned to assist.

Once he’d backed away enough to get a good running start, Link bolted directly toward the Zora, the magical shield still shining and fully active as he did. He watched, seeing Sidon’s expression turn from confusion to surprise, his eyes widening and his hands raising in apprehension just before Link leapt, striking the Prince hard enough for the shield to give a forceful, defensive blast, which sent even a Zora of Sidon’s size sailing backward and toppling into the water of the reservoir.

The Zora sank beneath the water with an oddly tiny splash, his scales slicing through the depths like a sharpened blade through something soft and tender, so that he was swallowed up and disappeared from sight.

Link stood laughing at his accomplishment, impressed that he had it in himself to shove somebody like Sidon around, let alone send him flying. The giggles quieted into wariness, however, when the Zora did not resurface. The reservoir was suddenly disturbingly still and silent and the Hylian couldn’t manage to convince himself that Sidon’s pride was injured enough that he simply swam away to pout.

Slowly, Link approached the edge of the reservoir, not quite coming near enough for the toe of his boots to overhang. Instead, he stopped an arm’s length from the drop off, cautiously edging his upper body forward while he looked down into the murky depths, trying to lay eyes on a giant, red shadow lurking just beneath.

His vision flicked here and there, scanning over the deep, dark blue of the pool, seeing nothing to indicate a massive Zora lingered anywhere nearby. There was nothing but the quiet wiggles of sunlight and the soft sound of the breeze as it whisked along the water’s surface.

At last, the silence was sharply broken when the Zora Prince burst with a great, misty spray from whatever depths had managed to conceal him, and he landed with a graceful patter directly before the Hylian, scooping him up so quickly, there wasn’t even time for him to consider resistance.

With an effortless heave, Sidon returned the favor of tossing his friend into the sharp chill of the reservoir, laughing in vengeful satisfaction when Link surfaced moments later. The Hylian took a gulp of air, his hair so wet and flat that his eyes looked huge and pitiful, and bluer than the reservoir, itself. “Cold, cold!” Link yelped as he paddled back to the ledge, clawing his way up like a hylian shepherd resisting at bath time.

The Prince chuckled in charmed amusement when Link plopped himself onto the warmth of the stone. “The water doesn’t warm up here until autumn. It takes all summer for the sun to have an effect.”

“Oh yeah,” the Hylian said, shivering and shucking his soggy boots from his feet. “I couldn’t tell.”

“It’s best to consider the consequences before getting yourself into such situations,” the Prince mocked as he came to sit by Link’s side.

“Why would I do that, when reckless abandon is my only charming quality?” Link asked, smiling at
the Zora by his side while he stripped out of his tunic, exposing the freckled skin of his shoulders to further sunlight, inviting additional speckling.

Sidon, however, found himself mapping the web of scars that marred his Hylian companion’s body in idle concern. He really was so very careless, but he was still here, so perhaps it didn’t matter so much.

“Yeah, I know,” Link uttered knowingly, watching the Zora’s gaze wander before it quickly shot back to the Hylian’s face in embarrassment. “I’m hideous.”

“Hm,” the larger man tittered, his hand unconsciously moving to trace the puckered, scaleless skin along his forefin. “The one who trained me in combat once told me that a scar is something to be proud of. It means one faced an enemy powerful enough to injure you, yet your life is proof that you prevailed, even so.”

“I like that,” the Hylian spoke in quiet appreciation of such an idea, nodding his head. In the next moment, he shoved himself back into water of the reservoir, momentarily dipping beneath the surface. He kicked his bared feet, his arms moving in a wide arc as he paddled back to the top and began toward the center of the vast pool that felt to be impossibly distant.

Watching just long enough to ascertain that Link didn’t appear to be coming back, Sidon, too, dove into the reservoir, his webbed feet gently flicking and carrying him with ease to where the Hylian was doing a very noisy, splashy series of movements that apparently counted as swimming.

Link looked to his side when the Zora swam up to him, thinking that, since the subject had come up, he was free to question Sidon further. “So, that scar on your head?”

“Oh,” the Prince immediately responded with a groan that bubbled as he dipped beneath the surface, seemingly content to follow after Link, a quiet, wobbling blob just close enough to be seen.

“I can’t believe it,” Link said with a laugh, “I found something the fancy fish is insecure about.”

“Did you just call me a fish?” Sidon spoke when he bobbed back to the surface. “I’ll have you know, that’s a common misconception. We’re amphibians, actually.”

“Okay,” the Hylian agreed, splashing in Sidon’s direction and scoffing when the Zora dodged the splash by ducking under the water, as if that made any real difference. “Then I’ll call you a fancy frog, since you’re so picky. Frog Prince.”

“Keep it up,” the Zora warned as he surfaced again. “I’m not opposed to unloading all of the horrid names my people came up with to call Hylians over the last hundred years.”

“So much for ‘you’re amazing!’” Link said, his sentences punctuated by deep, careful breaths as he made a futile attempt to swim harder and pull ahead of the Zora.

“A giant Octorock gave me the scar.” A soft, relenting tone was offered, alongside the admission; a peace offering to resolve the teasing. “It struck me with a stone much larger than that magical shield of yours and my head took the brunt of the blow. I was knocked unconscious, then the beast sucked me in and swallowed me like I was a hylian bass.”

“I think I read about this somewhere,” the Hylian reflected aloud while he kicked and paddled. “That’s right, this story is on one of those giant, stone engravings.”

“Yes, yes,” Sidon dipped lower in his humiliation, his tail flicking and slapping at the water before he resurfaced to speak again. “Everybody knows about it and the story is wildly overblown. I was
probably asleep in that thing’s belly for ten minutes before the burn of saltwater in my gills brought me out of it. When I did come around, I was concussed and reeling, and I’d lost my weapon in the process. Luckily, the beast’s gut was both a graveyard and an armory. I managed to put my hands on something sharp and I stabbed my way to freedom. I kept every single weapon I reclaimed as trophies, despite how gracelessly that battle was won.”

“So you make a habit of being swallowed by monsters?” Link asked, not intending to mock, at first, until he realized that it was a perfect opportunity for mockery. “I hope that’s not some kind of weird fetish.”

An exasperated sigh came from the Zora and Link could hear the eyeroll in the attitude behind his puff of breath. “What are you trying to do?” Sidon asked, curious as to his companion’s motivations for swimming very, very, very slowly across the reservoir.

“I’m swimming to the other side,” the Hylian said simply, though as he looked into the distance, it almost appeared that his goal had gotten further away.

“At this rate?” Sidon chuckled, a grin splaying wide across his features. “Maybe you’ll make it by nightfall.”

“No, that’s wrong,” Link hissed, utterly done with this Prince’s sass. He supposed they’d just gotten too casual, because Sidon had finally revealed himself for the petty, spoiled brat that he really was underneath all that mannerliness and charm. “You’re supposed to say that you believe in me and you have no doubt that I’ll succeed.”

“You said you didn’t like my ‘fake enthusiasm’,” the Zora quipped, though Link gave a breathless laugh in response.

“I lied. I love it. You are the perfect stereotypical prince charming and I love it,” Link announced, somehow managing to imitate Sidon’s own energetic, positive tone. Maybe it was because he’d been practicing it on his horse.

“Well, you are certainly a treat, my friend,” the Prince laughed, rolling onto his back and stretching his arms above his head.

Yet while Sidon was getting incredibly relaxed, Link could feel himself tiring and he gave a final huff before he dropped beneath the surface, slowly sinking down into the hungry depths, his eyes peering up at the halo of bubbles that escaped him and drifted upward.

He knew he was in no danger so the Hylian calmly allowed himself to fall, his body small and weightless as he descended. He could still see the Zora Prince bobbing at the surface, the water and light rippling around him, his great shadow dancing below him while it stretched downward. It didn’t take long for him to arch into a dive, his legs coming tightly together as his entire body rolled softly into each kick and he quickly closed the space between himself and his friend.

Sidon’s arm outstretched, his open hand being offered to the exhausted Hylian, just in the case that he needed assistance and wasn’t just playing around. Link accepted the offer without hesitation and the Zora’s fingers closed gently around his own, before he carried him back to the surface.

When the two emerged, Link shook the water from his face and brushed it from his closed eyes, only to open them and find Sidon’s golden gaze watching him. The mysterious warmth of the Zora’s expression left Link in confused questioning and he reached out as if he could wipe that look away, though when his palm touched the Prince’s cheek and his thumb pressed against the corner of Sidon’s mouth, he only succeeded in widening the smile on his face.
“What is that look about?” Link asked, when he finally realized he couldn’t get rid of it.

“It’s odd, being eye to eye with you,” Sidon spoke, his voice lowered to a softer tone since his Hylian companion was so near. “I don’t usually get to look you in the face like this.”

Link’s long hair was smoothed to his head, blonde tendrils splayed across his forehead and cheeks so that only his pointed ears poked out. The tips were touched pink from the sun, as were his cheeks, and the Prince laughed softly, sure that his friend needed to get out of the sun some time soon. For now, however, he would just enjoy this moment, and all the casual simplicity of it. It felt.. like something very rare and worth treasuring.

“Do you need help?” Sidon offered, though Link shook his head, the water rushing across his muscular shoulders as he began paddling again, intent on meeting his goal without assistance. “Will it really help if I compliment you?”

“I’m sure it will, yeah,” the Hylian spoke, glancing back while the Zora turned around in the water and swam up just behind his kicking feet.

“Well,” the Zora said, “I think you’re incredible and you can, in fact, do anything you set your mind to.” As he spoke, he took hold of Link’s feet and began paddling harder, increasing their pace until water splished and sprayed around the Hylian’s face, leaving Link to fight off a laugh at the Prince’s impatience.

“You are so insincere,” Link accused, squirming free from Sidon’s grasp and gulping in a deep breath before he dove beneath the surface, swimming shallowly, freely, just watching the ripples of light while they danced across his skin. The Zora, meanwhile, dashed ahead with easy flicks of his webbed feet, his fins slicing through the water and flaring with showy vibrance.

Watching Sidon swim was like witnessing any other beautiful event that occurred in nature; sunsets, flocks of birds flying with perfect synchronization, heavy rain that showered the land while the sun still shined through and the rainbows that followed. The way he moved was fluid and graceful with natural ease, yet he was also impossibly quick as he darted here and there. He spun and twirled while he circled the Hylian again and again, completely casual and playful, effortless regardless of his pure magnificence. When he sped away, he did so without care for the energy expended, adapted so perfectly that he could simply play with his own speediness.

The Zora flitted past the Hylian, swimming near him, bumping him gently along, his fins softly brushing against Link’s skin, a faint glimmer in the Prince’s eye when he glanced back to catch the Hylian’s gaze. Was he actually just showing off? Was this his way of saying, ‘Look at me. Look at what I can do. Look at how graceful and powerful I am.’

Link kicked back to the surface, taking a deep breath and shaking droplets from his face and hair. Sidon, however, did not surface at his friend’s side, instead diving further and powering himself to the top, breaching with a great splash. He sailed aloft, leaping overtop of the Hylian before diving down once again.

Now Link was sure he was showing off.

When Sidon finally did settle for floating to the top by his slow-swimming companion’s side, Link looked over and nudged his hand against the rough scales of the Zora’s arm, saying, “I want to jump like that.”

“Shall I assist?” Sidon spoke, brimming with immediate excitement.
“I can’t think of any other way to accomplish it, otherwise,” Link said before he took a deep breath and dove under, angling himself sharply downward. Seconds later, the Zora dipped down by his side, reaching out and taking the Hylian’s hands so that they sped into the depths together in a hurried rush.

Sidon was careful not to drag Link too far down, quickly reorienting back toward the surface before he placed his hands upon Link’s waist, holding him securely. As the Zora began to kick his webbed feet, Link’s hands hurriedly grabbed at Sidon’s shoulders, feeling as though he’d easily slip free from the Zora’s grasp at how quickly they gained speed, the water pushing forcefully against them while they sped toward the top then burst free with an explosive splash. Clear droplets flew in every direction as they shot into the air, the water’s surface disappearing beneath them like they could have taken flight and Link threw his arms out, laughing in triumphant joy. The Zora offered one last bit of lift, tossing the tiny Hylian above his head before he arced himself backward, diving back down to the water below.

Being high above everything wasn’t exactly a new experience for Link, but he supposed that in this way, it had come in a different form, which made it exciting once again. It reminded him of the morning he’d leapt down from the Plateau. That had been the first time he’d thrown himself down from a great height and because it represented an escape, it came with a newfound feeling of freedom that accompanied the bloodrush.

At peak height, Link tucked his legs in, his knees tightly pressing to his chest as he pushed his upper body forward, the rest of him following so that he curled into a flip, spinning at least twice before he unfurled and straightened, his arms extending before him into a graceful dive that shot him back down to the depths. A rush of bubbles raced around him, tickling against his bare chest and shoulders, the surrounding water a frothy, white veil, which soon peeled away, offering new visibility. Sidon was there, waiting, his long tail idly flapping and he smiled, wordlessly offering to throw Link all over again.

The two friends continued to jump together, practicing their acrobatics and taking turns showing off to one another. It was odd how entertained the Prince was by something that likely amounted to going for a walk to any Hylian, yet maybe the opportunity to impress or aid his less graceful companion gave the act some newfound entertainment value. Or maybe it was the fact that swimming came so naturally to the Zora that it gave him a sense of enjoyment that no awkward Hylian could hope to understand. Link couldn’t be sure, yet he could easily see that the Prince was enjoying himself. They both allowed their troubles to fade away in the simplicity of their carefree fun, trailing around the reservoir until Link barely felt the chill it left on his skin and the sun traveled well across the sky, threatening to finally dip beneath the mountainous horizon.

By dusk, Link was beyond exhausted, clinging to Sidon’s shoulders while the Prince mercifully carried him back to the warm stone of the landing. The Hylian plopped upon the smooth surface, splaying himself as he laid flat, feeling the wetness drip and spread out around him, forming a warm, shallow puddle.

“Feels nice..” he quietly purred, his voice weak and spent like the rest of him.

“Mmm,” the Zora agreed, laying on his belly, his arms folded underneath his chin, his gill flaps still open enough that the red flesh was visible underneath.

“It kind of makes me wish I could be a Zora,” Link idly mused as he stared at the dull blue of the sky so far above. The moon had already risen higher than where the sun burned low and heavy. A faint red outline traced the shadow that halved the silver orb, a warning sign of the blood moon’s time growing near.
“Hmm..” Sidon hummed, raising his head to look over at his Hylian friend. Link had folded his own arms behind his head, his abdomen stretched so that shadows fell upon the furrows between his ribs and the softer areas of his chest laid flat. “It’s funny that you should say that..”

“Funny?” The skin between the Hylian’s brows creased slightly in his curiosity and he looked over to meet the Zora’s gaze. “Why?”

“Well,” the Prince began, his voice trailing off as he considered his words. However, before he could explain, the soft, faint echo of bells rang up from the Palace, and his breath came out instead in a sigh. “Don’t worry about it, my friend. You’ll know soon enough.”

Sidon dragged himself up from where he laid, turning back to the reservoir to rinse away any dust that had clung to his scales. “I’m afraid I have an evening engagement to attend to.”

“Of course,” Link said, completely unsurprised and unmoved from his comfortable position while he watched the Zora shuffle about. “I have lots of fire-roasted pork leftover, if you need an excuse to drop by the Seabed Inn later.”

The Zora laughed quietly, nodding his head to the Hylian’s offer. “Tempting,” he purred. “We’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I’m running behind on review responses, and I’m going to try to work on that tonight, but I DO still want to hear from you all! This chapter was huge so there’s plenty to comment on. Let me know what you thought!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

While Betaal and Guardsman Dunma set out to handle a trade deal gone awry, Prince Sidon and his vigilant Knight attended a party, where at last the decision on whether or not to claim Fort Boko in the name of the Zorana Sovereign was to be announced.

But it was not such a splendid evening for everyone in Zora's Domain. For a certain Hylian Champion, his night took an unsettling turn when the lingering spirit of Mipha visited without apparent purpose, along with some bizarre behavior from his Sheikah Slate. He didn't personally know whether these events were related, but he couldn't think to take it as anything but a very bad sign.

Chapter Notes

Geez, friendos. I don't even know what to say any more. I'm perpetually behind schedule, haha. I'm sorry about that. In any case, please enjoy this day late chapter anyway and let me know what you think. :)

The camp that Betaal had become aware of through scout reports was actually beyond the extent she’d previously imagined. Tents stretched from shore to shore across Mercay Island, just beyond the reclaimed fort. The structures ranged from large, sturdy tents built with quality materials, to simple lean-to shelters, which one or two Hylians could huddle underneath.

The campsite was bustling, with people of all shapes wandering here and there. There were horses tied to hitching posts and unmoving donkeys strapped to full carts of goods. Various fires were blazing, for cooking and comfort, so the entire site smelled of smoke and livestock, with the occasional aroma of food drifting past before disappearing again underneath the less pleasant scents.

Betaal maintained her steely composure, her wild, yellow eye taking stock of all she beheld. As the reports stated, most of the population stuffed into this veritable village of tents was armed, though it didn’t seem as though it would pose any immediate issues. Every Hylian wore some old, dented blade and a shield on their back, the Sheikah among them armed with various small blades strapped to their hips, the Gorons carrying hammers and heavy swords, the Gerudo unabashedly wielding scimitars and spears that were tarnished from use. There was even a molted, old Rito, busily restringing a bow.

Despite all this, as the Zora soldiers marched through the camp, Betaal felt no animosity. The camp residents were not threatened by the Zora presence, but appreciative. After all, it was by their strong force that this territory was made safe and secure for everyone else. It was thanks to the Zora people that every one else could be here.

Of the three other guardsmen that marched along at Betaal’s heel, Dunma decidedly broke rank to
walk by her superior’s side. She wouldn’t normally do something so casual, but there was something pester ing her that she simply had to bring up. “Do you think this camp is going to be a problem, sir?”

The Sergeant’s fins flared in surprise at the sound of Dunma’s voice right at her side. Nobody ever seemed to think anything of approaching on her blind side and she was still torn on whether or not she appreciated that. “Uh. No, I don’t think it will be. Though whether certain individuals within the camp become a problem remains to be seen,” the blue Zora explained. “Do you mind walking on this side of me, guardsman?” Betaal gestured to her left side.

“Oh,” Dunma mumbled, “right, sir.” The younger Zora’s heel skidded against the ground while she slowed to pass behind Betaal and move to her left. “Sorry, sir.”

“It’s fine,” the shorter Zora stated, trying to be casual or even commanding though her voice was tight with nervousness. Maybe asking Dunma to walk where she could see her had been a poorly thought-out plan after all, because now Betaal could see the young woman’s beautiful violet and white complexion and her strong, graceful figure and..

“I have something I was meaning to return to you,” Dunma quickly, thankfully, cut off her superior’s trail of thought, though the hesitant sound of the young woman’s voice was a worrisome thing, which Betaal afforded a concerned glance. Indeed, Dunma’s tail was twitching nervously as she fussed with the small item pack at her hip. “I meant to bring this back sooner, but you’ve been so busy, there never was an appropriate time to interrupt. Actually, this still isn’t an appropriate time but I didn’t want to delay any longer.”

“Guardsman,” Betaal cut Dunma off from her rambling, honestly wondering what could have gotten her so worked up. “What is it?”

“Here,” the younger Zora uttered sheepishly, holding out a folded piece of paper that she’d drawn from her satchel, offering it to her superior. The blue Zora took the folded note with curious ease, unfurling it to discover that it was very familiar. A sudden, violent tremor of apprehension and embarrassment went through the older warrior. “W-where did you find this?”

“You dropped it in my tent, sir,” Dunma explained. “Like I said, this was the soonest time I could find to return it.”

“I see,” Betaal cleared her throat, forcing her gravely voice to imitate a state of relaxed calm while she haphazardly crinkled the sheet and shoved it into her own item pouch. “I hadn’t even realized it was missing, so I suppose your timing wasn’t terribly late. Did you read it, by chance?”

“Well...” The violet Zora’s voice was still quiet and unsure, though her superior’s relative calm soothed her somewhat. She was inwardly praying that she didn’t get suspended or have some kind of complaint filed against her. At the very same time, she was much too honest to even consider lying. “Yes, sir,” she sighed. “At first I just glanced at it, but then I noticed that the style seemed familiar and I got curious. It just dragged me in, and before I even knew it, I’d read the entire page.”

“It’s fine, guardsman,” the Sergeant reassured. “It was written by a..um, friend of mine. I just, you know, check over the fight scenes to make sure they’re accurate and plausible. My friend is just, really nitpicky. We’re coming up on the ruins of the Moor Garrison now, so be ready.”

“Right. Yes, sir,” Dunma nodded, falling back to where her other guardsmen followed in silence. The band of Zoras splashed along as they tramped across a shallow riverbed that ran between Mercay Island and the ruins, where they’d been summoned. Dunma watched while the fish basking in the warmth of the shallows darted away from the disturbance, her mind not yet going back to work, despite having been told to do so.
It was uncharacteristic for the young warrior to let her typical adherence to complete seriousness falter, especially during work, but maybe she just hadn’t managed to stamp down all of the nagging curiosity of youth. It had occurred to her that the paper she’d returned to Betaal was penned in an oddly similar handwriting as all of the guard schedules. At the same time, Dunma believed her superior to be a woman that was morally just, despite her tenacious ways, so how likely could it have been that she would simply lie? She wasn’t sure.

“There they are!” A short, wide, Hylian woman came to a stand atop one of the half crumbled, stone-built structures of the ruins. She placed her hands on her hips as she smiled down at the group of Zoras. She’d been perched near a fire with two other Hylian men, her apparent subordinates in whatever kind of band it was that she was leading. She clambered down what remained of the stone stairs, leaping to the grass below when there wasn’t enough left for proper footing and she strode over to greet Betaal. “I was starting to think you fish-folk weren’t coming.”

“I’m Sergeant Betaal of the fort garrison,” the blue Zora introduced herself with strict formality, her sharp teeth gleaming with every word she spoke. “One of my guardsmen informed me that a group of merchants believed they had supplies that would interest us.”

“Right, that was me,” the short woman growled with a voice and smile like a wasteland coyote. “The names Swift. This is my group. Follow me.”

The woman turned on heel, her stride long and quick for a person of her stature. Betaal followed in the Hylian’s flank, as asked, thinking that she lived up to the name Swift. She wore a fisherman’s shield on her back, along with a broadsword, a steel lizal bow and of course, a quiver full of arrows; she was better equipped than most travelers, which meant her group likely was as well.

“Me and my group have been watching your soldiers scout the area,” Swift spoke, glancing back at the Zora following closest to her. Betaal was busily looking over the remains of the old Moor Garrison, and wondering why it had suffered so much more damage than the trade fort. When the Sergeant said nothing, Swift continued, “Your people use spears and bows primarily, right?”

“Spears and bows are what we think of as ‘starting weapons’,,” Betaal answered. “Some go on to specialize in other weaponry, but spears are considered well suited to our physique and the easiest to master with best results. The perfect weapon.”

“Good then.” The thick, Hylian woman gave a satisfied nod, rounding a corner of the crumbling destruction and leading the group of Zora into a tree-lined area. There, a long hitching post had been constructed using two large trees as support, and a number of horses were tied to it, somewhere between fifteen and twenty. “Here we go. If your people already use spears and bows, then they’d make the perfect mounted soldiers. What your people need are horses.”

The Sergeant looked over the line of tied equines, her red fins puffed just enough to maintain an air of power and fearlessness, though she truly wasn’t sure what to think. She had rarely seen a horse up close in her life and understood little about their condition or behavior. After a moment of consideration, she let out a sigh and shrugged to the short Hylian. “I don’t disagree with the notion that our fighting style would be suitable for horseback combat. It was a decent observation,” she calmly explained, “but my people have no experience with them and aren’t supplied to care for them.”

“Not to worry,” Swift reassured, though her voice still sounded like it should have been coming from a snarling maw. “Me and my group are experts at handling them. If your people are willing to provide shelter to us within your fort and proper compensation, we’ll sell you the horses, care for them and provide training in horsemanship to your soldiers.”
“Such a decision wouldn’t fall to me,” the blue Zora spoke, her yellow eye staring down on the roguish Hylian, who had already begun to get an aggravated wrinkle in her brow. “I could put in the necessary paperwork for such a request, but to be frank, I wouldn’t expect much to come from it. We don’t require horses for fast travel between here and our Domain, nor do we have any real use for them within the wetlands, for combat or otherwise. Not only that, but we’ve still yet to be informed whether or not the fort garrison will be permanent, so the request would be premature at this point.”

The Hylian woman let out a sigh of frustration, her arms crossing over her chest as she quietly simmered the disappointment in her mind. She appeared as though she’d been counting on success and was now facing the responsibility for her own overblown expectations; that was Betaal’s assumption, in any case. While Swift contemplated her response, the Zora shifted her weight impatiently onto one foot. “You could have saved time by mentioning what it was you planned to offer us when you approached our fort.”

“Yeah, well,” Swift snapped, waving her hand at the blue Zora standing near. “The horses weren’t the only thing we had to offer. Come on, let me show you something else.”

The woman bolted off in her same hasty gait, saying little else but simply expecting the Zoras to follow. Betaal somewhat shook her head at the little Hylian’s demeanor but followed along, decidedly slower. She didn’t plan to match the woman’s speed just to humor her impatience.

As Swift went back around the corner of the most intact structure, she stuck two pinky fingers against her lips and blew a shrill whistle. Three quick, sharp notes echoed across the crumbling garrison, followed by one long sound. By the time the four Zora caught up to her, she was standing just outside of an iron gate, her two associates approaching from where they’d been settled, while one other young, Hylian woman scurried along the top of the ruin, coming to a crank which she turned in order to hoist the gate open.

“In here,” Swift said, waving the Zora along as she entered the single intact structure. Betaal followed on her heel, since the Hylian woman finally took the hint and slowed her pace. Dunma, however, glanced warily over her shoulder at the two men who followed behind the group of Zoras, right on their tails.

The group walked out from the narrow hallway, into an open space with high, stone masonry walls and little else. There, chained securely to the walls, was a group of bokoblins. Both red and blue variations were lined up, their hands bound and their necks collared with heavy steel. In one corner, a pair of lizalfos were tightly cuffed, held down to the floor by chains attached to stakes, with a canvas tarp draped over them.

“I’m told that, before the Calamity, Hyrulean soldiers would train against captured beasts,” Swift explained, gesturing proudly to her group’s collection. “Training against these beasts will give your soldiers an experienced edge in battle and keep them from shitting their pants the first time they see a monster.” The Hylian woman paused, looking over the Zoras and chuckling, “Well, not their pants, in this case.”

The Zoras observed the scene before them, but Betaal specifically curled her lip at what she was seeing, her mouth forming a feral snarl that showed her teeth. She could feel the end of her tail beginning to flick and she shook her head, not just to cease the flicking, but to vehemently deny whatever offer was being posed here. She didn’t need to hear any more.

“No,” the Sergeant sharply hissed. “Not only does this endanger everybody camped on Mercay Island, but under the law of the Zorana Sovereign, the containment of aggressive species is not permitted. Even if these beasts are wretched and bloodthirsty, enslaving them in any manner was long deemed to be against the civil nature of enlightened species.” Betaal’s expression hardened into
a glare and she raised one hand to point an accusing finger at the Hylian woman that stood before her, snarling right back. “If this were left to me, I would seize these creatures and see them quickly terminated—”

“Oh, is that right?” the short woman growled, her voice jumping in volume and cutting the angry Zora Sergeant off. Swift let out a laugh of challenge, her mouth forming a smile that belied her sudden fury. Clearly, this was not a woman that was used to submitting to any form of authority and Betaal’s toptail flared aggressively, in warning.

That warning was not heeded, however, and instead, Swift pulled the lizal bow from her back, drawing and nocking an arrow that crackled to life while it was aimed at the Zora’s face. Betaal was only momentarily surprised to see the Hylian woman armed with shock arrows; she probably lifted them off of the captured monsters and set them aside for this exact purpose.

“No,” Dunma whispered under her breath, her tongue going rogue at the sight of the shock arrows. Her pupils tightened in nervousness, her body rigid, her fingers trembling and itching to reach for her own weapon.

The two Hylian men flanking the group of Zoras drew their swords, the entire group ready to attack upon the haste displayed by their leader. “Taking these creatures alive was more work than I’m willing to see go to waste,” Swift explained with confidence from behind her drawn weapon. “If you don’t want them, fair enough. We’ll just have to see what your people are willing to pay to have you lot back, instead.”

Betaal drew in a deep breath and let it slide from her before she spoke up to address the threats of the Hylian woman. “What I was going to say was that we don’t have jurisdiction to remove the creatures, outside of the fort.” The Zora’s voice was calm, her demeanor unshaken, despite the arrow trained on her. “But now that you’ve drawn weapons on us, that loosens things significantly. We’ll suffer no threats from you. If a fight is what you want, you have much more to lose than some captured monsters.”

“So do you,” the Hylian woman growled, drawing back her bowstring to fire the arrow, yet as quickly as she spoke her words, Betaal went from calm standstill to fighting fury, pulling the spear from her back and knocking Swift’s weapon aside just enough that when the arrow flew, it sailed far from its intended course.

The butt of the Sergeant’s spear was smashed into the Hylian’s face, knocking her to the ground with ease, but she didn’t stay there for long. Swift rolled back to her feet, swiping an arm across her mouth to wipe away the blood that was dribbling down from her busted nose before she reached for her sword and drew it out with a harsh, metallic ring.

The other Zora warriors spun to face the two Hylians at their back, spears rolling into their hands with trained ease. As far as the Zoras were concerned, these opponents were only moderately more skilled than the bokoblins, themselves. Betaal exchanged quick blows with the leader of the group, needing only a few skillful strikes to slice the Hylian woman’s weapon arm and send her sword clattering to the stone floor. Then with one more, powerful swing of the Sergeant’s weapon, Swift joined her forgotten weapon, sprawled immobile and unconscious.

Betaal launched herself into a backward flip, coming to land behind the other two Hylians that her guardsmen were fending off with relative ease, yet she made it all the more easy with merciless haste. One knock to the back of the knees brought both men down, allowing the guardsmen to finish them with blows to the head.

Dunma, meanwhile, had leapt to the top of the crumbling walls to dispatch the other young woman
who’d been watching from above, armed with a bow, but thankfully not shock arrows. When Betaal looked up, the violet Zora had the Hylian woman so tightly pinned between the length of her spear and her own body that the short Hylian’s feet were dangling.

“Throw her down here,” Betaal harshly ordered. Dunma did not utter a word of question; she withdrew her spear and dropped the other woman down to the stone below. The Hylian woman screeched on impact, but not one of the Zoras paid her any heed. Instead, Betaal gestured to the flattened group of apparent monster hunters, and said, “Tie them up. They’ll stand trial in Zora’s Domain for their acts of needless aggression.”

“Yes, sir,” the two guardsmen answered Betaal’s command, hurrying to do precisely as she’d instructed.

While the Hylians were gathered up, Betaal looked over the captured monsters, shaking her head in disappointment that was thicker than those Hylians’ skulls. Dunma clambered down from her perch, coming to her superior’s side to stand in silence.

“I thought, for a moment there, you were going to lose your composure,” Betaal uttered, her voice laced with gentle concern. “I’m glad to see you pulled it together.”

“Yes, sir,” Dunma said with a nod, her shoulders still shaking with something she couldn’t distinguish; it might have been rage, fear, or just the shock. “What should we do about the monsters, sir?”

“I’ve already said as much,” the blue Zora sighed, reaching for the lizal bow that laid forgotten, and she handed it off to the young woman at her side. “The other archer had regular arrows, right? A single shot will take care of the bokoblins.”

The younger Zora nodded as her superior offered the weapon to her, taking it without a word of complaint before she turned to retrieve the other Hylian’s quiver. Betaal strode over to where the lizalfos were chained, drawing back the canvas that had kept them shrouded. The beasts did not move or even flinch, instead only flicking their swiveling eyes upward to watch her, unable to do much else. Their skin laid tight and shriveled over their ribs, the scales rubbed raw and torn away where they were cuffed.

The beasts were starved and drained from being unable to bask; at this point, Betaal doubted they could even move, regardless of the chains. Maybe they were monsters, but this was wrong and should have been against everything civilized people stood for. Luckily enough for the beasts, they were weakened to the point that they wouldn’t feel much. Betaal unbuckled a small sheath at her hip, drawing a sharp knife from the protective leather and she bent down to the creatures, one hand apologetically smoothing over their scales before she sliced their throats.

When that was done, Betaal flicked the blood from her knife, pushing it back into the sheath while she walked back to Dunma’s side. The younger warrior was standing over the bokoblins, her arrow drawn and held at the ready, yet for some reason, she was hesitating.

The blue Zora watched in silence, her single eye regarding Dunma while the younger Zora stared down at the shackled, pathetic beasts. Betaal did not immediately say or do anything to interrupt, sure that she knew what her subordinate must have been thinking: ‘These things killed my father just as easily as I could kill them now.’

When she could not bear to remain silent any longer, she breathed a sigh and spoke up. “Dunma.”

“I should be able to do this, right?” the violet Zora hissed, seemingly disappointed with herself to the
point of anger. “I should be angry enough that I don’t even care, yet. It doesn’t feel right to kill them while they’re helpless.”

Unlike the lizalfos, the bokoblins still had enough strength and awareness to know perfectly well what was about to happen. Dunma’s hands shook, but not from physical weakness, as she drew back the bowstring, biting her lip in bitter guilt while the creatures flinched away and trembled in apparent fear. “Why are they afraid?” the young woman grunted through the effort of holding the bowstring back. “What reason do they have to cower when they’ll just return to life in a few days from now?”

“No, you can’t use the anger and sadness of your loss to harden yourself,” Betaal spoke, her gravely voice a low, quiet calm. The other Zora allowed the bowstring to slowly return to its original position, then she lowered the weapon and turned a frustrated expression to the older woman. “Didn’t you? You had to have known that you couldn’t win after you lost your eye, but you fought anyway. Wasn’t it the anger that drove you? The desire to make the ones who hurt you pay?”

“Dunma, you can’t use the anger and sadness of your loss to harden yourself,” Betaal spoke, her gravely voice a low, quiet calm. The other Zora allowed the bowstring to slowly return to its original position, then she lowered the weapon and turned a frustrated expression to the older woman. “ Didn’t you? You had to have known that you couldn’t win after you lost your eye, but you fought anyway. Wasn’t it the anger that drove you? The desire to make the ones who hurt you pay?”

“No,” Betaal breathed after a quick moment of consideration. “That was something bigger than me and my anger. That event meant something special to everyone like me and that was too important for me to back down from, even though I knew I would lose.”

Reaching out, her movements slow and wary, Betaal placed one careful hand on Dunma’s shoulder. “Right now, you’re punishing yourself for not having enough anger or hatred to kill these creatures without a second thought, yet in doing so, you’re asking yourself to be as thoughtless and merciless as they are. Don’t punish yourself for that. Don’t punish yourself for kindness, because it’s not a weakness.”

“It is if I can’t do my job,” Dunma spoke in rebuttal, shaking her head. “You should be criticizing me for being weak and incapable right now.”

“You’re doing that well enough on your own,” the older warrior uttered, drawing her hand back and shrugging. “If you want, I can handle them.”

“I had no problem killing them in combat,” said the violet Zora, her golden eyes glancing back to where the lizalfos lay limp and still in a puddle of blood. “You killed those without an issue. How do you harden yourself to it?”

“Because what was happening here was cruel,” Betaal explained, her tone solemn but sure. “People like us shouldn’t allow cruel things to occur. Putting the beasts out of their misery is the kindest thing to do. And if not for them, then for the people that could be endangered, should they remain.”

Dunma took a deep breath, nodding her head as she raised the bow once again. “I can do it..”

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It was at the foot of the staircases leading up to the palace level that Sidon slowed his hurried gait. There, waiting with his feet soaked in the gentle trickle that cascaded from the upper levels, was the golden Knight, Brivere. His expression was as guarded as ever, but while Sidon caught his breath, his magical energy reached out to greet the familiar friend, feeling the subtle complexities that oft remained hidden.

Brivere was patient and calm more than anything, though there was a quiet wrinkle of question, a disappointment caused by his own strict timeliness. He was bothered by Sidon’s late arrival, but not at all surprised. The Prince provided a sheepish smile, a wordless plea for forgiveness, and felt his Knight’s ire ebb away with that much ease.
“Did they announce the decision already?” Sidon asked in a breathless voice, his scales still shining with wetness from his swim over the falls.

“They did,” Brivere spoke in calm affirmation, though a rare smile tugged just barely at the corners of his mouth. His Prince’s successes and goals were his own and so the joy that resulted found a way to manifest. Sidon’s golden eyes gleamed with excitement and anticipation while he waited for Brivere to elaborate, already giddy at just the hint of satisfaction to be found, tucked underneath Brivere’s scales like a gift-wrapped surprise.

“The council was evenly divided on the decision.” As the golden Zora spoke, Sidon’s eyes widened, his smile momentarily faltering. “However, the King still ruled in favor of claiming the fort and the territory it occupies for the Zorana Sovereign.”

“Yes!” the Prince exuberantly exclaimed, his hands tightening into fists that he raised and shook in celebration, his tail gleefully flapping so hard that it began to cramp his neck, yet he was too overjoyed to pay it any mind. “Oh, things must have been in complete uproar!”

Sidon straightened, his wide eyes looking to Brivere in questioning that was desperately hungry for details. The Knight remained calm, save for the pleased smile that was printed upon his visage. “Well, I realize that the King usually only rules in favor of things supported by his council, but he managed to smooth things over with relative ease. The Divine Oracle also spoke, expressing their approval, which settled things down.”

Brivere let out a tiny sigh, shaking his head at the taller Zora that stood celebrating before him. “Your father has a way of soothing voices of dissent and calming the people. You really would do well to learn his secrets.”

“Ugg...” The Prince’s vibrant expression fell immediately flat at his friend’s words. “His secret was prevailing during a time of disaster and gaining the trust and love of our people through that. It’s not exactly a method that has become available to me, nor would I want it to- Brivere?” Sidon’s words were cut off as his attention drifted sharply elsewhere, his gaze falling upon the lovely shine at his Knight’s neck. “Is that a new collar?”

A quiet inhale passed across the Knight’s lips while his mouth fell open in surprise, one hand shooting upward to be pressed to the jeweled, silver adornment as though he’d forgotten all about it. “Oh,” he uttered, sounding even more like he’d forgotten about the lovely accessory, only now reminded when the Prince’s wily attention span focused itself there. “The feast seemed to call for fancier dress. I thought it appropriate,” Brivere explained.

“Blue does look lovely on you, my friend,” the Prince purred, his fingers reaching out to trace the elaborate details that his eyes weren’t satisfied to simply flicker across. It was an uncommon style choice, the metallic details forming soft, spiraling circles, while the piece was set with a sky sapphire, a paler variation of the blue gem. “Of course, it is also a nice change to see you without your armor.”

Sidon’s gaze traced the length of his Knight’s neck, drifting up to meet his honey gold eyes and the soft expression that had ventured to his countenance, slipping past his ever careful control. “Thank you, my lord,” Brivere hummed softly, quickly shifting his focus elsewhere, his emotions like secretive whispers barely audible through a door left accidentally ajar and he was slamming it shut before anyone had the chance to learn his truths. “We should go. If you’re any more late than you already are, it won’t seem so fashionable.”

“Right,” the Prince laughed, his voice a bright and cheery sound.
Together, the two friends ascended to the level of the palace. The noise was clear and vibrant before they even cleared the stairs, though as the Prince stepped into the open space before the palace, most voices quieted while the eyes of all present turned to acknowledge him.

The area had been closed off for the ruling and the feast that followed, so that only those involved or otherwise invited could access it. The guards stood aside when Sidon entered, offering curt bows that were so commonplace, he hardly noticed. Instead, his attention strayed to the scene before him. Numerous tables were elegantly draped with the finest imported cloths and set with equally fine silver. They were adorned with vases of glowing blue nightshade and lamps carved from luminous stone, so that the entire area was bathed in a soft, calming, blue glow, which offered a feeling of underwater serenity.

Sidon caught his father’s eye and the Prince beamed with gracious cheer, dipping his head low in respect and gratitude. Though Sidon had spoken privately with his father in regards to the fort and knowingly had his support, it was still a rare gift for Dorephan’s decisions to be swayed by the Prince’s whims and wants. The King had always made an effort to teach his son a healthy respect for the voices of the people, even if it meant ruling against Sidon more often than not. As such, tonight was worthy of celebration, indeed.

Dorephan was seated alongside his advisor- the Grand Magistratus, as well as the Divine Oracle of the Basilica and other important members of his council. The King gave his son a nod when the Prince strode past, carrying himself with grace and walking tall despite the occasional sideways glance.

The Zora Prince hurried to find his own seat at his father’s table; he was situated at a slight distance from the King, his place surrounded by warriors, sans armor, dressed instead in finery and showy adornments. Among them, the First Knight of the Royal Order, the Knight Divine of the Basilica and Guard Captain Bazz. The two Knights, both head of their respective orders, were nursing drinks and playing a seemingly coy game of wits with their idle conversation, all while Bazz glanced between them, nodding occasionally. He appeared uncomfortable and out of place.

Because of the Guard Captain’s discomfort, he leapt to his feet when he noticed Prince Sidon’s approach, beyond relieved to no longer be alone and stuck in between the bizarre rivalmance going on with the other two Zora. “My lord!” the sleek, black Zora called out with a thankful smile, his upper body bowing forward in respectful greeting.

Sidon gave the Guard Captain a charming smile in return and a nod of acknowledgment as he took a seat, which Bazz awaited before sinking back into his own chair. Brivere snuck quietly into the seat at the Prince’s side, too reserved to speak if he wasn’t addressed.

“Ah, there you are, young lord,” the first Knight chimed in, his voice as smooth and sharp as a blade. “We were afraid the food would die before you arrived.”

The first Knight was an elegant, slight man with dark, smoky, violet scales that had begun to silver with age and bold, amber eyes which were warm and fiery; Sidon looked upon him as he spoke, the expression on his face turning sheepish and apologetic.

“There was no need to wait for me,” the Prince uttered, his own jeweled adornments jingling as he gestured.

“As if we could force our Prince to eat carrion like a commoner,” the Knight Divine of the Basilica tutted at Sidon’s other side. Sidon shifted his gaze to the Zora woman, finding her looking him over in the same intense way a strict teacher would stare down a pupil. She had eyes very likened to Brivere’s; a crisp yellow that was always full of thought. “Please,” she hissed, her tongue
enunciating every syllable as though each word had a bitter taste.

The Knight Divine stretched her neck, her eyes searching the floor for the Zora meant to prepare their meal. Once she caught sight of them, it took little time for her perpetually reprimanding stare to summon them over. All the while, the First Knight watched appreciatively from across the table, his eyes meandering across the woman’s big, glassy scales, which shined a pale aqua, save for the occasional golden scale, which dotted her hide.

It didn’t take long for Sidon to understand Bazz’s previous awkwardness, but he did his best to maintain some casual comfort, his voice an airy sound while he carried on the conversation with grace and charm. The First Knight was mysteriously intellectual, despite being a Zora of combat, and it took little coaxing to prompt him into something of a light-hearted discussion as the cook prepared their dinner. Somewhere along the way, the Prince even managed to elicit a giggle from the Knight Divine; he swore the sound of her laughter extended the life of all who heard it.

The group hushed momentarily at the noise of a large, hearty salmon being pulled out from a finely crafted, blue earthenware jar, which was amusingly sculpted to resemble a fish. The jar was filled with water and enough ice to immobilize the fish; this was necessary to assure that the fish didn’t flop about while its meat was carved from its bones. The meal would be considered ruined were to chef to accidentally puncture the fish’s gut, killing it. After all, no self-respecting member of the upperclass would eat meat from a dead animal.

As the others conversed, it was actually Brivere who felt most out of place, though that was also incredibly typical. He found himself quietly watching the fish as it was placed onto the chef’s chopping block. One tool was used to strip its scales away with an easy swipe, then a knife was brought to the fleshy area just near the salmon’s tail, the blade dipping into the creature’s flesh and slicing it away with one smooth, clean motion. The fish’s jaw shot wide while its ruby red meat was cut away just above its ribs, its gills pumping hard as it slowly suffocated.

Brivere turned away, choosing instead to glare across the room, when he realized what other bit of scum was present—Zambezi. The Knight’s eyes narrowed as he watched the other Zora; Zambezi was a man with deep, honey gold scales and a remarkably honest face for someone whose tongue only uttered lies. He had a smile that was bright and earnest and hands that often strayed to places they didn’t belong. Of course, he was just being friendly. His family likely provided the beverages for the party, if Brivere had to judge. As head of his family, Zambezi owned several parcels of valuable land within the Zorana Sovereign, most of which were used for gathering food to be crafted into ‘recreational’ consumables. Essentially, this made him the crown prince of drinks, in Zora’s Domain.

A series of plates were at last ready to be served, and the chef spread a thin, curling line of sauce across the delicate cuts of meat, which were finely arranged for visual appeal. The first plate was set before Prince Sidon, but he hurriedly pushed the offering away, sliding it instead to the Knight Divine.

“Oh, no, no,” Sidon tittered modestly, raising his hand to the Zora serving the food. “The others have been waiting on my account, please, serve them first.”

“So humble and kind you are,” the Knight Divine praised, taking the plate as it was offered. “Did you spend your day mingling with the common folk, as you do?” In her mind, the young Prince’s willingness to openly socialize with Zora far beneath his station was something of a deep virtue.

“Hm.” The Prince forced a smile to his face that was gleaming and unquestionable. “With the Hylian Champion, actually.”
The golden Zora was dragged from his contemplations by his Prince’s voice, and more specifically, what he had stated. Brivere raised his head, turning just enough to peer up at the man by his side.

“Oh, very good, young lord,” the First Knight said with a nod, a delicate sliver of meat held upon his utensil and poised before his lips. “I’m certain that your friendship with the Champion will be of use, should the Kingdom of Hyrule ever miraculously rise from the ashes. At this rate, it looks like all of their territory will be slowly ceded, until the Hylians possess no land of their own.”

“You forget that the Hylians are Goddess-blooded, the same as us,” said the Knight Divine, her posture as perfectly rigid as her faith. “By Hylia’s grace, they will likely regain their strength. We must only be vigilant until then.”

“I agree with the notion of vigilance,” Bazz chimed in, though his tone struck a chord of much deeper concern. “Master Link, err.. The Hylian Champion is the only true warrior left among them. The rest of the Hylian people that even know how to hold a weapon seem to have developed this culture of roguishness, living each day like it’s the last and subsisting on mercenary work. Hardly any remain among them that remember the Calamity enough to consider it a real threat. Meanwhile, the Calamity just.. Looms.”

“Speaking of vigilance,” Sidon spoke up to put this conversation back onto the right track. “The plans for the evening of the Blood Moon?”

“Right,” Bazz uttered, clearing his throat and sifting through a pack that waited by his side. “I’ll send word to the fort camp in the morning, in regards to its newly established permanency, as well as our plans for the night of the Blood Moon. My guardsmen will establish a checkpoint between our domain and the fort and our forces will be moved between them to clear any monsters that reappear. Communications will be maintained by means of the river.”

The Guard Captain finally put his hands upon the item he’d been searching for, drawing out a neatly folded map, which he spread before himself on the table and he turned it around to give Sidon the best view. “Messengers will be posted here and here, and a team of message carriers will be stationed at the fort, and at the Bank of Wishes, where I will maintain command.”

“My understanding is that there are to be two separate teams of soldiers moving between the checkpoints throughout the night,” the Royal Knight began, gesturing to the route marked on the map. “If taking this fort is the will of our King, then we fight. The Knights under my command will be alongside the Zorana Guard and our strength will assure no further incident, I’m certain of it. I will place command of one team under my Knight Lieutenant and the other with your Knight Captain.”

Brivere lowered his head ever so slightly in a nod of respect as his superior acknowledged him. It wasn’t often that he was openly referred to as Knight Captain Brivere, so he took some pleasure in it.

“My first priority is protecting the fort and our pyre circles,” the Knight Divine added as she proceeded to explain how many of her soldiers she would allow to be requisitioned. “I have a team of Goddess Knights to shore up the forces placed within the fort, all magically talented, of course. I was informed that the soldiers stationed at the fort are all new recruits from the undercity. I’m not certain I would trust security to such poorly qualified soldiers.”

“If it were up to me, the bottom feeders wouldn’t even be in soldier positions,” the First Knight hissed in disgust.

“We’ve reached an unusual impasse, in regards to our population and the priorities of the established classes,” Sidon quickly spoke up, pausing to take a bite of his meal, his manner unhurried and tidy
while he picked up his napkin and dabbed the corner of his mouth. Moments like these were perfect for when he needed to examine the emotional states of those around him and redirect conversation, if necessary. “The merchant class of the uppercity is not only shrinking but there’s just not as much interest in becoming soldiers as there used to be. In any case, it’s a thorough plan of action.”

The Prince turned to Bazz, gesturing to him, “Thank you, Guard Captain!”

“Certainly, my lord,” the black Zora nodded his head gladly, folding his map back up and returning it to the pack it had been drawn from. “Here’s to hoping that I don’t lose any more of my guardsmen. There’s no need for senseless loss in the line of duty, if it can be prevented with thorough preparation.”

“Oh,” the Prince paused just before taking a sip of his beverage. His eyes widened ever so slightly, his sharp teeth clicking together in momentary surprise. Realization quickly flooded him and he looked upon Bazz with sympathy softening his features, his voice a careful, quiet sound. “That’s right, you were close with guardsman Rivan, weren’t you?”

“Yes, my lord. Of course, I wasn’t speaking of him, specifically,” Bazz answered with poise that was beyond professional, his loss an aching thing that he merely masked for the sake of appearances, yet as he spoke, he made every effort to reassure the Prince, instead. “There’s no need to look so tense, my lord. Unlike Council Member Trello, I was present during the conflict and I know that circumstances went outside of expectations. You, nor your leadership, was at fault.”

“Ah,” Sidon nodded, his gaze faltering for an awkward moment. The two head Knights quietly listened as tidbits of gossip more juicy than their meals were revealed before them. “You heard about the words exchanged between the Council Member and I.”

“Nothing happens to Council Member Trello that the ‘Demon Sergeant’ doesn’t hear about and myself in turn,” the Guard Captain confessed with an idle shrug.

“You needn’t be so downtrodden, young lord,” the Knight Divine spoke up firmly, placing a hand upon the Prince’s arm as a means of comfort. “These scholars and bureaucrats sometimes forget that the world is harsher than it once was. Service to the Goddess sometimes calls for sacrifice.” She uttered these words with a kind of certainty that was cold and harsh, though she turned to Bazz immediately after and spoke up. “My condolences to you, of course, Guard Captain.”

“My lord,” the First Knight uttered, to gain Sidon’s attention, though he gestured to Brivere. “Your Knight Captain’s report made plenty of mention of your valor and compassion on the field of battle.”

“Oh. Is that so?” Sidon spoke, a curious sound to his voice. He glanced to his side, to where Brivere sat, finding the golden Zora with his head lowered, one hand rested upon the point of his brow in embarrassment. A grin tugged at the Prince’s lips while he returned his attention to the First Knight, listening as the man continued.

“Indeed,” the Zora across from the Prince nodded, a knowing twinkle in his eye that spoke his amusement. “And considering how precise and blunt he can be about details, I believe you did your best and that your best was also exceptional.”

“Then I suppose I should be grateful for Brivere’s honesty,” Sidon said with a titter, coyly adding, “..and his oddly thorough observations of my performance.”

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Things were back on track, weren’t they?
Link hadn’t thought that he even had the capability of drawing himself up from the pit of self-loathing and bitterness he’d sunken so far into, alongside his sanity. His prospects in regards to romance had been even bleaker, yet as he paddled freely through the crisp, crystal blue of the surrounding waters, his heart felt as weightless as the rest of his drifting frame.

He was out for a swim yet again with the Zora Prince, watching the dashing, red Zora while he zipped past time and time again, coyly brushing the Hylian with an errant fin or a curious hand. He’d gotten downright bold with his touches, to the point that Link was sure that things were more than friendly, yet he felt no need to question it. Why should he? If Sidon was willing enough to escalate whatever this bizarre thing between them was, well, Link was just a helpless Hylian, caught in the Zora’s rip current.

Sidon swam near, his feet gently kicking, his hands outstretched to Link and pulling him in. The Hylian didn’t refuse nor resist and the Zora’s arms wrapped tightly around him so that he was flush to Sidon’s chest. His own arms wound loosely around the Zora’s neck, his fingertips lovingly stroking his tail while he leaned himself in, pressing his lips to the Prince’s without guilt, without hesitation.

The two lovers tugged at one another in needful passion, pressing ever nearer, as though to become one. Link nuzzled his face into the prominent point of the Zora’s brow, breaking the kiss for a single instant, only to be pulled back into it, the Prince’s mouth pushing tightly against his as their tongues gently bumped in soft, wet greeting.

The Prince held Link so tightly that the Hylian’s movement was restricted, prevented, their kiss so desperate that it served to seal out the water that surrounded them as well as any escape of breath, and Link closed his eyes, succumbing to it gladly. It took little time for the Hylian to seek air by necessity, however, and he made an effort to wiggle free from the Zora’s grip in order to swim back to the surface. His attempts at movement were meek, at first, steadily growing in intensity until he opened his eyes to find that it was no longer Sidon who held him.

The water was dark, while a bright, blinding light shined from above the surface, a wavering, glassy image just beyond Link’s reach. His body was tightly pushed down to the depths, crushed against the solid surface at his back while he tried to flail for breath, dozens of hands holding him down, until all strength and will to fight was gone and he laid still, the last air escaping from him in tiny bubbles that fled to the top as desperately as he would, if he could.

No.. Please..

...why?

Was this the price of his failure?

Had he disappointed his people so deeply that his death was warranted?

He peered helplessly upward, at the blurred faces of the ones responsible for his execution. He couldn’t tell much and even less as darkness encroached on his attempts to cling to life. He could see the vibrant pale of their hair, the deep ruby of their merciless gazes and the mark emblazoned on some of their hovering visages; a wide, mournful eye, beholding one tragedy after another, a single tear sliding downward.

Yet it wasn’t for one lost Hylian that they wept and their guilt didn’t loosen the hold of their hands around his neck.

...Link...
A harsh gasp resounded through the Seabed Inn as Link shot upright in his bed, his chest heaving for breath as though he’d truly been drowning. His eyes searched his softly lit surroundings, his mind almost doubting the truth of where he’d awakened to find himself.

The luminous stone lamps radiated with faint blue that caressed the beds, the shelves, the desks carved into the stone and Link couldn’t have been more grateful for the light, his heart pounding with such rapid force, it felt almost like a fearful tremor under his sternum. Each little visible reminder served to soothe the shaken Champion, though his hands hurriedly smeared away the tears of relief that escaped, unpermitted.

The Hylian clenched his eyes shut, his palms coming to rest upon the sheets that clung around him, his fingers fisting the delicate material while he tried to remember something, anything. He could feel his hands shaking as they did when painful flashes of recall flooded him, branding his mind with images that burned behind his eyes like hot coals against his skin.

But as his heartbeat evened and the nervous sweat clinging to his skin turned cold, the dream faded and flitted beyond his grasp while he sunk into the dark, murky depths. He wasn’t daft enough to believe his dreams were meaningless, if legends of the prophetic capabilities of heroes before him could be trusted.

Then again, he couldn’t recall having ever seen the future. When the Calamity came, it snuck upon him, the same as everyone else. No. He had no magical, Goddess-given foresight, merely a mind that clumsily fumbled for images long behind him.

Just before the Champion resolved to lay back down and try again to properly sleep, a strange buzzing and a new source of light caught his attention. He glanced to his side, where his Sheikah Slate rested upon the bedside table and he warily reached out to take the apparently malfunctioning item in hand.

The screen was dully illuminated, a momentary flash of text flickering in a way that was almost uncomfortable to look at, though it was quickly concealed beneath a veil of static. The entire system went blank, rebooting, before opening immediately to the incomplete map. Without any prompting from Link, the item zoomed into the Great Plateau, placing a hazy beacon upon the Shrine of Resurrection.

“What?” Link whispered in confusion, his brow furrowing while he sat wondering if the piece of ancient technology was just too old to last any longer. Maybe it was giving up, not that Link could blame it, personally.

The Slate began to rotate between the image of the map and the previous message, though it was still dull and unreadable each time. The Sheikah Slate began to reboot one last time before it finally switched itself back on with its former functionality surprisingly intact, yet as the technology went back to normal, something even more questionable and bizarre occurred.

Yet another source of faint lumination cast a glow at the end of the Hylian’s bed, the light like soft, blue flame that burst spontaneously to life. A quiet jingling accompanied the light, the musical sounds the same as gentle chimes being carried on the wind as the glowing specter raised her melancholy, downcast visage to peer upon a very confused Hylian.

“Mipha?” Link rasped, his voice harsh from sleep, his eyes blinking in doubt as much as the strain of looking on her glowing image in the low light. Regardless of how quick he was to question his sanity, there she stood, gazing at him like her heart broke just to see his face. At the same time,
something in her expression silently implored.

“Were you doing this?” he asked, holding up the Sheikah Slate to make it clear what he was referring to. He watched the slow tilting movement of her head when her gaze shifted, her sad eyes regarding the Slate, her lashes lowered to cast mournful shadows over her otherwise vibrant countenance. “I don’t know what you want,” the Hylian said with a shrug. Maybe she was confused. Maybe she mistook the fear caused by his dream for true injury, and appeared with the intent to heal him.

It seemed unlikely, but Link didn’t exactly see himself as someone who could cleverly unravel unspoken mysteries, so what better conclusion could he honestly come to?

Eventually, Mipha’s image faded until it was near lightless and transparent, slowly flickering out and leaving Link alone to contemplate the unusual happenings of the unholy, early hours. He laid back down upon the comforting waver of the water mattress, attempting to settle in despite being entirely unsettled. For perhaps the first time ever, his mind was too shaken to allow easy sleep, yet somewhere in the unbroken silence, the questions and muttered thoughts of his mind lulled him into something of nervous, resting haze.

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Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Brivere, ever present in the training hall of the barracks, was continually working to improve his technique. On this particular day, however, persistent thoughts of the evening previous were dimming his normally intense focus. An errant Hylian likely wouldn't help the situation..

The Zora Prince was busy as ever with his royal duties, but there was one duty that he felt rather hesitant about.

The only ones taking it easy were Link and Estuu. The Hylian Champion, as a favor to Brivere, had set out to spy on the rebellious young Zora, but he much preferred making honest company of himself. Besides, Estuu was a nice kid, so far as Link knew..

Chapter Notes

It's probably no surprise at this point that I'm late. You all are probably just starting to expect Saturday updates. Oh! A really big thanks to OfficialUrbosa on Tumblr for some really great artwork! I'm still all warm and fuzzy over it and you all should go check them out! Their art is posted on my tumblr, too, so check it out and follow them. :)

Otherwise, please enjoy another late chapter, friends. This one came out pretty amusing, so tell me what you all think! :)

;)

The blade was heavy in his grasp, a familiar weight, an old burden. The heft that he felt, flexing in his biceps and chest was no different than naked gravity on land, and he carried the weapon like it was a part of him. The sword wasn’t any more burdensome than the rest of his aching frame, or his wandering thoughts, or the emotions he had pinned down beneath a glass casing, like a collection of butterflies.

But at least Brivere had the training halls of the barracks to release and ease his frustrations. He had wooden targets to plow through, he had techniques to practice that would stretch him to the edges of his strict, physical limitations, and he had the approaching Blood Moon to prepare for, all while he reflected on the previous night.

“My lord..” He could remember the uncertain tone of his voice. It was weak and tremulous and vulnerable, which was made all too obvious by the fact that it was outside the Knight’s usual reserve. When Sidon turned to him, he’d looked away, yet he finished his previous thought. “There is.. something I wish to confess.”

Brivere daringly raised his eyes back to look upon Sidon as he came to a halt outside the palace. They had only just managed to get away from the crowds and the noise of the political dinner party.
and the golden Zora didn’t know if it was the quiet outside or the fact that he’d hardly spoken all
night that had stoked an urge to babble.

“What is it, my dear friend?” the Prince purred in that smooth, silky voice that Brivere swore he
could feel rinsing over his scales.

He had cleared his throat, his nerves forming a tight knot underneath the lovely collar he wore. “I’ve
been contemplating some difficult matters,” Brivere said, attempting to put words to his feelings,
while praying that those words didn’t simply offend his Prince. “Frankly, I find this idea of high life
distasteful and all of these people crass and dishonest.”

“Yet haven’t you strove to reintegrate yourself and to reclaim what you know to be your blood
right?” Sidon spoke, the look on his face confused or perhaps intrigued; Brivere only snuck a glance
before his own gaze lowered again. That was the opposite of what he wanted Sidon to believe about
him and he needed to make his motivations more clear, to be sure that his Prince did not
misunderstand.

“To use a Hylian turn of phrase- it was merely to keep my head above the rising water,” Brivere
explained, hoping his words weren’t vacant and useless. He wasn’t like those other nobles and every
step he’d taken to elevate himself had come with cost, with struggle.

“It’s always like this Brivere,” the Prince uttered with a quiet sigh, his tone an uncertain thing. He
might have been trying to reassure, or he might have been expressing his own acceptance of the
undesirable but inevitable. “People hide themselves inside themselves. You do it. I do it. These
aristocrats do it. The undercity and upperlevel Zora all do it. Take it from me, it’s part of life. Like
you, most everyone is only doing it to keep themselves safe, whether it’s from humiliation,
attachment, or to hold tightly to their station and standard of living.”

The Knight scoffed, but not in derision. How was it that his Prince could be from the world of
upperclass snobbery yet he was so unlike them? They seemed completely unfeeling, whereas he felt
every little thing, a prince who was endlessly caring and understanding, perhaps to a fault.

“For so long, I believed they were superior in every way. Then at times, when I was faced with the
reality that I couldn’t do something no matter how hard I tried, it came with a fear and questioning-
maybe I really am not one of them?” the golden Zora reflected, as much as it stung for him to
verbalize his perceived mediocrity. “But the truth is, they aren’t superior. They’ve just been handed
all the advantages in order to maintain their illusion, an illusion which keeps them indulged while
those beneath them struggle just to survive.”

Just when the Knight’s anger threatened to show itself in the gleam of his sharp teeth when he spat
his words, he took a deep breath and tucked those feelings back, beneath his mask of neutrality. He
was getting off-track. “That’s not what I meant to talk about, though,” he explained. “I just wanted
you to know that nothing I do any longer will be to elevate me to that station.”

“I’m not following, Brivere,” the Zora Prince said, though he spoke these words with curious
intrigue, his golden gaze flickering across the Knight as though his true thoughts and feelings were
written plainly over every inch of him. Sidon’s eyes were a frightening, beautiful thing; they could be
warmer than the sun, but they could also make one feel like their body had been turned inside out, so
that everything meant to stay inside was suddenly visible and strewn about.

“My lord, please don’t think less of me,” the golden Zora uttered, feeling vulnerable and sure that
something beloved to him could easily slip through his fingers, if he dared to speak one wrong word.
“When I entered the tourney to become your Knight, I saw it as a chance to regain my lost title,
which I believed I was owed. I resolved to do whatever was necessary to rise up the ranks, to prove
myself, to spite all the terrible things that people spoke of me and my family. My plan was, ultimately, to..” Brivere trailed off as he hesitated. Could he really speak that truth? Could he truly confess to what a terrible person he’d been?

“Yes, go on,” Sidon encouraged, speaking like an authority, waiting for a child to admit to some bad deed. Brivere remembered; it was like his Prince already knew the truth, and surely, yes, he did, but to encourage one to speak it aloud? Maybe he’d been waiting for it, all along.

It made it only that much more difficult, yet Brivere persisted, blurring the cascade of words to remove them all from himself, “...to attempt to woo you in some way and wed you, if I could. In my young, angry, spiteful heart, becoming king over people who doubted and degraded me could maybe resolve those feelings. But, in our time together, I’ve seen a dozen others attempt the very same thing. I’ve seen countless Zora present themselves to you, all seeking a glorious rise in their already elevated stations, without regard or care for your happiness. You likely knew all along what I was seeking, yet you allowed me to be your friend anyway,” the Knight paused, looking to Sidon who stood, quietly listening to every awful word he spoke. “I just-my lord, please say something, your silence is overwhelming.”

“What shall I say?” the Prince shrugged, calm and unbothered. Brivere could recall that nonchalant movement of his shoulders, the soft remnants of a smile pulling at his lips and the warmth in his gaze that was still strong and unquestionable. “Of course I expected you to see me as an opportunity. Everyone does, so why should you be any different? It didn’t stop me from befriending you.”

“That’s precisely the cause of my moral dilemma,” Brivere said with a sigh. The bitter reality was saltwater on fresh wounds; it stung to know that his Prince had come to expect others to use him, but the Knight certainly was not surprised. “..When I realized that virtually everyone you know only vies for your favor, as a means of gain, I couldn’t personally bring myself to do the same. I decided I would see you as a person, not an opportunity. You deserve every bit of my loyalty and protection, and so much more than that, because you are a wonderful, delightful, kind person. No matter what, I’m thankful just to know you.”

“And you’re a dear, true friend,” Sidon purred, with one of his warm, healing smiles stretched over his countenance. “In my life, much as I’ve openly distributed my social graces, friends like you are rare. No matter what others may think or say, you will always be treasured by me.”

“That means.. So very much,” the golden Zora’s tongue was heavy when he muttered these words, his eyes downcast while his cheeks turned warm. “To think, a life spent trying to prove myself, yet being seen, being accepted by you, regardless of my blood or ability.. and suddenly all of the previous alienation feels less heavy. I know that your sister, Lady Mipha, was spoken of as a healer.. But I think you are certainly her equal, even without the magic she possessed.”

“Now you’re just flattering me,” the Prince laughed, his tail flicking softly in embarrassment.

“I’m not! I promise you that I’m not,” Brivere spoke up quickly in reassurance, his own tone taking on a more light-hearted sound as he was chorused by the Prince’s laughter. “I’m being as sincere as one can be, given the circumstances.. Perhaps, where my feelings are concerned, I could be biased, but..”

The Knight fell still, catching his breath from the quick, aggressive series of maneuvers he’d been practicing over and over. His arms slowly went slack, the sword lowering just enough that its weight rested upon the ground. The way his heart was racing while his chest heaved for breath was just as desperate and hurried as it had been the previous night; he had felt it pumping hard enough that he might have rung like a bell, if he’d been in armor.
He’d been waiting for so long, shrouding out the truth of his feelings, because he couldn’t bear for his dear Prince to believe he was just another person, out to use him. But there Sidon was, smiling and warm and beautiful and Brivere felt like he would burst into a thousand little pieces as rosy red as the Prince’s scales.

“Sidon,” the golden Zora whispered, his tongue wishing to feel the sound of the Prince’s name, to hold it there so that every drop of blood in his body could eventually touch it. He drifted nearer, his feet making soft patters as he did and the Prince looked down at him with curiosity but also with a quiet wanting that welcomed Brivere closer and closer still.

The Knight’s head came to rest against the Prince’s chest, his lips pressing gently to the soft scales below his collarbones, a moment of hesitation passing in the absence of any effort to reject the touch, then Brivere opened his mouth and bit down.

“Unn..” A quiet sound was softly carried on the Prince’s breath, his body shivering in delight at the show of affection and desire and he mumbled the other Zora’s name before his hand was brought up to rest upon Brivere’s tail, Sidon’s sharp fingerscales raking gently along it as he pulled the Knight in, more tightly to himself.

But Brivere wasn’t bold enough to sink his teeth in any further than he already had and he allowed the pinched flesh to slip from between his lips, apologetically kissing the reddened indents he’d made. He slowly turned his yellow eyes upward, searching his Prince’s face for a reaction to what was essentially a declaration of the Knight’s romantic intentions, yet he sank into breathless, woeful silence when he found an expression of uncertainty.

“Brivere,” Sidon whispered, “as much as.. as much as I want you and as much as I would like this.. It also wouldn’t be fair to you and to..” It was unusual to see the Prince so lost for the right words, yet he trailed off, shaking his head in doubt. “..it wouldn’t be fair for me to be with you, at a time when my own heart is in such chaos.”

A deep, disappointed sigh was quietly elicited from the golden Zora, but he gave his head a gentle nod and stepped back. “..it’s the Hylian, isn’t it?” he asked, his voice dispirited and hollow. “No, you need not say anything- I already knew as much. I may not be able to read the secrets written on your heart, but I’m plenty observant. In truth, that’s why I wanted to make my own feelings clear to you.. For the fear that the time for such a thing was waning and that my chance may be lost.”

“No, it isn’t a matter of time running out, my friend,” the Prince’s voice was gentle and reassuring and he shook his head, denying and pushing away his Knight’s fears. “In fact, it’s right the opposite. I’m trying to take my time, to see what might be, to allow myself to examine all of the possibilities. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Brivere answered, forcing the edges of his mouth into something of a smile to hide the sting of rejection. His heart felt like a vase with cracks spanning every inch of its surface, yet it miraculously remained in one piece. Still, his concern was and always would be for his Prince’s happiness, so he would hold it together, for him. “I understand, my lord.”

“You’re not just silently judging me?” Sidon asked, his tone light enough that his query sounded almost joking, but he dipped his head lower, searching for eye contact that Brivere hesitantly gave.

“Never,” the Knight breathed. “However, I judge him plenty. And I worry for you.”

“Someone is very focused,” a quiet voice echoed from a slight distance, snapping the golden Knight from his reverie. The images of the previous night, and of Prince Sidon’s thankful expression faded away as Brivere was brought back to the present and his present surroundings. One long forefin fell
over the Zora’s shoulder when he glanced back to notice the Hylian Champion had somehow managed to infiltrate the barracks.

“How did you find me here?” Brivere spoke the first question of a series of inquiries that sprang to mind.

“I asked around,” the Hylian admitted with a dull shrug, as though this task had been simple and easily accomplished. Did he even have clearance to enter here? “People said you never leave the training halls.”

“What do you want?” the Zora’s voice was a deep, bitter growl, his tail rigid and flicking in response to the intrusion.

Meanwhile, the Hylian glanced aside, blinking like he didn’t expect his interruption to be an annoyance. Brivere seriously doubted this boy ever considered anything or anyone outside of himself and he certainly didn’t deserve Sidon’s caring, considerate attention, when he was absolutely hopeless to ever return it.

“How I still stalking your brother for you today?” he quipped, putting particular emphasis on the word ‘stalking’. It was just honestly shocking that someone with such an incredible chip on their shoulder could ever become a Knight, much less a Champion. If all of the former Kingdom of Hyrule’s forces had been this brash and undisciplined and just utterly selfish, it was no wonder that the Calamity felled them all so quickly.

“Not ‘stalking’,” Brivere corrected, his own voice reclaiming its usual impassive sound as he placed his weapon momentarily aside. “You’re just checking up on him, for me.”

“Right,” the boy grumbled, his entire presence giving these vibes that fell somewhere in between ‘bored’ and ‘angry with existence.’ “Following him around and finding out what he’s up to and reporting it back to you isn’t stalking. It’s actually closer to spying.”

“Why are you here?” The Zora attempted to get this conversation back onto some kind of reasonable track, his patience not even close to enough to deal with this Hylian wretch, despite the fact that he considered himself remarkably patient.

“I thought it would be a good idea to find out where I need to be, to wait for him,” Link explained, speaking like Brivere had simply ‘forgotten’ this detail, whereas he had actually planned to get around to it, but later.

“His classes don’t start for several hours,” Brivere spoke to imply that if the Hylian went straight there, he’d be waiting about for a long while. “Do you have a map?”

“Yeah, something like that,” he sighed, at last drawing nearer to where Brivere stood, fussing with an object that hung from his belt. When the Hylian was near enough, he held the unusual object up for the Zora to see. Brivere had never laid eyes on anything like the softly glowing device, but he recognized the map of Zora’s Domain easily enough.

“He hasn’t even bothered going to the classes, from what I understand, so you’ll need to wait for him here,” Brivere pointed, one sharp fingerscale lightly tapping the screen. “This is near where we live. He’s sure to pass by on his way to.. wherever it is that he wanders.”

“Right,” the Hylian just nodded while he posted some kind of placemarker on the electronic map.

“Do you plan to assist, on the night of the Blood Moon?” Brivere asked, attempting civility, though he had no plans to allow the Hylian to bask in it. “Even if your techniques are sloppy, you were
essentially the hero in the fight for the fort. I’m sure your aid would be appreciated.”

“I can’t,” the shorter male mumbled with a strange, uncertain sound to his voice. His answer gave no indication that he’d made other plans, merely that he was uncomfortable with the question itself and didn’t wish to say any more. Still, he attempted to fill in the curious silence that followed, likely noticing Brivere’s suspicion. “Actually, I need to go back to Hateno before that, anyway.”

“But you’re staying for the festival?” the Zora questioned, sure that he heard the Prince mention how fitting it was that his Champion friend would actually be present for the Champion Festival.

“Yes,” the Hylian answered with an awkward, questioning tone to his voice, as if to say, ‘Of course. Why would you even ask that?’

“You won’t make it back to Hateno Village in a single day of traveling, even on horseback,” Brivere stated with a doubtful shake of his head.

“How would you know?” Link narrowed his eyes, equally as doubtful, judging from the expression on his oddly flat, Hylian features. “You’ve probably never traveled to Hateno Village, nor ridden a horse. How would you know what kind of distance is possible to travel?”

So now it was apparent; not only did Hylian Knights have terrible fighting form and sloppy technique, they also had poor judgement. Brivere let out a sigh that might have seemed impatient if it weren’t so disappointed. “Because I’ve looked at a map more than once in my life and I’m capable of judging the distance one can travel within a certain amount of time.”

The Prince was fastidious about his schedule, despite his habit of running horribly late. He spent the early morning hours going over paperwork and business, as well as laying his plans for the coming days. He had developed this habit as a means to combat his questionable attention span, though it had still taken years for him to gain the discipline he required to keep himself on task.

Laflat always appeared in his doorway a few hours before noon, a helpful indicator of the passage of time. She greeted the Prince in the usual breathless tone from the climb up his tower and he gave a tiny wave of his hand to permit her to enter. Before she was able to approach, he fidgeted with the royal purple shawl draped around his shoulders, in an attempt to conceal the fresh bitemark printed on the pale of his chest.

“Isn’t that your winter garb?” she asked, honing in immediately on the odd occurrence while she set down a thankfully light load of documents and reports upon his desk. Sidon quickly glanced the paperwork at the top of the stack, which was in regards to the naming ceremony for the newly acquired fort and he picked it up, skimming it.

“You’re quite right, Laflat!” he said with a soft laugh. “Nothing escapes your thorough attention to detail, does it? Truly, how do you manage to impress me with even the most idle-seeming comments? Your sheer excellence is overwhelming.”

“Oh,” the pinkish Zora let out a flustered titter. “Well, thank you, your Highness. You’re too kind.”

“It seems you got your wish,” Sidon smoothly changed the subject, flashing an ever-charming smile though his eyes were still tracing over the words on the page in his hand. “They’ve decided to call the fort the ‘Elegy Spire’ in memoriam of the warriors who gave their lives to take the fort back from the forces of darkness,” he read the words aloud, chuckling. “Personally I thought ‘Fort Boko’ was much more light-hearted.”
“Forgive me, your Highness, but you are such a kid,” Laflat teased, carefully pulling a small, glass bottle from her shoulder bag as she did and she placed it on the Prince’s desk with a quiet tap.

Sidon’s gaze flashed to the bottle when it was set down, his slitted pupils tightening while he looked upon the item; the bottle contained a dark, blue-violet concoction that appeared to have a metallic, reflective shine, though it was actually a faint, glowing luminosity.

“Uhh,” the Prince uttered in uncertainty, much like a diner who’d been delivered the wrong order. “Laflat, do you mind returning this to the Basilica? I simply can’t take it yet.”

“Highness?” the secretary spoke up in question, watching as the red Zora pushed the bottle away with a single finger, like he couldn’t bear to even be near it. “Why wouldn’t you be able to?”

“Well, I recently had my armor adjusted to fit my present size for the purpose of facing down that lynel who’s been troubling us,” he explained, remaining pleasant enough. “Master Dento will have a fit if he’s made to adjust it yet again.”

“Are you sure, Highness?” the young woman persisted, an oddly worried sound to her voice. “This is the third occasion that you’ve skipped taking your spirit potion. You do know that it’s a long held tradition of our people to heighten the strength and vitality of our royal family in this way, right?”

“I’m aware, Laflat,” Sidon responded, giving his head a gentle nod, though his tone fell short of his typical enthusiasm.

“I’m just... concerned.” Laflat bundled her hands before herself, clearly wanting to stand her ground on this subject, though she lacked any real authority to do so. Then again, maybe she really was worried.

“Please, there’s no need for worry,” the Prince hesitantly resumed his previously vibrant, reassuring tone, giving the secretary by his side a smile. “I will be quite alright and will continue taking the potions when it’s convenient.”

The pinkish Zora let out a quiet, defeated sigh, and picked up the bottle to tuck back into her shoulder bag. “Very well, your Highness.”

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It honestly wouldn’t matter if Link donned his Sheikah gear and guzzled down a dozen stealth potions, nothing could possibly make him, a Hylian, fade into the background in a city full of Zoras. It just wasn’t happening and trying harder only made him even more obvious.

He ducked behind one of the numerous elaborately carved pillars, just trying to keep himself out of the line of sight of the boy he was waiting for. Each and every passerby, without fail, turned a questioning glance in his direction. A vibrant, green-scaled Zora who was working right across from where Link stood, between every few taps of his hammer and chisel, would peer suspiciously toward the Hylian.

Link was honestly expecting the city guard to come by and harass him at any minute; being a racial minority was such a nerve-wracking experience. He finally smiled and waved at the green Zora, in the hopes that he would knock it off with the staring.

Thankfully, the target of Link’s stakeout eventually showed his adorable face and the Hylian flattened himself behind the pillar, managing to catch even more stares as he did, but luckily Estuu didn’t notice him.
‘Just be the pillar’, he told himself, ‘be the pillar.’

Leaning out ever so slightly to catch a glance when Estuu passed by, the spying Hylian couldn’t help but think that the Zora boy actually did look like he was on his way to lessons of some sort. He was carrying one of those waterproof rucksacks that Zoras produced with fish-scale leather; it was slung over one shoulder, the strap ducking just beneath the scarf Estuu wore around his head and neck.

The boy just sauntered along, his eyes downcast, his tiny frame weaving between other people who hardly appeared to even notice him. The young Zora walked toward one of the ledges of the Uppercity construction, dipping into the water that cascaded over the edge with the flow almost at his knees when he leapt over the edge, on his way to the lower levels.

From what Link knew, the Zoras apparently had some kind of grand temple at the furthest depths of the water that pooled beneath the city; it also appeared that Estuu was, in fact, headed there. How convenient would it be if he decided not to skip classes on the exact day his older brother sent somebody to spy on him?

As Estuu disappeared from sight, Link hauled all sorts of ass to follow him, again, making a huge spectacle of himself. From all sides, Zoras had stopped what they were doing just to look up in curiosity and concern, because, wow, a Hylian running! Link figured, if they were already watching him, he might as well make a show of it and he did something of a clumsy flip off the edge of the upper level, transitioning into a dive before he hit the water below.

Compared to the acrobatics that their kind were seemingly naturally talented at, Link’s tricks were assuredly unimpressive but he still felt cheeky, so maybe it didn’t matter so much.

The Hylian poked his head slowly over the surface, embodying a swimming lizalfos as he sneakily peered here and there for any sign of his target. If Estuu was busily diving to the abyss below, Link knew he wouldn’t find him. At this point, however, he was so invested that he could feel himself growing hopeful he would catch sight of the young Zora.

Within moments, Estuu burst forth from the rushing current that flowed around the city, coming to an easy landing on the river bank. From there, he began up the path that led outside the city, his pace relaxed and casual. Even so, while Link paddled hard to pursue, the strength of the current began to drag him downstream faster than he could make it to land; he was an idiot for leaving behind that Zora tunic and Mipha’s ghost was probably laughing at him.

By the time Link made it across, he was soggy and dripping, his boots sloshing with every step he took. Estuu was at the crest of the hill and disappeared from sight once again while the Hylian ran to catch up, already breathless from the swim as he bolted uphill. Being a spy was even more exhausting than regular adventuring.

The Hylian managed to make it up the hill just in time to see the Zora he was pursuing meander around a jagged outcropping from the surrounding cliffs and he slowed to a slightly more subtle jog, finding that his boots were still making sloppy, wet sounds that only got worse the slower he went. He attempted to walk more softly as he approached the outcropping, edging nearer and peering around the corner in order to catch a glimpse of Estuu.

However, the glimpse he got was of Estuu turned and waiting for him, his arms folded over his chest and a confused look tinting his usually subtle expression.

“Oh, good thing I caught up with you!” Link babbled with a start, gulping and panting to catch his breath. He really needed to complete more shrines. “It was very important,” he said, a questioning intonation to his words. He should have prepared excuses beforehand. He had all that time while he
was waiting, but he didn’t. Was he bound to always rush into everything without an ounce of forethought?

The small Zora stared up, into the Hylian’s face, though his eyes seemed to be looking at Link’s chin or maybe his neck? The boy still had that same confused and moderately dubious look on his face and raised his shoulders in a shrug, lifting his hands to further gesture his questioning. He was clearly confused as to why Link was following him, or maybe it was that he hadn’t been expecting his pursuer to be Link? Or, he could have been asking why it was so important for Link to do so in the first place. Honestly, Link was much better at staying quiet than he was at interpreting the silence of others.

“What?” Link said, dragging his vowels and laughing awkwardly. “I thought we were friends. You followed me around for days while we were out on that big mission, but it’s weird when I follow you?”

Estuu, of course, said nothing. He did nothing. He maintained the dubiousness printed on his face, though it slowly appeared to shift into full-blown suspicion.

“Alright. I hate lying like this and I don’t think you’re stupid,” Link groaned with a sigh of defeat, his voice regaining its typical, less expressive sound. “Your brother told me to follow you. Will you stop grilling me now?”

The younger male, too, let out a sigh, though it was more of a disappointed huff, and he turned on heel, resuming his previous course completely unhindered by the Hylian’s presence. He probably thought Link would take a hike, leaving Estuu to take a literal hike. Link had committed himself to this, plus he didn’t really have anything better to be doing. That was probably also the real reason he agreed, because Brivere was an absolute tool.

In complete silence, the duo continued to follow the trail up the mountain. Estuu walked a bit ahead of Link as the Hylian gave himself a slight rest from all of the running. He supposed that the Zora actually wasn’t all that troubled by essentially being escorted, because Link would have expected him to attempt an escape, if so.

When the trail finally plateaued, they walked only a bit further before the smaller boy scurried toward a cluster of tight-knitted trees. There was one tree among the bunch that was much taller than all the rest, the apparent progenitor of those surrounding it. Estuu, however, padded up to one of the shorter trees; it appeared unhealthy, its branches shriveled and covered with moss and its leaves as sparse as an elderly Hylian’s hair. Near the ground, there was a deep hollow in the trunk of this tree, which tall, thick grasses had grown over and shrouded.

Estuu reached into the hollow of the tree, unabashedly drawing out a silver bow and a quiver full of arrows.

“Wow, that’s actually a pretty nice one,” Link muttered, more impressed than he should have been as he leaned over the younger male’s shoulder. He quickly chased away his growing admiration for the little rebel’s devious form of resourcefulness, stating, “Oh, right, your brother told me to stop you from using any bows.”

The boy spared the Hylian a sideways glance, the look on his face utterly plain, but still seeming to say, ‘you’re kidding me, right?’ He didn’t hesitate for an instant, sliding the strap of the quiver over the shoulder opposite from his rucksack, then he followed it with the bow so it rested just overtop. From there, he wove through the tight cluster of trees and Link thankfully had little trouble following. A fully grown Zora would be another story.
The Hylian stayed right on Estuu’s tail, actually a bit amazed as he was shown to a place he hadn’t previously discovered; he wondered if the Zoras knew this was here? It turned out that the trees effectively shrouded the entrance to a cave that was narrow enough that even Link had to turn himself sideways to edge through. It was damp, and echoed with an ever-present trickle of water, but it was illuminated by small deposits of luminous stone and numerously growing silent shrooms.

Link spoke quietly while he and Estuu splashed slowly along, his voice a resounding echo in the tight space. “I told Brivere that I didn’t understand why you weren’t allowed to use a bow, because to me, that seems like a fine skill to have. Of course, he wouldn’t tell me why you weren’t allowed to use one,” Link shrugged. “I trust you more, not saying a single word, over anything Brivere says.”

A soft but genuine titter was elicited from the small Zora and Link couldn’t help but think that he must have a pretty difficult relationship with his brother. He didn’t ask why, because it wasn’t important and it wasn’t his business. Oh, also, because Estuu didn’t speak.

“So, sneaking off to shoot a bow...” Link continued to attempt casual, one-sided conversation. “That’s really all you’re doing?”

Estuu, as expected, just offered a soft nod of his head in response. Of course a kid wouldn’t really admit to doing anything bad, right? Well, especially not to somebody he expected to report back to his sheltering sibling.

The chasm in the mountain finally opened up on the other side to a quaint meadow, where there was a decently sized pond which stretched out toward a trickling fall that dropped over the side of a cliff of indeterminate height, from Link’s viewpoint. He placed his hands on his hips while his eyes traced across the view in slow appreciation. Once he’d taken it in, he looked down at the Zora boy, speaking again. “You know, if this is the kind of stuff you like to do, you should just come with me on my ‘adventures’. This is all I ever do.”

For the first time since the beginning of the entire escapade, a faint smile found its way to Estuu’s face and he glanced in Link’s direction, his tail flapping in hopeful excitement. The Hylian chuckled at the kid’s enthusiasm, but he shook his head and raised his hand to dismiss the previous statement. “Don’t look at me like that. You know your brother wouldn’t allow it.”

Link couldn’t be sure if the boy was just desperate in his boredom, or if he really couldn’t recognize hypotheticals, but as soon as he took back his previous statement, Estuu slumped and moped away in disappointment. Maybe he just liked to imagine himself saving Hyrule. Link would hand the responsibility over to him, if Estuu were older and if it were even possible.

The boy began to make his way around the placid body of water, and Link followed in a slow, casual gait, blue eyes staring out over the surface; it was an oddly pleasing sight to gaze thoughtlessly at. Still, the Hylian attempted to make more easy conversation with his silent companion. “It’s probably too dangerous anyway,” he explained. “I mean, I’m not good at protecting myself and you already know from experience how bad I am at keeping others safe.”

With careful, precise movements, Estuu stepped up onto a fallen tree that stretched out toward an outcropping of stone in the center of the pond. He hoisted himself up with ease, his tiny toeclaws gripping the wood like a perched islander hawk. Link followed, though he did so with a bit less grace; the log was completely saturated with water, which made it a good bit more slippery for him.

“I just want you to know,” Link began as they walked across the makeshift bridge, “you being completely quiet all the time isn’t a problem for me. Actually, I have times when I don’t want to talk, or I choose not to talk, or I feel like.. there’s nothing I can say.”
The boy turned a glance over his shoulder while the Hylian rambled, obviously listening, regardless. As such, Link continued, “With that said, you clearly understand, so.. do you have ways that you can express your thoughts in response? Hand signs, maybe? You’re educated, so I’m assuming you’re also literate. Can you write things out?”

This time, the boy didn’t bother to look back, though his tail flicked and he let out a frustrated sigh.

“You can’t?” Link guessed, receiving a hard, irritated nod of the young Zora’s head in reply. Clearly, he didn’t appreciate being doubted. Either that or Link was intruding on his peace; maybe this was his version of Mount Bullshit? Bullshit Pond- that was it.

“Okay so, you can, but,” the Hylian gently persisted, “..you don’t want to?”

Another, slightly more calm nod was granted in response and Link gave a nod of his own. This was still better communication than he had with Prince Sidon, anyway.

“Yeah,” Link breathed, “that’s only gonna make life harder for you. People are always focused on words and if you don’t have the right ones, or you don’t know what to say right away.. People start assuming that maybe you just aren’t even thinking.”

Estuu paused, looking back in Link’s direction again, his lips forming a tight line. With minimal expression, he still genuinely appeared as though he were saying, ‘what the hell are you going on about?’

“Yeah, that’s probably a bit obscure,” Link muttered, dismissing his previous point. As he did, Estuu bent himself toward the boulder, clambering up with his hands and feet braced against the surface, scaling the damn thing with as much ease as one of those nutty mountain goats. Link scoffed while he watched, mumbling ‘we’re not built for climbing, Hylian Champion,’ in a quiet, mocking tone.

Once Estuu made it to the top and stood upright, brushing himself off, Link trailed after him. This place was a nice hangout spot, he had to admit. And it also wasn’t already overrun with numerous other rebellious Zora children, so Estuu definitely received the credit, in Link’s mind.

“So, how old are you really?” the Hylian spoke up, actually curious. He understood Zora aging for the most part, but he could still use a bit of additional reference in regards to Estuu specifically. “I don’t know if you realize, but Hylians age a lot faster than Zoras so, even though I can tell that you’re still a young Zora, I’m sure a Hylian of your age would be a young adult or maybe older?”

Dutifully focused, Estuu’s slitted eyes were searching the water that stretched to the drop off like he was seeking out a hidden Korok. Link waited for a few moments, expecting maybe a delayed answer, but it just never came.

“Come on, I’m trying to maintain the conversation here,” Link complained, hoping to be thrown a bone, or else this would get boring sooner rather than later. “You can answer with your hands right?”

With hesitance that was apparent, Estuu raised his hands before himself and Link leaned to one side in order to get a better look. The boy was holding up three fingers with one hand, whereas all five fingers of the other were extended.

Link spoke a questioning, “Thirty-five?” to confirm, getting a nod in reply as Estuu dropped his hands back to his sides, his tail suddenly flicking again. The Hylian just nodded, continuing on to say, “So you’re getting to be more of a teenager. Well, an adolescent. We say teenager because we reach adolescence between the ages of thirteen to eighteen.”

When Estuu gave little in response, Link just shrugged, and grumbled, “I guess that explains your
rebelliousness and your awful attitude.”

Finally, the boy offered a clue that he was even listening, turning his head in Link’s direction with such force that his forefins flapped against his chin. The young Zora had his eyes narrowed enough that his dark eyelids were starkly apparent against his complexion. He looked a good bit like his brother when he made this face and Link couldn’t help but chuckle, saying, “I’m kidding.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask…” the Hylian began anew, trailing off for a moment. “Well, not really, but since I’m here, I might as well. Brivere doesn’t want you shooting a bow and he won’t say why. That alone is pretty suspicious. On top of that, when we first met, you told me that you didn’t know how to use a bow. You pretended to be terrible at it, like really terrible,” Link rambled on, watching Estuu for any sign of a response, while the boy finally drew the bow from over his shoulder. “You almost emptied my quiver at a single octorock.. but then later on, it was pretty obvious that you were really good at shooting. It saved me a lot of trouble, because you can apparently kill moblins with a single shot, so I can’t complain. But, what I still can’t understand is why? Why lie?”

While Estuu maintained his silent focus, seemingly ignoring more or less everything Link was saying, Link finally got bored enough to lower himself to a seated position, stretching his legs out so they dangled over the slope of the massive boulder. He hovered in quiet introspection for a few thoughtful minutes, zoning out as he stared at the water again, then finally he attempted to revive the previous topic. “It’s not like I don’t understand having secrets,” he quietly confided, kicking one foot in irritation as he pondered his own inescapable problems. “I have things that I wouldn’t dare think of telling anybody, especially if I cared what they thought of me.”

“I could probably tell you,” Link stated with a bitter laugh. “No offense, but since you can’t talk, you can’t really tell anybody else and even if you did, people would just say that you were crazy or that you were making things up. You’ve already lied to me once, so we both know you’re not the most honest kid.”

Idly, Link pulled his own bow from over his shoulder, focusing on the water as though he planned to shoot at fish as well, but he hadn’t caught sight of a single one, yet. He was starting to think this pond was devoid of life, actually. Estuu spared him a curious glance which lasted for less than a second before he looked back to the deathly still pond. It was at this point that the boy drew an arrow and nocked it to his bowstring, his gaze searching and intense.

Slowly, quietly, Estuu drew back the bowstring, hovering in an extended pause, not taking a single breath that could unsteady his hand. At last, he released the string, firing the arrow into the deep blue of the pond and it disappeared entirely beneath the surface.

Link felt almost certain that the Zora had merely shot randomly into the water, because that arrow was entirely gone. To his amazement and surprise, a few moments later, a fish bobbed to the surface. “That fish was obviously swimming pretty far down,” Link uttered in pure astonishment, though an explanation drifted to the forefront of his mind at the same pace as the dead, floating fish. “Right. I guess you would have that electrical sense thing, being a Zora. Your kind are seriously amazing hunters, especially considering how naturally adapted you are for it. And your kind eats mostly meat, right? Again, I just can’t see why your brother wouldn’t want you to use a bow. Hunting like this is basically a natural instinct.”

Estuu wasn’t at all looking in Link’s direction, but the Hylian still saw the eyeroll that the boy gave him. He gave no response, of course, placing his bow back over his shoulder and dove into the pond to retrieve his quarry. The swim was quick and easy; he closed the distance between himself and the fish at a pace that was rapid yet calm, then he grabbed his kill and dipped beneath the surface.
Link had a passing thought that maybe the pond was so empty because of Estuu’s hunting habits, if this was the only place he frequented. It was possible.

Soon enough, the boy breached the surface with a powerful leap, coming to land back upon the boulder by Link’s side, splashing the Hylian in the process. He was still damp so it didn’t really matter, but he shielded his face out of instinct.

The young Zora straightened, tugging the arrow from where it was buried, straight through the fish’s head, in one eye and out the other. He returned the arrow to his quiver, handing the fish off to Link without a second thought.

“Oh, for me?” Link spouted in mock surprise, putting his own bow away before he embarrassed himself. He was already humiliated enough that he attempted to ‘teach’ this kid how to shoot. What an idiot. “You’re too kind,” he thanked Estuu, hoping there wasn’t some kind of odd gifting ritual between Zoras that he was unaware of. That did give him an idea, though.

“So,” the Hylian again attempted to renew the weird, pointless chatter while he stuffed the fish into his own pack. “What if I told you my deepest, darkest secret? And in exchange, you tell me why Brivere doesn’t let you hunt?”

Estuu’s arms were immediately crossed over his chest, his eyes narrowing again as he gave the Hylian another suspicious stare. If the boy had some kind of shit list, it seemed Link was on it today. Still, he couldn’t help but laugh over not even being trustworthy enough for a kid to believe in. What did that say about Sidon, he wondered?

“You still trusted me after I got you swallowed by a Hinox, but you can’t tell me your dark secrets? Come on, man. You can only ride the intrigue of mystery for so long before it gets old and even I lose interest,” Link joked, making his best attempt at being convincing, though it was more likely that he was coming off desperate. “I promise that I won’t tell anybody, no matter what you tell me. In all of our interactions, have I ever done anything to hurt you? Do I really seem that invested in ruining some Zora kid’s life?”

As expected, Estuu was yet unconvinced and after a slight pause, Link added, “I won’t tell your brother anything. Well, nothing he doesn’t already know. He already knows that you’re doing this and rather than preventing it himself, he sent me. I don’t even know what to take from that, honestly.”

With a little grumble, Estuu finally turned on heel and dove into the water, disappearing beneath the surface. Link had oddly never considered that Zoras could submerge themselves for hours, just for the sake of being passive-aggressive, until this moment. However, when Estuu reappeared at the edge of the pond, his head slowly rising up from beneath the water, he casually walked from the shallows, up the rocky bank and back onto dry land. Glancing back, he gestured for Link to follow.

The Hylian could only hope that maybe, maybe, he was finally getting somewhere. It made perfect sense for one to actually build relationships before being allowed to know dark secrets, but Link had been starting to think it was a lost cause. Then again, the kid could want to show him something irrelevant, like an oddly shaped rock or a deactivated guardian; he wasn’t sure what kids these days were into.

Link, too, trod into the water, sinking further under than he intended. He paddled after Estuu, shaking his head in hopes of knocking his dripping fringe back from his eyes. The boy, meanwhile, was just flicking the water from himself and slightly wringing his headscarf; both the material and the boy’s scales perfectly constructed for the sole purpose of letting water glide right off. The Hylian was not far behind, his feet finally striking shallow ground beneath the water and he dragged himself out
of the pond, a sopping, cascading mess of absorbent clothing and wet hair.

When Link made it to the shore, Estuu began away once more, leaving the Hylian to trail along after him. The boy didn’t go far, meandering over to yet another outcropping of stone, which he crawled up onto, again, pretty decent at climbing despite it apparently being something that was difficult for Zoras. Estuu laid back atop the flat surface at the top, folding his arms behind his head while Link skidded his way up to join him.

That was right; Zoras liked to bask, or something, right? Link admitted, the warmth of the stone did feel nice since he was dripping wet, but the Zora boy probably didn’t appreciate having his basking spot soaked by the Hylian’s lack of waterproofing. Oh well, it was his fault for asking Link to follow him. Link sat himself next to the sprawled Zora with a wet plop, and Estuu sat himself upright, taking the bow, quiver and his rucksack from his back and setting them aside.

The boy pulled his rucksack onto his lap, however, unsealing it and reaching in. Link watched in curious interest, because no matter what he said, Estuu was entirely mysterious and it did stoke those quiet questions that whispered in your mind and refused to leave you alone. All the boy pulled from the pack, though, was an old-looking book; it was very worn, with numerous cracks and creases traversing the binding. The lettering on the cover was equally cracked and faded, though it was still readable enough to make out: ‘The Cursed Girl. A Novel Series by The Red Herring.’

“Well, can I see it?” Link asked, though Estuu looked at his wet frame warily. He held the book out for the Hylian to see, but drew it back quickly when Link reached for it. He settled for just gazing on the pages while the boy flipped open to the cover. The first page had some kind of handwritten note, which Estuu quickly skipped past, coming instead to the summary page.

‘Once, the Zora people lived in harmony and fellowship, upholding the bonds forged between their people and the forces of light across the land of Hyrule. However, a great darkness descended across these lands, shrouding and suffocating all that was good and just. The Zora people were scattered light through a prism, fragmenting and lost as the devastation grew. Yet in this time of chaos, a young girl named Lorelei was swallowed up, like numerous hundreds before her, only to accomplish a feat never seen before; she survived. Lorelei, though she lived, was touched by the darkness and its curse soaked into her every scale, permeating her being. This curse would give her the very edge she needed to save her people and her world. However, it was also not without price, for each time she used the curse to aid the forces of light, it slowly but surely began to kill her.’

“Relatable,” Link quipped, raising a brow in intrigue. Estuu was obviously confused as to what the Hylian could possibly mean, his head snapping quickly in his direction when Link said this.

Estuu didn’t wait for an explanation, instead shaking his head and flipping past a large chunk of the pages, coming to somewhere at almost the middle of the story. With sharp fingerscales, he made a careful, precise indication, pointing out one particular line. Link leaned in further and read over the sentence, speaking aloud, “If those around me insist that I am a beast, am I truly obligated to try and try to prove them wrong?”

With a sigh, Link shook his head and answered, “I really hope this isn’t your way of trying to tell me things, because I’m terrible at using obscure hints to come to solid conclusions.”

A small, quiet grumble came from the Zora, his patience short and his frustration already blatantly clear at not being understood. He flipped quickly but carefully to a different page, stopping, reading over the text, then bypassing a few more pages when he did not find what he wanted. It was already pretty incredible that he appeared to know the story well enough to find specific lines of text with relative speed. He did, within a few moments, find the bit he was looking for, pointing once again.
“The beast did something unthinkable, unforgivable, but they didn’t kill it,” Link read, “Instead, they ripped out its fangs and cut off its claws, as though they could fool themselves into thinking that it was no longer a beast.” The Hylian gave his head a slow, uncertain nod, adding, “I’m not convinced that this is for kids.”

Estuu ignored Link’s comment, dragging a careful finger a bit down the page, pointing out some snippet of dialogue. “I’ve done unthinkable, unforgivable things, too.”

“Are you saying you did something bad?” Link asked. That seemed a pretty obvious conclusion, without Estuu’s hints. The question was really more about the severity of this bad deed.

With gentle hands, Estuu pushed past another chunk of the story, leafing through the pages until he found another line he wished to point out. “Lorelei felt the approach of another, but she did not move; she knew it was that blue Zora from before.”

“I have no idea what this is supposed to mean,” Link huffed in exasperation. He swore, for all the thinking involved in unraveling Estuu’s riddles, there needed to be a spirit orb at the end of this. “Something bad.. A blue Zora..”

At first, Estuu sheepishly nodded as his Hylian friend attempted to puzzle out the answers to the presented mystery. Link’s thinking process was clearly too slow for Estuu’s lack of patience, however, so the boy attempted to make the answer a bit more clear. He huffed in frustration, reaching up to place one hand over his right eye, then he made a grimacing face, showing the sharp points of his teeth.

Watching, the Hylian was at first just slightly amused by the boy’s exaggerated impressions, unsure what this was all about for a few dim moments. Then, his mind wandered back to the battle for the fort, to the incident between Betaal and Estuu. He remembered; she hit him, knocking him back, calling him a monster for reasons Link was unaware of and it wasn’t as though anybody explained it to him at the time.

“Wait, is it something to do with Betaal?” Link asked, his tone turning oddly excited by the sheer fact that he felt like he was finally onto something, whereas Estuu immediately looked away, his body rigid, his tail starting to flap nervously. Still, the boy gave a tiny nod.

“Well, what about her?” the Hylian asked, not catching on himself, but hungry for additional details now that he was on the right track.

The Zora whined at the prodding, his feet pattering against the surface of the stone like a young kid about to throw a tantrum. At first he crossed his arms in defiance, though as Link just sat waiting for answers, he let out a tiny sigh of defeat, raising one hand to point to his eye.

Again, Link needed a moment to think on what this meant; Betaal was missing an eye and Estuu was trying to say something about that, right? The Hylian sat silently pondering, until he considered the dead fish tucked into his pack and how its eyes were gouged by the shot that killed it.

“Wait,” Link spat in utter shock, turning sharply to stare at the Zora boy with surprise clear on his face. “Are you saying that you shot Betaal in the eye?”

The boy’s head dropped lower and Link gasped from the sheer force of the revelation that had been staring him in the face all along. “That’s why she hit you,” he said, his voice slightly risen in volume while the answers washed over him. “That’s why Brivere doesn’t want you using a bow. That’s definitely why he didn’t want to tell me. Wow.”
Link shrugged his own gear from his back as the pooled water around them dried and he sat them aside. He laid himself back, simmering these newly demystified facts calmly enough. That alone appeared to worry the Zora boy and he leaned over Link in questioning, seeming to expect judgement and thorough condemnation. Instead, the Hylian idly commented, saying, “I feel really unobservant now for taking so long to realize this. It’s one of those things, you know, where it seems so obvious, but only after it’s revealed.”

It took a very short moment for the Hylian’s curiosity to bubble up again, further questions racing to the forefront of his mind. “But why did you do it? Did she hurt you?” he asked, receiving a shake of the boy’s head in reply.

“How did she survive?” Link blurted, blinking in fascination. He thought he was the only one in the world that got up from fatal injuries. Maybe it had something to do with Zora anatomy? Either way, Betaal was even more badass in his mind, now. “It still seems like an arrow to the eye would definitely kill even a Zora.”

At first, Estuu just shrugged while Link folded his arms behind his head and turned to peer up expectantly at the boy. With growing exasperation, the Zora gave in to the Hylian’s pestering questions, raising his hands to form the pose he used when he summoned his healing abilities.

“Oh, so you healed her?” the Hylian mumbled, unconvinced that the boy’s powers could be good enough to save someone from death. Estuu was already uncomfortable with the subject matter, though, so Link gave an understanding nod and dropped it. “Alright, alright. All I asked was for your dark secret, not your motivations.”

With great care, the boy tucked his precious book away, before turning back to Link with renewed excitement. He leaned nearer, a funny smile on his face that didn’t actually seem real, despite that he did appear at least a bit happy, suddenly. One finger was raised to point down at Link while the rest of Estuu’s body bounced in fervor.

“Right,” Link nodded knowingly, finally catching onto something for once. He had promised to tell the Zora boy his own dark secret as well, so now he was the one feeling nervous and generally uncomfortable. He took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh while he steeled himself. “So.. I’m unable to die.”

When Link peered up at the Zora again, he was giving the Hylian that dubious look. Too bad this kid had trust issues, because Link was sure to make them that much worse.

“Yeah, yeah. Unbelievable,” the Hylian batted his hand at the disbelieving Zora kid. Geez, what a world, when you couldn’t even convince a dang kid of questionable things. “I’m probably just crazy, I know.”

Regardless of his state of disbelief, Estuu gave the Hylian a poke, then gestured with exuberance to rival Sidon in his pursuit of further details. He was basically saying, ‘well, go on, explain!’ Link had to admit, the excitement did make it easier to talk about.

“I’ve died probably a hundred times over, but I always come back to life. And, whenever it happens, anybody that was around has forgotten about it.” Estuu’s excited hands slowed to a stop as Link spoke, and the Hylian scoffed. “Look, kid, don’t give me that look. If I could prove it, I would.”

Link rolled himself over on the stone, turning the cold shoulder on his young companion, while Estuu tittered at the Hylian’s behavior. Slowly, an awful, horrifying thought managed to quietly whisper itself into Link’s mind and he sat himself back upright as he considered it.
“I can’t believe I’m about to say this,” he mumbled darkly, looking back at the young Zora who was waiting in anticipation for whatever it was the Hylian was going to say. “Let’s try it.”
Hello friends. I'm so sorry if this 'update' got you all excited and now you're disappointed. My apologies! I’m sorry to say, but there’s not gonna be an update this weekend.

Instead, I’m combining this week’s chapter with next week’s chapter and posting it on this upcoming Wednesday! It’s going to be like the fanfiction equivalent of a two-hour special. This way, I’ll have a few days to catch up on review responses AND it will give me this Thursday off, because..

That’s my birthday. :D

Also, I may or may not be able to post a new chapter on the following week, because I will be at a convention. I will still try, but if it doesn't materialize, at least you'll all know what's going on. So, DO I HAVE ANY READERS FROM BC, CANADA? Are any of you going to AnimeRevolution?

COMING WEDNESDAY JULY 26!
Chapter Summary

Sidon was freed from his duties and decidedly spent some time with his dear friend and Knight, as well as young Estuu. The Zoras happily indulged in the Raindrop Cakes while making conversation or, at least, some of them happily indulged.

With the help of Sidon, Estuu was allowed to venture off on his own, in order to participate in one of the festival contests, which resulted in an unusual occurrence.

Against Sidon's advisement, Brivere attended the play written by the famous Zora author, The Red Herring. He found himself wishing he had listened to his friend.

At the end of the night, Sidon was prepared to go before all of Zora's Domain and give the speech he'd been putting his heart into. Speaking publicly didn't bother him, but he was certain that his people weren't ready to hear what he had to say about Mipha. After being absent all day, Link finally came into the Prince's sight, offering the last bit of confidence he needed to overcome the challenge laid before him. After, the two friends went to visit Mipha's chambers, where some new truths were revealed to them, and some old ones were reconciled.

Despite the joyous evening, however, not everything in Zora's Domain was well. Nor everyone.

Chapter Notes

WELCOME, friends, to the exciting midnight(my time) release of the two-hour special! Seriously, this chapter is a monster, right at 20K words. However, I feel like it is crammed full of history, lore, action, and character development! You all are sure to love this. It really feels like the last episode in a television series season! I am looking forward to hearing all of your thoughts and I am beyond excited!

With that said, there will be no further updates this week or next week. I'm gonna be taking a little break, responding to your comments, attending a convention and playing Dream Daddy, which has been waiting for me.. THANK YOU all so much for the birthday wishes! It was a delight to hear from all of you. :)

Without further ado, CHAPTER 20! Enjoy!

The Hylian stood with his back pressed to the powerful stone of one of the numerous surrounding mountains; all he needed was a blindfold for this to feel like a classic execution scenario. He tried to relax himself against the warm, sun-bathed surface, but he could feel the tremor of adrenaline rushing through him. He swallowed dryly, squinting as he peered into the distance where Estuu stood, his silver bow in hand.
The boy had put quite a bit of space between himself and the Hylian, as per Link’s instruction. Sure, Link didn’t know if this resurrection ability was some kind of bizarre hallucination or the work of a supreme deity, but he suspected that proximity played into it somehow. Whenever he died, only those nearby at the time of his death seemed to be altered in some way; it wasn’t like everybody in the world lost their memory and it certainly didn’t resurrect every monster, either.

However, Link was still nervous, because expecting the boy to land such a long-shot was asking a bit much. He really, really didn’t want to be made into a Hylian pincushion just to prove a point, so he was counting on Estuu being able to land one of those one-shot kills he seemed to be proficient at.

“Are you sure you can hit me from that far away?” the Hylian called out to the young Zora. At first, he wasn’t sure Estuu even heard him, but then he remembered, oh yeah, it’s not like he could just yell an answer. Instead, the boy lifted his hand to acknowledge that he did, indeed, hear the question and his unspoken answer appeared to be ‘I’ve got this.’

That was the final deliberation, apparently, because Estuu’s hand lowered to his quiver immediately after, drawing an arrow and knocking it to his bowstring. While the boy took his initial aim, Link drew in a deep, shaking breath, closing his eyes the moment he saw the Zora pull back the bowstring. Even if this was his idea and even if he had died in plenty of worse ways, he didn’t like it and he certainly wasn’t completely unafraid. He could hear his heartbeat thundering in his eardrums, sure that it was giving him a stern cussing because it probably wanted to continue living.

He waited, sure that Esuu needed a bit longer to steady his aim from such a distance. If the boy came through, oblivion would soon take the Hylian away for.. however long it took him. Sometimes it seemed like minutes, other times it was more like hours. Maybe it depended on the severity of the actual wound.

The tension only grew as the seconds passed horrifically slow. Link already had a cramp in his jaw from how tightly he’d clenched it. Then, at last, a loud snap resounded against the cliff wall he had backed himself against. An arrow flew and collided right near his head, thumping against the stone and bouncing away, almost giving him a new ear piercing, rather than killing him.

The Hylian didn’t flinch but he felt his heart jump and start running even faster at the missed shot. He opened his eyes and gave Estuu an unimpressed glare, not concerned with whether or not the Zora could even make out his expressions. “Come on,” Link groaned, gesturing at the missed arrow. “I wasn’t looking for death by fright.”

Estuu appeared to watch Link’s reactions, standing still for an extended moment with his bow lowered. Was he unsure? He’d always seemed so steely about these sorts of things in the past. Was Link misjudging him? Was his apparent violence against Betaal maybe just accidental? It wasn’t like Link was forcing him and he seemed willing enough to try it out. But maybe Link had too much sway over him as an adult and someone the boy seemed to trust and reasonably like. Maybe this wasn’t something Link should have been asking a young boy, regardless.. Was he really so desperate to prove he wasn’t crazy that he hadn’t considered Estuu’s feelings?

Yet, even so, Link could see Estuu quickly overcoming his hesitation and drawing another arrow; he nocked it with practiced hands and precise movements, before he pulled back the string once more.

It was already too late for Link to have second thoughts; he closed his eyes again, resting his head against the stone at his back and clenching his trembling hands into tight fists as he waited..

; “Swift Violet nectar is absolutely, one hundred percent, the most delectable substance in existence,”
Brivere commented, trying with all of his might to keep his voice steady, while his long, yellow tail swayed gently from side to side in delight. It was true, he absolutely hated the Champion Festival but so far the events and food had been enjoyable enough.

“So you like it?” Sidon asked, a bit more distrustful of the crystal clear, rounded mass that softly wobbled about on his plate, with thin streams of thick, violet nectar dribbled artfully across. He and Brivere had always been extreme opposites in regards to sweets; Sidon felt that anything even lightly sugared caused his tongue to cringe, whereas his Knight consumed sweets with the joyful vigor of a child. “With how they hyped this ‘Raindrop Cake’, I would hate for it to be a failure.”

“It’s very subtly sweet, my lord,” Brivere reassured in between bites. “In fact, the cake itself has hardly any taste. It’s the nectar that provides the flavor.”

Hesitantly, the Prince cut a tiny sliver of a bite from the pliant mass, dragging his utensil through the syrup before he delivered the food to his mouth with an apprehensive cringe. The pink area beneath the prominent crest of his brow only wrinkled further as he chewed and swallowed. “It’s alright,” he said, attempting to humor his friend’s unusual tastes. “I prefer food with a bit more nuance.”

“Careful,” the golden Zora spoke with a quiet titter and a slight upturn at one corner of his lips. “You’re starting to sound like a spoiled prince.”

Sidon laughed in a way that was unabashed and joyful, placing one hand before his mouth as he did, yet his sharp teeth still gleamed between the cracks of his fingers. “Maybe you’re right!” he confessed, his tail raised and swishing happily. “But if you love sweets so much, I’ll have to let you try these awful things my father has imported from the Faron region. They’re called chocolate truffles.”

Brivere immediately tilted his head in questioning, blinking while he considered the unfamiliar terminology. “Is it a type of shroom?”

“No, no.” The Prince batted one hand as he spoke. “They are simply named similarly because they are quite alike in appearance. My father seems to enjoy them. Truly, he could eat an entire shipment within the week.”

“Hm,” the off-duty Knight gave a nod, somehow making pure astonishment look calm and collected. “Well, I wouldn’t like to know what the consequences would be for stealing the King’s favorite sweet, much as I am curious.”

At first, a gleeful smile and nod traced the pale surface of the red Zora’s lips, though as his concentration wandered, his smile began to slowly fade away. “Brivere?” His voice was quiet, yet undeniably laced with questioning and concern. “Have you seen the Hylian Champion anywhere about?”

“I have not,” Brivere answered frankly, looking up from his cake and glancing in his younger sibling’s direction. “Have you, Estuu?”

The younger Zora’s head snapped up like the sound of his name was a surprising thing. He’d been so preoccupied with swiping every drop of nectar from his Raindrop Cake in order to eat in plain that he might have well been in his own world. His yellow gaze traced between his brother and the Prince, not meeting either of their eyes but he was sure enough that they saw, as he shook his head.

“Do you not sense him lurking nearby, my lord?” Brivere asked, looking back to Sidon.

“Hmm.. Not at the moment,” Sidon answered with a shake of his head, his voice falling flat in his
growing disappointment. Still, he didn’t wish be entirely gloomy, so he quickly attempted to reassure himself. “...but he wanders quite far to tend to that horse of his.”

“Likely a good thing,” the golden Zora uttered, not even slightly impressed. The Hylian’s choice of mount was as belligerent as he was. “He mentioned being here for the festivities to me days ago, but he also said something about going back to Hateno Village. I told him that he wouldn’t make it back in a single day, so perhaps he merely left early?”

“That can’t be...” The Prince hastily denied this possibility, yet the way his eyes widened at the mention of Link simply not showing made his state of worry all too apparent. “I asked him to remain here, to hear the speech I prepared..”

“In that case, I wouldn’t worry, my lord.” Brivere’s voice was soft and genuine as he attempted to comfort his friend. He greatly disliked the Hylian, but he refused to take that out on the Prince. As far as he knew, however, Link had taken off right after Brivere saw him last; he never came back to report anything about Estuu’s wanderings and the young Zora never mentioned anything about seeing or encountering him that day. In fact, his brother had been more ‘silent’ than usual about him, whereas normally he would leave Brivere the occasional note, asking about him.

“You’re right,” Sidon laughed, clearly still a touch nervous. Or, perhaps it was just that he’d been looking forward to spending time with his dearest Hylian friend today. “I suppose he was simply feeling unsettled about the crowd and will be more likely to show up at a later hour,” he muttered with a quiet sigh.

“Young Zora spoke, “how are you holding up?”

“Oh. I’m quite alright, no need to worry for my sake. Furthermore, the mood doesn’t become terribly somber until sundown, when the memorial services begin.” The Prince forced a soft smile back to his face; he really had no reason to be feeling so lonely while he was in good company. He shouldn’t have been feeling sorry for himself, either, because he knew that this day was equally as troubling for Brivere as it was for him. “But, my friend, how are you fairing?”

“I was a bit gloomy about losing to you at tail tag three consecutive times, but the treats improved my mood significantly,” the yellow Zora joked, placing his empty plate aside. “However, I wouldn’t mind losing a few more games to you, if you’d like to return to the reservoir?”

“Oh yes! You know I would enjoy that very much,” Sidon nodded excitedly, his tail becoming immediately much less flopsy at the suggestion. “Tail tag is so as those sweets are to you, my friend. But I digress, why not simply play on the same team as me?”

“Where’s the challenge in that?” Brivere chuckled, a subtle grin tugging at his lips just enough to show the shiny points of his sharp teeth.

Their exchange was momentarily interrupted, however, when the younger Zora tapped a single finger against his brother’s arm. Normally the boy did little to actively acquire the attention of others, but at this very moment, he had something to contribute to the conversation. When Brivere turned to his younger sibling, the boy idly pointed at the nearby schedule of events which was posted for all the see.

Estuu didn’t even need to gesture to anything specific on the posting for his elder to realize what he was getting at; the boy attended the contest at the Veiled Falls every year, despite that he had never been tall enough to participate.

“Oh, right. It is about time for that, isn’t it?” Brivere uttered, having not realized precisely what time
it was. Only the smaller Zora seemed to always be keenly aware. He immediately looked to Sidon apologetically, and said, “Shall I rejoin you at the reservoir after this contest is done, my lord?”

Before the golden Zora could even finish his question, Estuu scooted himself closer to the table, placing his plate aside and patting his hand against the surface while giving his head a vehement shake. Brivere turned back to his brother, a questioning expression coming over his face.

“What?” Brivere asked, shrugging and raising his hands to gesture his confusion.

“Hm..” Sidon hummed thoughtfully; typically, he didn’t use his powers to delve into the psyches of others, as he considered it an invasion to do so. However, when he could be of assistance, he broke a few of his own rules. “If I may- I believe he’s saying that he can go on his own.”

The boy raised his hand to point in the Prince’s direction, giving his head a nod to confirm that Sidon was correct. Brivere began shaking his head just as rapidly, sharply denying the suggestion. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Come now, Brivere,” Sidon asserted, tilting his head and giving the golden Zora a pleading look in Estuu’s stead. “He’s at that age when it’s embarrassing to have his family escort him everywhere.”

“My lord,” Brivere groaned, choosing to address the Prince just the same as he would a misbehaved child, “you’re not helping.”

“You don’t always have to be on duty, Brivere,” said the Prince while he straightened and gave his friend’s shoulder a pat, as though to loosen him up. His hand did not linger, instead moving into a very showy, shooing gesture as he continued to argue for the young Zora’s sake. Honestly, Estuu and Brivere sometimes reminded him of his younger self and his stuffy, over-protective tutor. “Let the boy go ahead. The contest is supervised well enough.”

The young Zora continued his enthusiastic nodding, the only thing he really could do back up the Prince arguing in his favor. Brivere found himself looking helplessly between Sidon and Estuu, quietly debating his decision despite how he was being outnumbered. At last, he let out a frustrated sigh and growled, “Fine.”

The boy shot out of his chair and started away so quickly, he left his elder sibling to spin round in his seat in order to call out belatedly, “Stay out of trouble!”

Crowds were already beginning to gather by the time Estuu made it to the Veiled Falls. The path was scattered with youngsters walking in groups of two or three ahead of the boy and behind him, as well. Their chattering voices mixed in chorus with the roar of the falls, into an indistinguishable static of noise that Estuu could hardly make out.

The spray from falling water made the air pleasantly moist and cool against the scales, so that much was relieving. Estuu kept his eyes downcast as he approached the pool that stretched out from the cascade; the constant movement of the water was much more pleasing to the eyes than the numerous stares he risked meeting with his own, should he look up.

It was a short, effortless paddle for the boy to swim to the falls and only a vague effort for him to kick himself up the wall of frothy, rushing water, to the top of the cliff. Once he pulled himself from the river, his yellow eyes raised just enough to see the line of feet belonging to other excited, young Zoras who wanted to participate in the contest.

Estuu had always enjoyed watching this contest every year. He’d even practiced the swimming leap
over the falls necessary to land a blow at the center of the pedestal below. It wasn’t as accurate as his bow shot, but he’d managed to succeed enough times that he was hopeful about his chances. The end of his tail was flicking in excitement while he imagined himself walking away with the prize.

Ever since he’d awakened his healing powers, he’d idolized the fallen Zora Champion and even if she was seemingly his complete opposite, he felt that she was someone to live up to. Maybe if he could embody her, perhaps, one day, he could escape the awful things people said about him.

He wondered if Lady Mipha’s magic prickled like pins and needles in her palms, too? Did it feel like she was being slowly stripped away until nothing was left, as her magic drained? He had a hundred questions he wished he could ask her. He had to believe that there was some reason that he was the first healer born to his people in the hundred years since the Zora Champion’s death.

When Estuu made it to shore, moving to secure his own place in line, he was first greeted by an elder Zora, a retired Basilica Priest whose name he wasn’t sure of. Samson? Chapson? Kapson? The older man still wore the adornments of a council elder, and Estuu’s eyes only raised as far as the fine, beaded material that draped around the man’s neck and rested against his chest.

“Oh, finally tall enough to participate, are you, Estuu?” he spoke kindly, his voice warm but roughened. For the longest time, he was one of the only Basilica members that would bother attempting to speak with Estuu. He would find the boy walking alone or waiting, ever unaccompanied by other children his age. The older man would often spend a few minutes asking casual questions and offering gentle advice, though Estuu still didn’t understand what reason the man had to do so.

Estuu simply offered a nod to the elder’s question and the man gestured for the young Zora to go ahead and get in line. The boy scurried off, happily enough, though he hoped the wait wasn’t too long. Waiting about was the absolute bane of his existence.

It was maybe ten or fifteen minutes, but of course it felt like hours. He hadn’t realized how boring standing in line would be and maybe regretted his intentionally early arrival just a bit. Before the contest could officially begin, the entire line, as well as the crowd collected at the bottom of the falls, had to take part in the Ceremonial Song; the crowd’s voices rose in joyous vigor, making it seem like most of them waited all year just to wail out this particular song.

“A gift from the sky: a scale of light, Splits the feet of a Veiled Falls sight, Your trial awaits... It's glowing bright!”

The boy quickly tucked his hands underneath his forefins, pressing his fingers tight against his earholes to block out the sheer volume of the singing. The noise was unnerving and stung with each note, making it feel like his head was rattling violently. However, while Estuu made an effort to block out the singing, another group of Zoras around his age took notice of him standing there with his ears covered.

The first among the group standing in a bunched huddle just behind Estuu glanced back at him and she rolled her eyes with a sneer. “What is that kid even doing here?” she said to her friend, her voice loud enough to be heard over the song. The group all turned their heads to look over, with one of them immediately shaking his head and shrugging.

Even with his ears covered, Estuu could still notice the irregular sound of voices chattering, rather than following along with the song and he glanced back to catch the group all looking in his direction. He didn’t look into any of their faces, but he could see that they, too, were nobles, the same as him. They had their shoulders and heads draped in ornate shawls, each one wearing fine jewels that dangled from their tails and forefins, and elaborate cuffs and bangles encircled their
necks, wrists and ankles. Truly, they were the image of decadence and superiority, so much so that others maintained a slight distance from them, afraid to disrespect them by standing too close in line.

They surely noticed Estuu’s backward glances, yet even so, they carried on their conversation as they pleased, almost welcoming him to listen as they berated him.

“His mother broke the sacred bond of souls when she made him. You know what that means, don’t you?” One laughed while she spoke, her words like a lizalfos acidic spit. “He’s cursed- he has no soul.”

“Yeah, I heard that.” Another nodded, nonchalantly contributing as though the topic were of no real consequence. “Wanna know what else doesn’t have a soul? Monsters. That’s why they’re uncivilized. They don’t have souls filled with light like we do.”

“Well, that’s probably why he tried to murder that one Undercity warrior,” one of the boys hissed, momentarily glaring over his shoulder in Estuu’s direction. “That’s what soulless monsters do.”

“I heard my parents talking about him before,” a previously silent one added. Her voice was less spiteful and more curious. “They said his mother killed herself and a loophole in our laws elevated him to noble status.”

“What?” Several members of the group all chimed in, almost in unison. “How?”

“His mother tricked a nobleman into giving her egg life, so when she died, her soulless spawn inherited his living relative’s status,” a different one began to explain.

“You know what?” a boy said, with a gasp. “I bet he killed his mother on purpose so that he could become a noble.”

“I didn’t think of that!” One of them practically screamed, while another nodded and chimed in, “Maybe he did!”

Estuu quietly listened to these other Zoras talk about him as he waited his turn. His tail was flicking now in annoyance and in an attempt to calm himself. At last, he stepped up to the river’s edge to attempt the challenge, and Kapson walked over to place the Ceremonial Trident into Estuu’s unsteady hands.

“Are you nervous?” the elder asked in a gentle, friendly way, yet the young Zora gave a shake of his head in reply while he felt the weight of the replica weapon in his hands. He wasn’t nervous. He had turned himself inward, finding focus in his desire to succeed. All else was a blur.

Diving into the river, the boy tucked the trident close enough to himself to prevent any drag while he swam hard toward the fall, fearlessly welcoming the roaring rush just before the massive drop. At the crest of the waterfall, Estuu arched himself into a powerful leap for distance, his body twisting into a flip that reoriented him. He drew the weapon into the downward stabbing position as he hurtled toward the pedestal, the air whipping against his face so hard that he was momentarily blinded, yet even still, he landed hard on his feet, digging the three-pronged head of the Ceremonial Trident into the solid surface beneath him.

The beads on the trident clinked from the force of his landing and Estuu opened his yellow eyes to find himself stooped over the pedestal, with the head of his weapon stabbed directly into the center. He peered down, his heart racing in both excitement and disbelief, while the spectating crowd gaped in awe. The orange light from the pedestal momentarily flickered blue, before going back to its
original state and another Zora walked up onto the structure to judge, as if the strange behavior of the lights left any doubt that Estuu had hit it perfectly.

In his mind, the boy was questioning this occurrence, as surely everyone else present was; had that ever happened before? Had anyone else made the lights change color like that? What did it mean?

“Nicely done.” The Zora judging the strike congratulated the boy, his voice a bit dull from the perplexity of what had just occurred. The rest of the crowd was murmuring in equal confusion, but Estuu paid it little mind. Instead, as he straightened, he turned immediately to look up toward the ones who had been gossiping about him before. They looked shocked, maybe even fearful; the boy wasn’t the best judge of these things, but seeing them all silent was satisfying enough.

The judge was scratching at his head, still staring down at the pedestal with a certain degree of questioning, but he managed to retrieve the trident before guiding Estuu to where another Zora waited, with a prize in hand. She presented him with a replica of the Champion sash worn by Lady Mipha. It was placed over one shoulder and around him with a final word of congratulation.

Estuu looked down at the blue sash with reverence, his fingers delicately tracing the hems, the details, the tiny folds that naturally formed as it draped against him. He was so utterly enraptured and pleased with himself that the crowd completely faded from his focus while he wandered away, not even caring to watch the rest of the contest.

The sun had dipped low on the horizon, hovering just atop the surrounding cliffs so that most of Zora’s Domain was shrouded by the shadow of the Palace. The air was still warm from the heat of the day, the stone of the intricately sculpted city only kept cool by the constant trickle of fresh, cold water moving through the streets and walkways.

Brivere was content enough to have found a place to rest from the numerous games of tail tag. He’d been given a swim for his rupees by that incredibly quick Prince; he swore Sidon was impossibly fast in the water, even for a Zora. As it was, the golden Zora needed to refuel and had ordered yet another Raindrop Cake, while Estuu sat nearby, nibbling at the crisp edges of a fishcake.

The off-duty Knight had been warned by the Prince well in advance not to view the production of ‘The Battle of Diviner’s Sorrow’, yet Sidon’s cautioning somehow managed to encourage Brivere’s curiosity. He positioned himself far from the crowd, the distance intentional, and he occupied a stray table that had been set up a bit out of the way. He was sure that both himself and his younger brother appreciated the space.

Before the performance began, a young woman approached the table to offer the yellow Zora a small bottle of Fleet Lotus Seed wine, but he politely declined. He wasn’t about to put any more rupees into Zambezi’s pouch. She continued on, from Zora to Zora and Brivere found himself watching in bitter spite, almost as though he could jinx sales with his eyes and his anger.

As soon as the curtain drew back and the production finally began, the adoring congregation seated before the stage began to coo and aww at the costumed youngsters and their antics. Brivere, meanwhile, crossed his arms over his chest, a scowl plainly written on his face from the very first scene.

The play opened with a quick, acrobatic fight scene that had surely been practiced hundreds of times over, just for the kids to memorize all the flips and combat. A handful of children operated some
rather impressive Guardian props, crafted from pottery, with luminous stone eyes that glared threateningly; one tiny Zora was assigned to each of the fake Guardian’s legs, while a slightly taller one wore the bulky body of the costume.

The battle was waged against the towering Guardians by two heavily costumed youngsters, whose intricate outfits left little question as to who they were meant to be; one was King Dorephan, while the other was the former First Knight of the Royal Order.

The child playing the part of the former First Knight appeared to be around Estuu’s age and was also similar in coloration. However, he’d had his scales brushed with temporary gold coloring that shined in an oddly reflective way, and the white of his cheeks had been dotted with freckle spots as part of his costume.

Another very tall child played the part of King Dorephan; this one actually seemed to be a young girl who’d gotten an early growth spurt and she appropriately towered over all of the others on stage. Whenever she spoke her lines, she puffed her chest and put on a voice that was amusingly deep, which the watching crowd giggled hysterically over.

“My friend,” the young girl playing the King spoke as she fought the Guardians, “I fear that at this rate, we will soon be bested by these awful machines!”

“Fear not, my lord,” spoke the First Knight in a smooth, confident tone. “I have seen our victory. They will drive us to the cliffs, yes, but it is there that we will ultimately prevail. Trust in our strength, the strength of the Zora people!”

The crowd gave a cheer when the gold-painted boy spoke his lines. It never failed; Zoras were ever-proud of their lineage and nothing riled them like praise for that lineage.

Those working the stage smoothly dragged in a constructed precipice as the scene played out; dozens of young children dressed like warriors danced about and poked at the Guardians with blunt spears while the excitingly orchestrated fight scene approached its climax.

The Zora warriors could be seen falling much more quickly than the Guardians, whose springy claws swiped at their tiny forms, knocking them to the ground while the First Knight and the King were slowly backed to the edge of the cliff. The last Guardian faced the First Knight and the King on the precipice, with the Knight falling under the talons of the mechanical beast, only for the King to heroically rush in to save his friend.

The young girl playing the King lifted the massive sculpted pot that formed the Guardian character’s head off of the youngster who’d been in control of it and she raised it triumphantly above her head as the others working its legs wiggled the springy limbs helplessly.

“They will never destroy us!” the King wailed, heaving the Guardian from the stage so that the pot shattered dramatically, drawing another roar of cheers from the audience. Immediately, the King aided the First Knight in climbing to his feet, and they limped from the cliff. One was injured, the other downtrodden, the King’s demeanor shifting from victorious to mournful while the young Zora looked over the carnage and destruction left behind. The incredible loss of life of this historic battle was represented by the numerous children who laid sprawled all across the stage, with pieces of red fabric draped across them to represent their spilled blood.

The scene ended with the Knight and King hobbling from the stage, at which point the crowd applauded and the fallen warriors began to shuffle from the set, transitioning into the very next scene. It opened with the two youngsters who played the King and the First Knight.
“What shall we do, my dear friend?” said the young girl playing the King. She was actually a talented actress, her exaggerated deep voice somehow managing to hold a real tone of deep sadness and fear, despite how amusing it had seemed, at first. “Our numbers are not enough to stand against the evil that continues to invade our home. The Royal Order is decimated, the Goddess Knights fare only slightly better, and the Guard is down to those who possess the sheer tenacity to continue fighting, despite grievous injuries.”

“Remember, my lord, even shrouded in darkness, our people always sought the light and prevailed against impossible odds. Our fate is in the hands of the Goddess and under her care, there is always hope,” the pious Knight uttered in a sagely way, standing firm by his King’s side, though he now wore bandages to show that he’d suffered numerous injuries. “Allow me this night to peer into our future, and in the morning I will have the answers to our dilemma, I swear to that.”

With a pat to the gold painted boy’s shoulder, the Zora playing the King strode from the stage. The First Knight drifted slowly toward front and center stage, limping yet somehow graceful and refined. When he made it to his position, he stood poised before the audience, his eyes shining like citrine gems. A massive, obscuring, black curtain suddenly dropped around the area where the audience was gathered, the heavy fabric flapping down just behind where Brivere and Estuu sat.

Everyone gathered murmured in quiet surprise, but the action on stage soon captured the attention of all present yet again. A handful of other youngsters danced onto the set, each carrying chunks of luminous stone which shone brilliantly in the dark shadow now cast across the stage.

These tiny lights slowly began to form wide circles around the First Knight and he lowered himself onto one knee with difficulty, taking the divining pose as described by the ancient, sacred texts of the Zora people. This position was said to be passed down by the founder of their tribe, who existed hundreds of thousands of years ago, who saved her aquatic people from extinction when she used her prescience powers to predict disaster and lead her people to safety; Diviner Zorana.

The light encircling the First Knight tightened in formation, the spinning around him quickening as he made his appeal to the spirits and the Goddess. “Spirit Naydra, lend me your wisdom. Spirit Farosh, lend me your courage. Spirit Dinraal, lend me your strength... Most Holy Goddess, Hylia, shine your golden light upon my gaze and allow me to see the way.”

For a long, extended moment, the Knight hovered in the darkness, maintaining the divining pose while the tiny lights circled him, eventually slowing and drifting away, one by one, until there was no light left at all, and nothing on the stage was visible through the shadow.

Another gap of time passed, with nothing but darkness and silence. A whispering anticipation began building from the crowd. Was the scene over? Was that it?

Suddenly, a bright, golden beam from above the stage shined down, vibrantly casting a pillar of light onto the Knight. It was hopeful and touching enough for the crowd to begin applauding; the idea that Hylia came to the Zora people in their time of struggle, guiding them and saving them from disaster. The Knight slowly struggled to his feet, taking a bow before the crowd as the scene faded out once again.

The obscuring curtain slowly raised, the light of evening being brought to once more shine upon the stage, though at this time, it cleverly represented sunrise. The King strode onto stage once again, speaking in a hopeful yet desperate tone when he came to the First Knight’s side. “Have you seen the future, my friend?”

The First Knight was solemn as he spoke in return, his head bowed in respect to his King. “I have seen it, my lord. We must send a messenger back to where our people have hidden away, in the
Basilica, and implore that our people of the Undercity step forward to aid our efforts.”

“The Undercity Zora?” the King repeated. “But they are fishers, miners, laborers, not warriors. They will be no match against the evil of this Calamity.”

“Trust in the Goddess, my lord. Trust in my vision,” the First Knight reassured. “I have seen a grand and terrible battle, but I have seen our people fight and win. You must take what remains of the Goddess Knights to aid you and half of the entire force from the Undercity. Meanwhile, I will take a single Goddess Knight and the other half of the Undercity forces to the Lanayru Wetlands to fight. We will take to the rivers, to lead the armies away, as much as we can.”

“My friend! Such a fight would be suicide!” the King boomed in concern, yet the Knight tightly grasped his hand, kneeling before him.

“In every vision, I have seen my death. There is no way to avoid that truth, my lord,” the gold painted boy uttered, somber yet resigned. “However, this tactic will divert enough of the Guardians and monsters to assure the continued existence of our people. For that, I will die gladly.”

“My dearest friend..” the young girl playing the King rumbled in a shaking, tearful tone, raising the Knight from his bowed position and pulling him into a tight hug. The scene ended here, leaving the audience in mournful silence; the particularly soft-hearted ones might have had tears in their eyes.

With a bit of shuffling and setup, a new scene began; many of the children who had ‘died’ in the battle scene from before were now newly costumed with little mohawks made of material, representing the fin membranes of Undercity Zora. They stood together in a tight line, at attention.

A taller, black Zora, undoubtably meant to be the ‘Demon Sergeant’ Seggin, stood before them, monologueing in a sharp hiss of a voice, meaning to hype them for the battle to come.

“All right you Undercity wretches!” the child playing Seggin sneered as he walked up and down the line. “Never before in the history of our people have we called upon those of you who don’t have the Blood of the Goddess flowing in your veins to fight our battles. However, our people have been pushed back so far that if we fall any further, our Domain, our home, will be overtaken and destroyed by these monsters, these so-called ‘Guardians’ that the Hylians set upon us! We stand, pushed to our limits, forced onto the edge of oblivion, but who among us now is willing to simply fall without a fight?”

The tiny crowd of young Zoras playing the Undercity warriors gave a wild, unrestrained howl. In the crowd, the Undercity Zoras who were mixed among them also gave a howl, with some climbing up onto their seats, so the others around them likely rolled their eyes or muttered words of disapproval.

“Undercity Zora fighting in a battle to assure the future of our existence is an unprecedented, historical moment!” Seggin roared over the soldiers, which were hilariously all played by aristocrat and merchant class children. “So you had all better fight like you plan to make history!”

Once more, all of the Undercity warriors in the production and the actual Undercity people paying witness gave a holler. The cheering died down quickly enough, however, because the scene focused in on a very tiny, blue Zora, who appeared to be the youngest one in the entire play so far. The small, blue child wore a bright, red fin cresting her head and she held a pack comically stuffed with weapons on her back, while her arms were loaded with scrolls. She had her nose pressed near one scroll, her hand moving furiously as she took down every last word spoken.

The child playing Seggin slowly strode to her side, leaning over the tiny, blue Zora with his hands on his hips. The crowd chuckled while the smaller Zora failed to notice the Sergeant for an extended
moment. At last, she looked up to acknowledge the black Zora’s stern glare.

“What is a child doing here?!” Seggin queried in perplexity, raising his arms in a very exaggerated shrug. The entire crowd started laughing over the irony that everyone on stage was a child.

“I’m helping my father, who’s a blacksmith, keep all of our soldiers armed, should their weapons break!” the young, blue Zora declared in a strong, loud tone, her voice an adorable, high-pitched sound that humorously off-set her apparent gutsiness. “Also, I’m chronicling everything that happens, so that our people will always remember how we, the Undercity Zora, fought for the survival of all Zora!”

As the youngest actor on stage finished her speech, the King strode back on, with the line bowing down as he passed, and the Sergeant saluting. The King was flanked by five other Zora children, who all wore Basilica shrouds and costume armor adorned with the Crest of Farosh; these were apparently the remaining Goddess Knights and the Knight Divine.

“To arms!” cried the King, brandishing his trident as the scene came to an end.

The next scene resumed focus on the First Knight, who was surrounded by a company of Undercity warriors and a few youngsters wearing costume versions of the city guard armor. There was another epic battle scene, which involved plenty of fancy maneuvers and flips. It was entertaining enough, but Brivere felt himself inwardly cringing while he watched.

The First Knight rushed one of the constructed Guardians, though this one appeared to be made of wood and was much larger than the previous ones operated by other children. The young Zora playing the Knight stabbed at the machine, his spear making a resounding noise as it plunked against the wood in rapid succession.

“Just a bit more!” the gold-painted Zora called out heroically. From off-stage, however, another character let out a war cry, charging onto the stage with fiery tenacity. Her loud, enthusiastic entrance comedically startled the First Knight apparently more than the Guardian he was meant to be fighting and he fell to his knees in a duck when a female warrior with shining, scarlet scales leapt over him with a giant prop meant to be a Silver Longsword.

With one great swing of the sword, the Guardian was flipped onto its side, with various children moving in to wiggle its attached legs. The girl playing the newly introduced character plunged her prop sword into a hole that had already been in the wooden Guardian, but she did it dramatically enough that it seemed convincing.

The First Knight clambered to his feet while the female warrior stepped off of the wooden Guardian, placing her sword onto her back.

“Wait,” the gold-painted Knight spoke, enraptured as the scarlet soldier began to walk past him. She stopped, glancing over her shoulder while he attempted to pull himself together. “You don’t look like an Undercity Zora. Yet I’ve never seen you before now, on the battlefield.”

“I’m no Undercity Zora,” she spoke in a confident, silky voice. “I’m a daughter of the merchant class, but I wasn’t trained to be a warrior. Yet even so, when I heard that our King called for strong Zoras to step up to fight, I could not stand by.”

“If you’re not a warrior,” the Knight began with great intrigue, “what are you?”

“I’m a singer.” She spoke matter-of-factly, eliciting a titter from the audience.

“Really?” the gold-painted Zora said, nodding his head in a suddenly serene, yet melancholy way. “I
should like to hear a song, if you would indulge me.”

“Oh,” the scarlet Zora uttered, apparently flustered and embarrassed to have such a thing requested of her. Still, she began to softly sing a gentle melody that most Zoras knew, despite the fact that it was Gerudo in origin. It was a song about traversing the desert and overcoming dangers in search of true love. The young girl’s voice grew in strength as she came to the climax of the song, locking hands with the First Knight and seeming to gently coax him off the stage while she sang the final line.

As the scene ended, the stagehands rushed to remove the toppled Guardian prop while the audience applauded. It felt like the only people not clapping and cheering were Brivere and Estuu. It was mere minutes before the next scene began, which took place with the King and his soldiers.

The King, the Goddess Knights, the Demon Sergeant and a group of Undercity soldiers were waging battle against various monsters, though when one particular character fell, the others went still, as if the entire scene had paused itself, to turn all attention to one pair of performers.

One of the Undercity soldiers crumpled dramatically at the head of the stage, seemingly crushed beneath the weight of his immense pack of weapons. The tiny blue Zora from before rushed frantically to his side. “Papa! Papa!” she cried. The audience aww’ed in apparent sympathy when she collapsed to her knees beside her fallen father. “Get up, Papa!”

“My child,” the boy playing the blacksmith uttered weakly, “I know I told you that I didn’t want you to fight, but the truth is, despite your young age, you’re the most talented warrior among all of Zora kind. Take my spear, child, and fight.”

The blacksmith weakly extended his prop spear to the tiny child, going limp as it was placed into her little hands and she held it tightly, choking back her tears. “Papa,” she whimpered. “I will fight.”

All of those who had fallen still on stage suddenly resumed their previous struggles. The small, young Zora holding the spear climbed slowly back to her feet, her head raising as she took a long, deep breath.

Moments later, the blue Zora leapt into action, rushing from enemy to enemy and fighting each and every one of them with quick, ferocious movements that had the audience in a sudden rise of excitement, cheering and clapping wildly, because nobody expected such a young Zora to be able to perform such a fast, complex fight scene.

Single-handedly, the little, blue Zora felled every enemy on the stage, coming lastly to the side of the King, who appeared to be about to meet his end against a Guardian. She rushed at the terrible machine with her spear and lifted it in the same way the King had done in a previous scene, tossing it off the stage to shatter into pieces.

The tall girl playing the King gave a roar of triumph and lifted the teeny Zora up onto her shoulders while the other soldiers surrounded them in joyous celebration. The crowd of victorious Zora warriors continued to howl, following the King and parading off the stage.

The scene that followed began once again with the First Knight and the scarlet warrior from before. “I have seen how all of this ends,” the gold-painted Zora uttered in worry, his voice steady yet melancholy. “If you knew everything that I do, would that change your mind?”

“Nothing will change my mind,” the scarlet warrior said in a tone that was determined and unquestionable as she reached out and took the Knight’s hand. “I love you.”
“And I, you,” the First Knight sighed. “But that part of me wants to spare you all the suffering to come. I have seen your life, your future, and it can only be made more difficult, if we do this.”

“I wasn’t meant to be a warrior,” she said, “but I am strong and I’m not afraid.”

“Very well, my love,” the gold-painted boy playing the Knight uttered with another one of his sagely nods. They turned, facing one another and locked hands. A Zora bearing the Goddess Knight armor costume approached them, reciting the words of the soul binding ceremony, the Zora marriage ritual.

As the ceremonial words were recited, other warriors and enemies crowded onto the stage, acting out a scene of horrific battle around the couple while they were wed. The crowd watched, aghast; it must have been hard to imagine having one’s wedding, a supposedly joyous occasion, on the field of battle.

All around the couple, numerous warriors fought to their last breath, each and every one meeting their demise, until a pile of young Zoras were scattered at the pairs’ feet and a hoard of enemies encircled them. Just as the Goddess Knight uttered the last phrase of the soul binding ceremony, a Guardian knocked him aside.

The couple, alone, faced the army of monsters. The crowd was on the collective edges of their seats, watching while the characters were hopelessly outnumbered and set upon by the forces of darkness. Against all odds, the two lovers fought together and bested the army of monsters, standing at the end, injured but victorious.

However, just as their victory seemed assured, the Knight fell to his knees, his scarlet lover quickly stooping by his side and catching him in her arms before he toppled over. “My love!” she cried.

“I’m sorry,” he uttered, “but I’m afraid this is my fate. My fragile life slips away and it is in the hands of the Goddess... but as long as you live, we will be one in spirit, and I will always be with you. Would you.. Would you sing that song for me once more?”

In tears, the scarlet Zora peered down upon her fading beloved. Her voice came as a mournful, silvery bell while she sadly reprised the Gerudo love song she’d sang at their first meeting. The sun set over the mountains during the warrior’s heartbreaking performance, the last golden light passing across the stage and finally vanishing on the horizon when she finished, then sadly bent over her fallen lover in sorrow.

The young girl playing the scarlet Zora remained slumped, her body trembling in a sob while the curtain slowly closed, to allow the scene to quietly, tragically fade to black.

It wasn’t long before the curtains opened once more and the entire cast filed onto the stage. The audience cheered for them in feverish, boisterous excitement. Every Zora was on their feet, their tails flapping, their hands clapping or wiping away the tears that stained their cheeks.

Every child who’d played one of the main characters each took a turn bowing at center stage while the crowd roared and celebrated each one individually, then finally, the entire cast and crew formed a line across the front of the stage and took a bow before their audience.

While the group filed off the stage, though, a white Zora excitedly scuttled out onto it, looking nervously across the crowd while she raised her hands in an attempt to quiet the crowd.

“Thank you all for coming!” she said, her voice shy yet managing to carry across the crowd. “Thank you to all of the families that helped get this together, and encouraged the youngsters who worked so hard. Thank you to all of the Basilica scholars other than myself, who helped with the script, and
thank you to the famous Zora author who sent this work to us, The Red Herring! Have a good night everyone!”

The white Zora waved to the slowly dispersing group, peering curiously across the collection of faces, her eyes naturally following each furrow that formed in the constantly shifting cluster of Zoras. When the group fully parted, an empty corridor was formed down the middle of the seating area, so that Brivere became suddenly visible to the single Zora on the stage.

He stood from his table abruptly when noticed, his arms folded, his face pinched into a scowl as he glared, then turned his back and walked away with his sibling in tow.

;“Ah! There you are, Brivere!” Sidon’s strong, musical call rung clearly over the echo of various speeches being given here and there across the Uppercity. He lifted one arm skyward to wave for the approaching Knight’s attention, as though Brivere had not noticed his towering form, standing far aside from the gathering.

Upon coming near enough to get a better look, Brivere noticed the Prince appeared troubled, unnerved. His pupils were tight with worry and his red scales had deepened in hue until he seemed a rich, dark crimson. He stood fussing with the strap of an item pack that he now carried, and as soon as the golden Zora stood within range, Sidon’s words bubbled forth without restraint. “It’s almost time for me to give my speech, I’m so glad you made it. I’m sure I’ll need your suppo-”

Sidon cut himself off; one moment, his words were rolling off his tongue at such a pace, one might have thought he was speaking another language, and then, nothing. He glanced curiously at his friend’s face, blinking in realization before immediately dropping his own troubles aside in order to refocus on those he had suddenly sensed from the other. “Brivere, is something wrong? You seem very distressed.”

“I’m fine, my lord.” The off-duty Knight let out a sigh, attempting to tuck his contempt and spite somewhere a bit quieter, if only to remove that look of concern from the taller Zora’s pretty face.

“. . .you went to the play, didn’t you?” the Prince uttered knowingly, his eyes downcast while he was flooded with disappointment for not being able to stop that event from even occurring. “I’m so sorry, my friend, I tried to get them to change it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Brivere muttered, his tongue sharply enunciating each word. “By now I’m used to it.”

“You’re clearly not,” Sidon observed, eliciting a quiet glare from his Knight. Brivere still wasn’t sure if the Prince simply failed to understand that some people bottled things up in order to deal with them alone, or if he actively wished to prevent people from doing this. He meant well, but those powers of his occasionally made him a bit of a busybody.

“My lord, please,” the golden Zora took it upon himself to sharply escort the previous topic out. “Your speech? Are you planning to turn everyone upside down with your bizarre ideas and wild notions, as usual?”

“Hnn..” Resuming his previous unsettled behavior, the red Zora brought his sharp fingerscails to his lips, as though he may soon descend into nervous chewing. “Turning all of Zora’s Domain upside down and dumping the entire population into the water below might as well be a calm, normal occurrence, compared to what I’m about to say to these people.”
“Is it something you think Lady Mipha would have wanted you sharing?” Brivere’s voice was smooth, yet genuinely cautious. He had no clue what his Prince was about to get himself into, but it also wasn’t too late for him to back out of giving this speech. If he needed somebody to reassure him that he was allowed to have second thoughts, the Knight would provide.

“Maybe not,” the worried Prince mumbled in uncertainty, wrinkling that pink skin beneath his crested brow while he reevaluated his reasoning for the thousandth time. He finally took a deep breath, trying harder to calm himself as he remembered the truth of the matter- some things needed to be said. “No, I do think she would have gotten around to it... if only she’d had the chance.”

“Then, in that case,” the yellow Zora spoke in his most soothing tone, trying to embody calm, still and confidence in the hopes that his Prince could feel it and reflect it in himself, “that’s more important than their reactions or opinions. Show the enemy no fear, my lord.”

A slow, warm smile at last managed to find its way to Sidon’s lips and his golden eyes shined with gratitude. He pulled the other Zora into a tight embrace, to thank him for all of his support. “Thank you, my friend,” he softly uttered.

In the background, Council Member Trello’s roughened voice could be heard trailing along strings of words that had been repeated about Mipha, year after year. His speech was coming to a close, as apparent by how he was attempting to end on some kind of bittersweet note and with a vague life lesson that held little relation to Mipha’s life.

The crowd clapped in a calm, solemn way, each little cheer somehow managing to be soft enough to remain respectful. Sidon let out another deep, resigned sigh, his heart pounding when his turn to speak approached and he allowed Brivere to slide from his affectionate grip. “Brivere?” the Prince spoke up, his tone questioning and melancholy. “Have you seen the Hylian Champion?”

Brivere never thought that he would actually feel a pang of intense regret at the fact that the Hylian had, apparently, fucked off. However, he could see that his Prince was deeply troubled and on the verge of utter disappointment.

“I haven’t,” he answered, almost apologetic.

“I see,” the red Zora nodded weakly.

“Good luck, my lord.” The off-duty Knight offered his dearest friend a pat upon his shoulders. Sidon placed a small, forced smile onto his face as he nodded and turned to venture toward the stage.

Sidon climbed the stairs while the formerly speaking elder descended. As they passed one another, the Zora Prince caught sight of a sneer tugging at Trello’s wrinkled face, yet he replied to the sour expression with a pleasant smile full of vibrant sunshine. He’d learned that smiling in the face of adversity was most effective, whether you wished to soften those who hated you, or prove to them that their hatred was inconsequential.

When the Prince took the stage, the crowd gave a boisterous cheer, the entire mood seeming to change the moment he appeared before them. It felt as though they welcomed him and praised him just for being there and being himself, and that was somewhat reassuring. Maybe he was just seeing and feeling what he needed to be strong in this moment, but if it worked, he wouldn’t chase away these thoughts too soon.

Sidon raised his hand high to cheerfully wave and thank the crowd for such a warm greeting, smiling as his eyes traced across each face before him. While he waved, waiting for the gathering to settle back down, he took one last moment to stretch out with his senses, to search yet again for the man
he’d been hoping to see all day.

To his surprise, he suddenly felt a signature that indeed struck him as belonging to a Hylian. He fought himself, trying not to allow his hopes to soar too high, lest they end up dashed when he’d come to discover that it was a merchant or tourist, enjoying the festivities. The placement of this presence was odd, however, if only because it was intentionally tucked out of the way and even Sidon wouldn’t have noticed it, if he hadn’t been specifically looking.

He tilted his head back, taking note of, yes, a Hylian sitting casually upon the rail of one of the numerous overhanging gazebo structures. As he gazed upward, squinting ever so slightly, he noticed that the Hylian raised a hand to wave at him, and at that moment he knew it was Link.

With his confidence renewed, Sidon finally came before the speaking podium, taking a deep breath to steady himself, his golden eyes shining with joy that was fresh and genuine. “Hello, my dear friends!” he began. “Thank you all for coming, it surely is a pleasure to gaze upon each of your faces tonight!”

“As you all know, Mipha was a warrior of incredible skill, while also being a kind, compassionate young woman, who excelled in mending wounds with talent that was rare and unmatched.” Sidon’s speech started in on familiar territory, so to catch the attention of his listeners and ease them into a comfortable state. “She was kind and passionately insistent about finding the beauty in everything, even seemingly disastrous circumstances. Once a family of hot-footed frogs laid their eggs in the King’s throne pool, and Mipha refused to let him use it until the babies matured and left the pond. I remember- we treated the tiny invaders like new family members. We gave them all names, but of course, only Mipha could tell them all apart. I still, to this day, am not sure how she did that.”

The crowd gave a titter at the gentle humor. Even Brivere allowed a tiny smile to creep across his features, though he was expectant and steeled, ready to follow, no matter how far downhill his dear Prince took this. Even Estuu’s attention was captured, or so the elder noticed; he glanced down at his brother, finding the boy staring up in curious wonder.

“We all know, of course, that Mipha was a hero,” the Prince continued. “When the Calamity struck, she rose up to fight, not knowing whether she had any chance for victory. She didn’t even need to question the odds, because they didn’t matter. She fought to protect all of us, even the ones who were born long after she was gone. No- especially those. We were all the tadpoles in the throne pool to her and she went out of her way to save us all.” Sidon’s voice was warm and velvety as he affectionately uttered each word, yet it was equally morose in a way he tried and failed to conceal.

“..However, as her younger brother, I feel that I’m in a position to tell you truths about my sister that many of you might not have been aware of. Mipha was brilliant at everything she did, true, and she made everything appear easy, flawless, but the truth is, even she struggled. She failed. She pushed herself. Sometimes, she forced herself. To her, failure was not in her list of options. That, in itself, maybe wasn’t so bad. Anything worth doing is worth being great at, and being great takes work, of course.”

“Hm,” Brivere quietly hummed, nodding his head. He vaguely hoped that his Prince’s worries had been overblown, because the message that Lady Mipha was imperfect and simply ‘tried hard’ seemed relatively tame. Also, strangely comforting, from the golden Zora’s standpoint.

“[..The troubling part of this is that, for such a long time, the world around her painted these very clear, idealized images of who and what she should be and she strove to meet every one of those expectations. She tried so hard that, many days, she felt like she didn’t even know who she was; trying to be what others expected, struggling to measure up to ever heightening goals placed before her. Even now that she’s gone, we still idealize the person she was, the idea of the person that she
was... And that’s why I wanted to paint a different picture in your minds, an image of a young woman who had troubles, who made mistakes.” he paused, laughing quietly, “...and who liked to dump her younger brother into any given cistern chamber.”

Another warm, little laugh echoed back from the crowd, to which the Prince nodded thankfully. From where he stood, Brivere, too, gave a gentle nod of his head, thinking it was good that Sidon was attempting to keep it somewhat light.

“.I think, if Mipha could give all of you a few words of advice, it would be this; be yourselves, your truest selves. Be great at what you do, but only as long as it makes you happy to do so. Chase your dreams with all the passion you can muster and always follow your heart, no matter where it may lead you,” Sidon paused again, sure that his numerous listeners must have believed this to be the end of his speech. If only the evening could be so simple. He spared another glance in the direction of his Hylian friend- Link appeared to be leaned forward in concentration, his elbows rested upon his knees as he slumped, his pointed ears pricked outward in order to hear every word.

“If you would like to remember my dear sister by those virtues and those alone, it would be best to step away now, before I say anything further,” Sidon continued, his tone taking on a foreboding ring that suited well to his words of warning. Not one single soul budged, however. Instead, it seemed like the crowd’s attention only intensified in sudden apprehension and anticipation. “Because... the real truth is... Mipha didn’t see herself as one of us; a ‘proud Zora’. She cared deeply for us, yes, but she also felt like an outsider among us.”

There it was; the bitter pill, the ultimate shock, the words promised to turn Zora’s Domain upside down. The audience descended into confused murmuring, some in questioning, others in harsh insult. The noise steadily grew as voices did, until at last, Council Member Trello stood from his seat. He had a venomous glare written on his features and the words, “How dare you,” slipped from his tongue as though he’d had them resting there, in waiting.

“Sit down, Council Member,” Brivere growled, striding over to the seating area with purpose. “Or you will be, respectfully, removed.”

Everyone present could see Trello’s immediate first thoughts bubbling into verbal form, but dying in his throat. ‘I organized this event,’ and ‘you don’t have the authority to,’ however, he must have known that his hand in this made no difference, and that Brivere did, in fact, have the authority to drag him from the event. From how deadly serious the Knight appeared, Trello dared not risk the humiliation and slowly lowered himself back to his seat in complete indignation.

With the crowd effectively quieted, Brivere turned to where the Prince remained and calmly spoke up. “Please continue, my lord.”

Sidon offered a smile and a nod of gratitude, before starting back in, this time with words that were more easily swallowed. “Most of us know the Basilica Tale of how the Zora people became what we refer to as ‘Goddess-Blooded’. We know that, after a thousand years of imprisonment deep underground, in a place we now refer to as ‘The Hallowed Caverns’, our people at last paid recompense for the evils of our past and were set free to roam the surface once more. When our underground prison was unsealed, the stone and dirt of this very valley collapsed into a horrific sinkhole, which became the deep, abysmal pool that still allows us to thrive, to this day. At that time, a village of Hylian people had been established in the secluded peace of our valley. Yet when the land they lived upon suddenly plunged into the airless depths, swallowing up hundreds of unsuspecting innocents, it was our people swimming up from the watery prison that took hold of the helpless Hylians, carrying them back to the surface and safety.”

Pausing to take a deep breath, the Prince’s golden stare flicked once again up to where Link was
perched. He was nodding his head in support, while Brivere also stood near to keep the situation under control; Sidon dearly hoped they both knew how much their presence meant to him.

“...Some of those Hylians were lucky, whereas some of them were not. But, as the legend goes, those that could not be revived were preserved, even so. The honor of our first deed in service to the Goddess was rewarded with a sacred magic; in the protection of our embrace, those fallen Hylians become one with us, two souls fusing into one so that those who prematurely lost their lives could live on, through us. Sometimes, it’s said that even the ones who lived were transformed into Zoras by the pure, selfless love of those of our kind who outstretched their arms to save them. It’s because of this very legend that we still refer to our marriage tradition as a soul binding ceremony. In this way, the blood of the Goddess was passed to us, through the Hylians we saved that day.”

“This legend has also, over the thousands of years that have passed since then, led to some other interesting stories. Once, it was almost common for our people to occasionally experience a melancholy longing, in association with the Hylian people. They say it comes from the parts of us that we inherited from Hylians so long ago; those parts ache with longing to return to a people, to a life that we seemingly have never known, yet we still desire it.” Here, the Prince paused, holding one finger up before his audience to bid their patience while he finally opened up the item pack at his hip. From it, he drew forth an old storybook; it was large and heavy, with a colorful cover. “In fact, I have here a book, which I know to have been one of my sister’s favorite stories. It’s a tale of a young Zora woman, a Princess, no less, who watched the Hylian people day after day, with a yearning in her heart that she couldn’t understand or explain. She fell in love with a Hylian Prince and when she could endure the aching of her heart no longer, she submitted herself before the magic of a dark, malevolent entity, who tore her very soul into two, swallowing up the part that made her Zora and changing her into the form of a Hylian.”

Slowly, the Prince lowered the book to the podium with a quiet thump. He took a breath, releasing it in a mournful sigh before he continued, “...of course that story ends tragically, so thinking on it now, it’s no wonder that dear Mipha always seemed so downhearted. But, my entire point to this horrendously verbose speech is this- Mipha, like the Princess of the story, did not see herself as a Zora. She painted her lips, she slept with the crest of her brow bound to prevent it from growing too prominent, and she refused spirit potions, all with the hopes of making herself more like one of them, because when she looked at herself in the mirror, she hated the person she saw. And, like the Princess in this story, she too, loved a Hylian man. She wanted to live by his side and die by his side. She wanted to be soul-bound to him, so that no matter what oblivion carried them away in time, they would never be parted. I think... she believed that she could keep him safe with her healing abilities and the sheer force of her love for him. But alas, she was tragically wrong... and her dreams never came to pass. She lost her chance for that happiness.”

Once more, Sidon paused, needing a moment to collect himself. His voice had begun to shake ever so slightly, his tone a delicate, tremulous, heart-broken purr while he poured all of these secrets out before the engrossed audience. Oddly, though some were still shaking their heads in disgust and denial, others actually seemed sympathetic, or perhaps refreshed by this frank and truthful verbal depiction of a woman beloved by all of Zora kind. That, at least, gave him the willpower needed to close out. “However, that is exactly why I tell all of you this, now. My dear sister felt herself selfish for even wanting these things, for even daring to desire them, because she lived every day of her life to appease us... Please, now that she is gone, at least remember her as who she truly was, not who you want or expect her to be. Thank you, all.”

Sidon offered a respectful bow to his audience, gathering up the book he’d presented to them. The response to his finish was cautious, the applause so soft that it was difficult to tell if it was out of respect or merely lukewarm. The Prince sauntered from the stage, descending the stairs, where he was immediately met by Brivere and Estuu, who fell in stride with him while he wisely vacated the
vicinity. The golden Zora appeared legitimately concerned for Sidon’s safety; he could scarcely believe the things that his dear Prince had dared to utter before so many people, yet at the very same time, he wasn’t at all surprised.

“I always know, wherever you go, you constantly plan to piss off everybody present,” he teased, hoping that he could raise his friend’s spirits. It was as though, by allowing those words to pass his lips, all of Sidon’s vigor and radiance had gone with them, and that just wouldn’t do. “I’ve simply come to expect it, now.”

“That’s my way, I’m afraid,” the Prince let out a scoff, sounding almost disappointed with himself. It certainly would have been easier if he just fell in line with the status quo, but that had never been something he could do. “...questioning everything and rejecting most of it.”

Sparing a glance back in the direction of where he’d previously caught sight of Link waiting and listening, Sidon quickly realized that the Hylian, too, had made himself scarce. He was sure that Link intended to meet up with him elsewhere, yet the Prince couldn’t bear to leave without full certainty; he paused, quickly reaching with his senses, searching, and thankfully finding the Champion scurrying along the tops of structures, somewhere just above them. Link probably expected his own presence to be as unwelcome as the Prince’s, after what had been said to those people.

“Brivere,” the Prince began, carrying on at his previous walking pace, “I had planned to visit my sister’s old quarters tonight, to reflect on some things. Would you like to accompany me?”

“I’m sure your reflections will be clearer, without me to interrupt them,” the Knight declined, his voice low and doleful. He was wise to what was soon to occur, as he’d noticed the presence of the Hylian Champion at the same time Sidon had. He’d seen the Prince’s searching, upturned gaze and the twinkle of relief in his golden eyes when he realized that Hylian was present. “There were, apparently, several pleas for Estuu’s healing capabilities that came up. I told him we simply had to look into it after your speech, so we’ll need to handle that.”

“Very well,” Sidon nodded, choosing not to say anything about the melancholy shift in the golden Zora’s mood. Instead, he placed his hand graciously against the other’s back, speaking warmly to him. “Thank you for stepping in earlier.”

“It is my duty and my pleasure,” Brivere reassured. He stopped short of Sidon’s gait, yet the Prince turned and slowed for a fleeting instant to face him, gentle, honey-gold eyes gifting the Knight with the grace of his glances. To that, the golden Zora smiled thankfully, nodding his head, and saying, “Think nothing of it.”

Cleverly, Sidon tucked himself somewhere out of sight and out of the way while patiently waiting for his wayward Hylian friend to catch up to him. At last, Link came climbing down from levels far above, which certainly weren’t built to be walked on. The way he skidded cautiously down the slanted walls, grasping his fingers into the tiniest ridges, he seemed like some kind of stray animal that had been startled up into a tree and was finally deciding to return to the ground.

“Ah, there you are, at last,” the Prince uttered in a somewhat flat tone, his voice a resounding echo in the empty space underneath one of the numerous arched walkways. He couldn’t hide the disappointment that managed to linger, at not seeing Link all day, until the last, vital moment; he was beyond fashionably late. “Have you been hidden all day long? Did you enjoy any of the festivities?”

“I spent the last of my rupees on dozens of those Raindrop Cakes, then I gorged on them until I was right on the edge of a food coma,” the shorter man answered with a shrug. As far as he knew, he
hadn’t been expected anywhere but exactly where he showed up. “I enjoyed that part.”

“And were you able to hear my speech from your lofty hideaway?” Sidon asked, placing his hands onto his hips with a faint jingling from his numerous jeweled adornments.

“Every word,” Link said, nodding his head while he spoke.

“What did you think? Are you as outraged as everyone else who heard it?” The Prince’s tone was still just as tired, though he refocused his empty frustration back to his situation.

“Outraged? No.” The Hylian edged himself nearer, moving to stand at the Zora’s side, though he lazily leaned himself onto the wall at his back. It was so quiet now that he kept his voice down low, saying, “I’m surprised, sure.. But with how little I know about Mipha, it’s not difficult to surprise me. Though, I wanted to ask- Are you sure about those things you said about her? Did she really tell you all that?”

Link had said dozens of times that he didn’t remember much of anything; even so, he felt that something so devastating to his apparent lover should have been something he could recall or at least find tiny hints of, in what memories he did have. Had she never told him that? Shouldn’t she have?

“Yes and no,” Sidon answered forlornly, his voice managing to grab at Link’s drifting attention. The Hylian tilted his head, inclining his neck to peer upward at the towering Zora. He had one slitted eye downcast to look upon his friend, the shadow of a tiny smile tugging at the pretty pale of his lips. Sidon’s hand, which had come to rest at his side, raised just enough to be placed against Link’s shoulder, warmly enveloping it. “Come with me, my friend.”

The Zora took the first few steps in the direction of some mysterious destination, his webbed feet making soft little patters as he went, and Link followed at his side, drifting like he was a tiny moon, caught in the Prince’s gravity. It was a short, comfortably quiet walk along the winding, humid corridors of the Uppercity, through moonlit archways and unoccupied courtyards that were still decorated for the festival.

Eventually, the two came to a grand but darkened doorway, where they met other people for the first time since leaving the main gathering areas. Two armored city guards stood at each side of the door, then, at the sight of Sidon approaching, one moved from his post to unlock and push open the heavy door so the Prince could enter.

Sidon stepped over the threshold without hesitation, though Link slowed his pace to observe. He blinked while his eyes adjusted to the shadow of the abandoned stairway, which was sparsely lined with little dots of luminous stone and the floor clicked dryly beneath his boots, the gentle trickle that should have resounded up and down the cavern completely absent. The path of the eerily quiet stairway spiraled gently upward, much like the one that led to the Prince’s tower.

It became suddenly important to break the silence, and Link rushed to close the slight gap between himself and Sidon, slowing back to his previous pace when he walked at the Zora’s side once more. “I can’t help but wonder,” he uttered, his voice a dull, quiet echo. He could feel the Prince’s gaze turn to him as he spoke, so he continued, “You said that Mipha wanted to be a Hylian.. Do you feel the same?”

“Ah, not at all,” Sidon answered plainly, shaking his head so that his tail swayed softly behind him, bouncing against shoulders. “I’m perfectly content to be who and what I am.”

“I suppose that’s right,” the Hylian nearly chuckled. “It would be awful if you couldn’t be ‘unstoppable’ in the water.”
“Aha ha, quite right!” The Zora did not fail to laugh at the suggestion, even amidst the haze of sullen emotions that had descended over him. “A land-bound life sounds unthinkable, from my perspective. I am, indeed, a proud Zora, though it seems doubtful that my own people will see me as such.”

“Fuck them,” Link blurted, without even thinking. He didn’t really need to, because there wasn’t anything inherently wrong with his instinctual response, but he supposed it also wasn’t very helpful, in Sidon’s case. “You told the truth, that’s worth more than empty ideals.”

“Oh, my dear friend.. I was already horribly rebellious without your influence,” said Sidon with a gentle sigh, yet even so, his voice was light and almost grateful. “I have to wonder where it will lead me, in the end.”

“Hopefully to a place where speaking the truth isn’t considered an act of rebellion,” the Hylian hastily quipped. He really was at an odd point in this relationship, where speaking was not only easy but also, apparently, completely without filter. It was funny because he remembered when talking to the Prince was impossible. When had that changed?

When they arrived at an archway at the top of the stairs, the Prince kindly brushed aside a hanging curtain, which was strung with pale, glassy shells, allowing Link to enter first. Sidon followed directly behind his Hylian friend, speaking up to make his friend aware of just where they were. “This is Mipha’s quarters.”

“Mipha’s?” Link repeated, several curiosities flooding his mind at this knowledge. He hadn’t considered that her private chamber would still be so intact; it was utterly untouched. His gaze was like calm, blue water as it traced the room, which was a mirror image of Sidon’s own, apart from the different trappings and decor.

It was surprisingly comfortable and welcoming, more than Link could have expected. It should have seemed empty and ghostly, yet the way all of Mipha’s belongings remained in place and the room itself hadn’t been allowed to fall into dusty disrepair gave this aching illusion that it was still lived in. Link wondered if it pained Sidon to see this space, to suffer the feeling that Mipha could walk through the door at any moment, yet also knowing that she was gone forever.

What must it have taken for him to allow himself to be so vulnerable? For him to trust the Hylian in a place such as this?

Link showed every possible ounce of care and respect as he wandered the edge of the room, his gaze roving across every little detail; the bookshelves carved into the stone of the walls, the desk and vanity mirror that were crafted in the same manner and style as in Sidon’s chamber, yet were adorned with different trinkets. There was a jewelry box, a forgotten tube of lipstick and a collection of notes written on very old parchment, stacked underneath a glass paperweight. From what Link observed, Mipha had plenty of Hylian friends that she once wrote to. All of those people were likely as dead as she was now.

“I wanted to show you this,” Sidon said gently, padding over to Link’s side and standing before the bookshelf, bending himself just enough to reach a thin notebook that had been tucked away with care. “My sister’s journal.”

As it was presented to him, Link delicately handled the item, glancing up at Sidon as if to ask permission, despite how the Prince had offered it to him. He opened up the delicately bound book, glancing over the elegant penmanship of the entries.

‘It feels like it was such a short time ago that I met him; Father had requested aid from the Kingdom of Hyrule in order to get rid of the lynel that had been tormenting us. He received word back that
they would send a small group of Knights to accompany our own to the mountain territory taken by
the creature, yet the very next day, this young boy appeared. He stayed on the outskirts of our
territory so not to be noticed but little did he know that I had not only taken note of him but thought
his behavior was quite odd. It turned out that his father, a Hylian Knight, had been issued the order to
come to our aid, but he stole his father’s weapons and rode away in the night. A mischievous boy, to
be sure.’

“Is this.. About how we met? Mipha and I?” the Hylian spoke, his normally vacant voice suddenly
heavy with odd emotions that he didn’t recognize. He turned an imploring gaze to the towering Zora
that stood by his side, and Sidon immediately gave a soft smile and a nod in reply, his hand softly
patting Link’s back in encouragement. That warm, comforting touch remained, even as the Hylian
continued to read.

‘..It was for the best that I decided to follow him, for his sake and for the fact that.. Meeting him that
day was probably the most important thing that ever happened to me. I was, back then, still naive and
firmly believed that all rules were meant to be followed. I tried to convince him that he stood no
chance against a lynel, as young and inexperienced as he was, but he was determined. His father
had, apparently, forbidden him to become a Knight, for the fear that he was ill-suited and not strong
enough, so his plan was to slay the beast and take a trophy back, as proof of his mettle.

It was all my fault that the lynel noticed our approach. My awkward feet made far too much noise
and the monster came running for us. It went for me first, of course, as I was the larger target, but the
boy quickly diverted its attention with a volley of arrows to its flank, while I did my best to hold it
off. Thank the spirits that I had the forethought to bring my trident, that day.

When the lynel turned its attention to the young boy, I gave chase after the beast, thinking it was now
my responsibility to fight off this monster and protect this overly bold Hylian child. It turned out,
however, that the Hylian did, in fact, know precisely what to do. His movements were fast and
graceful, his footwork the most absolutely perfect thing I had ever seen. It was honestly like fighting
this creature, to him, was just a casual dance. He circled the monster, dodging blow after blow with
the kind of acrobatic fluidity that I thought only our people could manage; one would have thought
he was born from the water, the same as us. His fighting form was never once improper, though at
the same time, he hardly even seemed to be trying to maintain it. It was just something that came
naturally to him, while his sharp instincts for battle always, always kept him several steps ahead.

It’s worth saying that I got a few good blows in, myself. The boy, for all his skill, did not come out
of the struggle unscathed, however. His overconfidence was sure to be his downfall, one day. He
had broken bones and burns and I hope he’s thankful that I was there to heal him, because if not,
well, his trophy might not have looked like such a flawless win.

How old were you then? Eight? Ten? Hylian years are still so hard for me to judge- you looked to be
in the range of a Zora’s twenties. But still, I remember so innocently the boy you were; half my size,
with long, golden-brown hair that was much paler, in your youth, which you had worn in a braid that
draped down your back. Your ears and eyes were much too big for your face; you looked like a
grassland fox that had fallen into a pond, you precious thing.

After that fight, you were so excited. I don’t have enough ego in me to claim that I won the fight for
us, yet after the lynel had fallen, you enthusiastically praised my skills first. You were so impressed,
as if you had time to watch me, while you, yourself, did the bulk of the fighting. I suppose it was
ultimately a wonderful bonding experience, despite being absolutely wild.

I still spoke to you like you were a child, then, because you were. But how many short summers
passed before you stood before me, a young man, and I stood before you, a hopeless mess.’
“I remember that fight, vaguely,” Link breathed, smiling to himself and carefully turning the page to the next entry. It had always been one of those things that felt more like a dream than a real memory.

‘My dearest Link sent word to me recently. The Queen of Hyrule, before she passed, heard the voices from the spirit realm whispering to her in warning. A being that I understand to be contained within the sword housed in the Temple of Time cried out for a hand to wield it, for the spirit of the Hero to awaken once more. Just like that, the Hylian people began to prepare for disaster. I’ve never seen Link so serious. They mobilized all of their forces and marched legions of their Knights to the Temple of Time, to find the one who would answer the calling of the blade.

Link told me in his letter that he accompanied his father to the Temple. His father was to be tested, but Link didn’t think a man of his age would end up being the one the sword chose. My dear one was still essentially a recruit and wasn’t even there to be given a chance to be tested, yet something most unusual occurred. He was by his father’s side when the older man went to take hold of the blade and as they approached, the sword began to glow. The entire crowd gasped in shock and awe when the blade showed signs of life. However, when Link’s father laid his hands upon the hilt, the light dimmed away, then, the moment he removed his hands, the light persistently returned.

Apparently, a moment of fearful questioning passed between Link and his father. As much as the man had tried to prevent his son from walking the path of Knighthood, he seemed to know and dread what this meant. He heaved a deep sigh, reaching out to Link and taking him by the arm. He cautiously brought his son’s hands to the hilt of the sword, and as soon as he did, the sword cried out. A sharp ring vibrated through its blade, the light glowing more vibrantly than ever.

And just like that, my dearest one is to make the leap from Knight recruit to Hylian Champion. He mentioned that his summer visit would be delayed, thanks to all the new training regiments and.. I’m not sure what to think. Link seems proud, honored, and like he’s taking all of it in his stride. He’s surely meeting all of these new challenges in the same brash, headstrong way he always has.. I should be happy for him but it’s difficult. Maybe I’m just being selfish again.’

“I can’t recall any of that,” the Hylian uttered, dejected and perplexed. What an odd feeling, attempting to process that these events could have actually taken place. It was near impossible for him to even picture himself as a young man any longer. Yes, he certainly resembled one but what he felt like was something entirely different, something so battered and angry, it didn’t belong in this body.

Even imagining that he had a family, at least a father, was bizarre and alien, which was maybe the strangest part of all. Of course he had a family, because he had to have actually come from somewhere, but his patchwork of recall hadn’t offered him a scrap of indication in regards to his upbringing. He was nobody and could only be somebody in the written words left behind by long dead women.

He almost feared to turn the page, yet at the same time, his curiosity might have kept him awake at night.

‘All of my friends from Castle Town seem to be colored in various shades of nervous and frightened. They aren’t warriors, like myself, so I suppose it does make one feel a good bit helpless. It’s really too bad that the Hylian people seem to hold such doubts, in regards to young women becoming warriors. I’m sure I could sway them, if I could actually live among them. One of the friends I write to insists that her father would simply say ‘it’s different for Zoras.’ I say that’s an unfair judgement.’

‘Father doesn’t like the idea of me becoming the Zora Champion. Even now, despite that I can say, without ego, that I am the best warrior among our people, he sees danger laid out before me and doubts that I have the strength to meet it. No, I know he worries and maybe he has good reason to.
It’s a hard thing for me to consider, I suppose. There’s so much talk about disaster these days, but as peaceful as my near fifty years of life have been, it’s difficult for me to believe our world could simply be plunged into darkness and destruction. Surely, it won’t be so terrible? At least I pray that all of this talk of Calamity is being overblown, and that I can eventually go back to the way things were. It isn’t just for my sake that I hope such a thing, either. Father.. I hope you’ll understand, this is something I must do.’

‘The Hylians at last completed the mining operation, unearthing the weapons that they believe will be our salvation against the Calamity. When I was introduced to him, Vah Ruta, it felt as though my heart stood still. Most people call Ruta an ‘it’ but I enjoy believing him to be a majestic bull of a creature, powerful and wise. I’m not sure if it’s because of the electricity running through his circuits, but my senses read his field as that of a lifeform. Maybe it’s whimsical of me- the Hylian Princess certainly got quite a pinched look on her face when I called Ruta a ‘he’. He’s not just a weapon. He’s not just here to be used and buried. He has a part to play, and it’s an important one.. I think he deserves more respect and gratitude.’

‘The Princess Zelda returned to Zora’s Domain today in the company of her Sheikah scientists. Link was with her, of course, but he said nothing to me, which I certainly wasn’t used to. I know he is trying to take his duty seriously but it makes my heart weep to see someone I know to be so free suddenly so burdened.

The Hylian Princess seems.. very shrewd. Maybe it’s more accurate and much more unkind to say that she’s a shrew. Still, I suppose I can’t blame her. I know the burdens she faces. I know the weight of expectations all too well and with how frantic her people are becoming, it must be difficult. All of the hopes and fears have fallen to her, for her alone to answer. She must envy me, for all I am and all I can do. It must pain her to see me, another Princess like herself, a strong warrior, skilled with my Goddess-given healing talent and capable of understanding the complicated matter of piloting Ruta. I wish I could help her. I wish even more that I didn’t also envy her, in return.’

When Link turned the page to keep reading, he found the following sheets devoid of any further entries and a rough edge which made it clear that at least one page had been torn from the journal entirely. It didn’t take long for the patiently waiting Zora to heave a sigh when he realized that his friend had made it to this point. Link peered up at Sidon, his visage written clearly in questioning, which the Prince possessed an answer to.

“For so long, I just thought there was nothing more,” he explained, reaching into the pack that still rested at his hip and producing the storybook he’d brought out during his earlier speech. “Then, I found this book on her shelf.”

Carefully, Sidon opened the heavy novel to a particular page, his sharp fingerscales tracing a folded sheet of delicate paper that had been tucked inside, then he drew it forth and pressed it into the Hylian’s waiting palm. “The missing pages had been hidden inside this book the entire time.”

Link unfolded the secret note with care to not rip the thin sheet at the seams, pushing it into its proper place in the journal and flattening it so that he could read over the words.

‘Our world seems soon to descend into chaos, yet here I am, worrying about my silly wants. What does it matter, really? My dearest Link, who inspired me so, I wish I could follow your example but you were always so much stronger than me. Either that, or some dreams just weren’t meant to be.

You always looked at me like I was just the same as you, perhaps you even found something beautiful about me.. I’m not sure.. But I know you were never unobservant. You weren’t blind to our differences and we are so, very different. I believe you loved me, even so. You loved me, as I am, a Zora, but you deserve something, someone, better. You deserve someone who can love themself as
much as you love them and that will never be me, because, the truth is, I hate myself. I hate these blood red scales, I hate these sharp fingerscales, these gills, these feet, these fins, this face. No matter how I work to better myself, no matter how I try to convince myself that my existence holds so much worth and that something like my outer appearance is inconsequential, I just. Can’t. How stupid and selfish I must be, to loath every inch of my existence, at a time when that existence could easily be wiped out. How terrible and ungrateful I must be, to insult my mother, my father, my brother, my people and my culture by rejecting myself and everything I am, everything that they are.

I wanted to offer my handmade tunic to you, my love, this summer. I thought, maybe having my soul bound forever to yours would offer some solace. Then this looming disaster turned everything to chaos and uncertainty, and I’m trying so hard to put aside my own problems, because the world needs us, and you need me, I’m sure. I will do whatever it takes to protect you. I will give whatever it takes to be by your side.’

Quiet hands traced the words and the creases in the paper, as though the Hylian might hear Mipha’s voice through his fingertips, or by touching one of the only remnants of his past lover, he might gently lay a tender hand upon her, as well. It wasn’t love or affection that he felt, not any longer, probably not ever again, but instead, a deep, aching sympathy.

He understood the haunting whisper that came and went, never failing to remind him of how it felt to be a stranger in his own body, like some tattered echo of the person he might have once been and he hated thinking that somebody he maybe once loved. had to suffer that same gnawing self-loathing.

Gently, Link shut the journal, leaving the missing page where it had been ripped from, thinking that it belonged there, or perhaps deserved to stay there. He handed the book back to Sidon, hovering in silence while he processed. whatever it was he felt and all else he was meant to be feeling.

“Thank you.. for showing me that, Sidon,” the Hylian murmured, his voice suddenly an odd, quiet echo to his ears, his gaze unblinking and empty.

“You deserved to know the truth, just as everyone else..” the Prince reassured, carefully tucking the journal back into the tiny, empty space it had been drawn from. He straightened once the item was safely put away and quickly turned his doting attention back to his dear friend, a soft look of concern staining his features. “Her exact words, those were not for everybody to know. But you, yes.”

Sidon’s fingers twitched, his fists tightening and unfurling in impatience as he resisted his urge to comfort the suddenly vacant Hylian; the Prince could feel it when Link began to dip further into the strange static that oft consumed his emotional state, and he wanted to offer something, anything, to anchor him here in this moment.

“My friend?” the Zora uttered gently, one hand reaching out to Link, unsure what he even meant to do. He stopped before he could touch the other, hesitating, knowing that Link didn’t want his touch, yet he felt powerless to assist otherwise. He settled, instead, for speaking, his voice a warm, coaxing beacon of comfort that he hoped the Hylian could latch onto. “I’m here.”

“I’m here, too.” Link at last broke his silence, his blue eyes flickering to the hand that hovered before him and helplessly, he moved himself into it, unable to resist what he’d been without for much too long. His own fingers, so small by comparison, latched into the tiny furrowed etchings of the silvery cuff at Sidon’s wrist, pulling the enveloping warmth of the Zora’s palm to rest against his face.

“Is it alright for me to come back here?” Link asked quietly, closing his eyes like he well intended to drift to sleep with his head in the Prince’s gentle hand. “..you know, if you’re not with me.”

“Certainly,” the Zora answered without hesitation. If anybody deserved to be here, it was Link. “The
guards will permit you to pass any time you return, have no fear.”

“I feel badly,” the Hylian confessed, a wrinkle forming between his brows when he opened his eyes, his lids still heavy overtop the deep, mournful blue. “I still don’t remember her, other than a few things. It seems like I did nothing but cause her pain and here I am again, probably doing the same to you.”

“My friend, that is the furthest thing from the truth, in both of our cases,” Sidon spoke up, his usual gentle reassurances and positivity momentarily falling away to unveil a subtle tinge of aggression. He would hear no more of his friend’s self-degradation; Link didn’t deserve to be spoken of in any such way, even by himself. “You were an inspiration to her and you gave her so much strength.”

“It would be easier to believe if I had memories to back that up,” the Hylian chuckled, bitterly, eliciting a slightly frustrated sigh from the towering Zora.

“Come, I think you need some air,” the Prince coaxed, slowly drawing his touch away from where Link had placed it. He shifted to stand by his side, laying his hand on the Hylian’s back instead, to guide him along. Unlike Sidon’s quarters, Mipha’s had a balcony; they came before a wide, glass door, which clicked quietly open and led out to a quaint lookout area. It was small and private, lined with blue pots that housed thriving patches of Silent Princess plants. Overhead were the usual elaborate, arching structures, which curved and curled; from one hung a jeweled chime that sang soft, little notes in the cool, evening breeze.

“I can say that you’ve personally given me so much,” Sidon continued his previous point as he watched Link slowly explore the space. The Hylian needed to touch every little thing before he could claim that he’d thoroughly looked around. “..inspiration, strength, closure, courage, confidence, I could go on, if you’d like?”

A tiny, amused titter came from Link while he stood with the petals of a Silent Princess softly grasped between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of where the Zora stood, giving him a little smile, which hopefully satisfied his inherent need to endlessly reassure. “We’ll be here all night, if you do,” Link teased.

Meandering about, the Hylian soon found a nook alongside one of the shining blue structures and he pushed himself up onto the rail, turning around in enough time to catch the faint tinge of worry becoming apparent on the Prince’s face. He was probably wondering what Link’s deadly fascination was with casually sitting at the edge of danger, but it would likely be too difficult for any nine foot behemoth to grasp, anyway.

Surprisingly, Sidon said nothing about it, opting instead to place his hands upon his friend, to keep him securely in place. Suddenly, his reservations from before were stripped away, his palms beginning at Link’s knees and sliding slowly upward until he’d grasped the smaller male by the hips and held him tightly. “I think I may go on, anyway,” he purred, the sound of his voice warm and enveloping, yet somehow just a touch unsure.

Link inclined his neck, his gaze tilting upward to find the Zora searching his expression in questioning but wanting, in a need that was coming untethered, but with one last delicate strand holding onto restraint, for the fear of leaving harm in the wake of his heart.

In the end, it was Link who gave peace to the Prince’s warring wishes; he extended a hand to the Zora, which Sidon bowed to meet, his lips pushing cautious kisses to the Hylian’s palm before Link guided him only closer, so the crest of the Zora’s brow softly, affectionately bumped the hair that crowned the Hylian’s head. With a tilt of his own head, Sidon slid nearer, until his lips were placed ever so gently upon Link’s.
A soft hum purred from the much shorter man’s throat, his nose bumping that blushing patch of pink as they kissed, his hands reaching, grasping for anything that could bring the Zora ever closer. It was an unabashed moment of forgotten restraint and wanting that overflowed, overwhelming all sensibility, if there had ever been any at all between the two of them.

When they managed to part, a quiet whimper passed the Zora’s lips, with needful, aching words hurriedly chasing it. “This is something else you’ve given me. I felt it, a long time ago, from Mipha. Something that fluttered, yet was heavy, something that consumed, yet empowered, something that is much too elusive for me to put my hands on, yet I can feel it, spreading through every inch of me,” he tried to explain, biting his lip for one unsure second. “You gave that to her once, and now you’ve passed it to me. Whatever it is, there is just.. so, very much of it.”

Link turned his gaze aside while the Prince spoke, unsure if he was overwhelmed or if he just wanted to hide the confounded look wrinkling his face. “You remember what I said about being confused, right?” he mumbled, uncertain and indeed, confused. “I thought it was friendship that you wanted.”

“I know and I’m truly sorry,” the Zora whispered, speaking softly as he held onto the Hylian, keeping him near. “But I had also been confused. I hadn’t realized how unfair my behavior had been to you. Yes, I asked for friendship, yet the way I expressed my affections went beyond that. I wanted to support where I could, then set you free when you needed it, because so many others have placed their burdens on your shoulders and I know how it feels to be pulled in a hundred directions all at once. Nevertheless, here I am, just another one of those, wanting emotional gratification but keeping you at a distance because... well, I was afraid.”

“Why?” Link asked; he did so without a note of blame or spite to be heard in the single word. Instead, there was only curiosity and the genuine want to understand. He’d never thought his hands could even be used for gentleness or comfort, but when he raised one palm to Sidon’s cheek and he saw the Zora’s sudden shame fall away, he understood differently.

“I fear so many things, though I do everything in my power to conceal it,” he confessed, maybe only bold enough to do so thanks to the Hylian’s gesture of support. “Uncertainty, inconsistency, failure... I was afraid of being used, or that, no matter how I tried, I would never be able to heal your heart. Furthermore, I didn’t believe romance to be the appropriate solution to your troubles. Support and friendship seemed the best I could offer.”

“I think you’re right,” the Hylian answered calmly while his hand fell away and the Prince’s own traveled to his back, unconsciously trying to drag him nearer, leaving Link to grab at the rail, lest he’d be pulled down from it. “It’s alright.. I’m glad that we took the time to sort out these things. Before, I thought I needed affection and comfort to mend me, but it didn’t turn out that way. It only distracted me from the problems I needed to face in order to properly move past them. It’s better this way..”

“Then, is it indeed foolish for me now, to long for your presence when it’s gone?” Sidon pronounced each word like it had been a burden upon his tongue, his fear of vulnerability forcing him to whisper these confessions like the dirtiest of secrets. He leaned nearer, nuzzling once more against the Hylian, endlessly fascinated by the soft feeling of his hair. “Is it wrong that I’m always thinking of you, always hoping for another chance to see you? That I fear I could lose you..”

“You won’t lose me,” Link spoke sharply, not even needing to waste time on fanciful-sounding reassurances on this matter.

“My dear friend, how can you say that?” The Zora straightened himself, looking down on the Hylian in surprise and confusion. How was it that he always seemed so sure? How could he be so
overconfident? “Does the path before you not give you reason to doubt?”

“No,” the Hylian answered, doubtless as accused. However, he knew he couldn’t explain his certainty, though he wished he could. Instead, he reached for something a bit more light-hearted to play this off. “As long as you believe in me, I’ll never lose.”

Link watched while the Zora’s expression shifted from confounded, to utterly dubious and looking as though he’d been duped in some way. It was the kind of face somebody might make after politely asking somebody not to do something, only for that person to defy them right to their face. In short, it was pretty damn rich and Link immediately found himself caught in a bout of laughter.

“What’s this?” he spoke between his giggles. “Have your beliefs been shaken? Have you lost your faith in me?”

“Oh no, my belief in you can never be shaken,” Sidon vehemently denied the lapse of confidence, though his sharp teeth gleamed with how his lip curled with his words. It was easier to offer belief in someone, though, when it was for the sake of self-gain and one had nothing to lose. “However, the fear of loss may overwhelm it, from time to time. I know that pain intimately enough that I do what I can to avoid it.”

With Sidon maintaining his seriousness, Link stilled his previous amusement, taking a deep breath to let a sense of calm wash over him. What could he say to comfort the Prince, here? Don’t worry, I’m not able to die? The Hylian’s mouth fell open, thinking perhaps there was some combination of words that might make the claim less unbelievable, but there was not. In defeat, his mouth closed, not a single sound issuing forth.

In Link’s silence, the Zora went on to speak further, saying, “I know that.. loving you would welcome that very suffering, whether sooner or later. A hundred years is as good a single season, to me.. But it’s a lifetime for you... and that frightens me.”

Link could feel the Zora’s fingers tightening in the fabric of his tunic, as though by holding onto him, he could just stop the hands of time from pulling that much harder. He let out a quiet sigh, leaning in so that his forehead was laid against the Prince’s chest. “If you’re already in love with me.. then there really is no avoiding it any longer, is there? All you can do now is care for me while I’m here.. Or don’t, then live with the eventual question of what might have been.”

“...almost everyone I once knew is dead. Those that aren’t, I don’t remember,” the Hylian’s tone dropped back to dull and empty. He’d been hollowed out and broken and if he had to put that on display to make his point, so be it. “The uncertainty and emptiness hurts more than anything.”

“You’re right, of course,” Sidon conceded, one hand softly stroking up and down the Hylian’s back as Link rested against him. “There is one other concern, however. Because of my hyper-empathic abilities, it’s very easy for me to become ‘swept up’ by powerful emotions.. I’d like to avoid being completely overwhelmed, if I can.”

Link’s first reflex was to say, ‘I thought that was just how it worked?’ He quickly thought better of saying any such thing, though, and raised his head to look up at the Prince’s lovely but concerned visage. “What can we do to be sure that isn’t the case?”

The Zora almost immediately let out a nervous chuckle, and it seemed apparent that even he knew there was no such thing as avoiding being overwhelmed by something like this. “We can try, perhaps, to take it slowly.”

“I’ll do whatever you need..” the Hylian reassured, gentle, understanding.“Though it is a bit sad..
That somebody as passionate as you can’t simply give in to passion.”

A soft laugh shook the Zora Prince and Link just sat, watching, a smile coming over his own face at having returned happiness to Sidon’s. “Think of it more like..” the Prince began, “...savoring the passion, lingering with the subtle nuances of the emotion and allowing it to slowly manifest into something strong and stable..rather than simply letting it burn itself to nothing in a wild rush.”

“That tongue of yours is so smooth,” Link said, his ears flattening slightly in distrust. Listening to somebody who had such perfect answers felt like a trap, but if so, Link was probably already in it. “As much as I love it when you talk sense to me, I’m the very embodiment of a ‘wild rush’.”

“Oh,” the towering Zora uttered, a hint of snark finding its way to his tone, “then why are you still talking.. when you could be kissing me instead?”

“Do you want me to kiss you slowly, too?” the Hylian spoke, his own propensity for sass managing to show itself just before he straightened, reaching up to tangle his hands behind the Prince’s neck and coax him down to his level so their lips could be pressed together once again.

If there had been any lingering restraint before, it had been thrown to the wind now. Sidon finally just removed Link from his perch, pulling the Hylian into such an embrace that he was lifted and pressed against the Zora’s chest, held there by the strong arms that encircled him. There was scarcely breath between them while they sought one another out, both needful and desperate and more than anything else, glad.

Link held the Zora’s face between his palms, pulling away from the kiss just enough to study the shine of happiness in the Prince’s lovely, golden eyes. This near, there were even subtle traces of pale blue to be found and Link spent a few content moments just admiring these precious, little details.

“Do you know what I really want?” Sidon uttered, his voice light and free as song while he held Link close. “I want you to return to my bed and my side, where I should have allowed you to stay, all along.”

“Only if you carry me there,” the Hylian whispered, laughing quietly as he wrapped his arms around the Zora’s neck once more and laid his head upon one shoulder like a tiny child.

“Then consider it done,” the Prince answered gladly.

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“They’re in here,” the Apostle spoke, her voice a delicate, fearful sound. Her feet made rushed patters that echoed within the expansive and strangely vacant Basilica corridors. Brivere could only give his best effort to stay right on her tail, while also trying not to walk faster than Estuu could follow.

The golden Zora glanced back, noticing that his younger brother had slowed to the point that he’d begun to fall behind, his small frame easily lost in the creeping shadows between hazy, blue lights. It was difficult to tell if he was too tired to keep up or if he simply didn’t care to answer these apparent pleas. Despite Estuu’s endless apathy, however, Brivere could already feel a subtle, unnerving tremor creeping across his scales and crawling underneath his skin.

“Your grace, if you could slow down just a bit,” the golden Zora spoke gently, noticing with ease the Apostle’s frantic state and her ragged appearance. Her shawl was tousled and falling from her shoulders, like she hadn’t the time or care to affix it into place. Her face was creased with tired
shadows and her pupils had tightened to slits, even in the low light.

Looking over her shoulder, the Apostle slowed, her own breath coming in shallow pants while her rounded brow crest shined with perspiration. She didn’t even seem well enough to be bustling about as she was, but despite his growing concern, Brivere said nothing.

“We wouldn’t normally make such a request of you but our medics need time to figure this out and time is not a luxury that any of these people have,” she grimly explained, gesturing to a dimly lit archway that led into one of the grand chambers. The Knight only nodded in uncertainty to the Apostle’s words, waiting for Estuu to walk at his side before they stepped into the chamber together.

Upon first sight of the normally wide open chamber, Brivere stood aghast at how every inch of floor space was now lined with woolen maths, save for narrow corridors with just enough space for careful feet to tread. Upon each mat, there lay a weak and gravely ill Zora, each one of them a pallid shade of their former hue. Here and there, some rolled helplessly onto their sides coughing and heaving, until their mouths sputtered and spewed a viscous, black fluid. Others were utterly still, with their bellies so deeply sunken that their ribs protruded. Their eyes were hollowed and black, with sockets and gaping mouths like obsidian ash; they were already gone.

Brivere took Estuu by the arm and sharply pulled him back, tucking the boy behind himself in a protective manner that was instinctual and immediate. His sharp, yellow eyes watched the small handful of medical workers scurry about the collection of very, very sick Zoras. The amount of injured warriors the Knight saw during the battle for the fort couldn’t compare to this; not even close. There were already tenfold that number here, and from what he’d heard, it was still going up.

“What is this?” Brivere uttered, his voice steely despite his horror.

The Apostle’s response was tired and hopeless, as though within the last hours, she’d felt as much sorrow and terror as any person had the capacity to experience. Now, there was nothing left but the hollow ring produced in her throat as she formed the words, “Water Blight.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Though Link and Sidon had only reunited as lovers the night previous, the eve of the Blood Moon saw fit to part them. The Champion wasn't comfortable enough with himself, nor his Zora lover, to linger while in his most weakened state. His plan: to away to Hateno Village and sleep out the awful evening.

As ever, the Prince had duties to perform, one of which involved Hylians being put on trial for crimes omitted against the Zora people.

Chapter Notes

Hello there, friends! I am back from my vacation and have descended to deliver to you all, the long-awaited update! :D Things are getting wild, so read and enjoy, my friends!

There was a soft scratching noise, occasional but consistent, which Link heard again and again as he laid still beneath the sheets. He tucked himself tighter into the bundle, to forcibly ignore the sun creeping over the mountaintops and the quiet scritch-scratch that came once more, just enough to disturb him.

Eventually, no matter how much blanket the Hylian pulled over his head, he found himself laying half-awake, dimly aware of his surroundings, the blue of his eyes showing from underneath heavy lids. Wait- was last night even real or just a delusion of the food coma he’d slipped into?

Slowly, Link dragged himself upright, looking like a child in a pile of snow while he tried to knock the comforter off of his head. Once he was set free, he immediately sought out the source of the scratching noise which had summoned him from sleeping oblivion and into the waking world.

There, perched at his desk, Sidon was already busily attending to some princely duty that Link could only wonder at and it was still much too early for wondering at anything. The red Zora, though he appeared maybe too big for the chair he was occupying, also looked comfortable enough, with one leg sprawled out sideways and a lazily slumped posture. He’d also yet to dress himself up in his numerous fancy adornments, which was an oddly pleasing way to see him, his visual splendor uninterrupted by jingling, jeweled bangles and soft, flowing ruffles.

He looked relaxed and raw, stripped of everything that made him a prince and everything that continually controlled his ever-busy days. In this particular moment, he was just Sidon, content and mostly quiet as he allowed his companion to sleep.. Well, sort of.

Link yawned and rubbed his eyes, his movement stealing the Prince’s attention away from his busy work. Sidon turned a glance over his shoulder at first, a smile pulling across his features when he realized that Link was awake, then he placed his quill aside and turned around in his chair, leaning
over the back. “Isn’t it a bit early for you to be awake?” he spoke, his voice coy and teasing.

“That’s right,” Sidon uttered, feeling the sullen drop in his companion’s mood, internally questioning it for just a moment before Link made the reason clear to him. He could remember the odd spell his friend suffered during the Blood Moon; he recalled with ease the night they met and the hours he spent tending to the unresponsive Hylian, fraught with worry all the while. “So then, you really plan to return to Hateno Village, do you?”

“I should go back,” Link mumbled blearily. “My problems aren’t yours to tend to. Plus, you have your own troubles to deal with tonight.”

“I’d like to gently remind you that I had no qualms about placing the problems of my people onto your shoulders,” Sidon reassured, his voice warm and gentle, enveloping the Hylian in such an overly comforting way, it left Link feeling so weak, so helpless. “I don’t mind shouldering yours, in turn.”

Quietly, Link contemplated his own personal and moral dilemmas, unmoving while his cheek pressed against the rough scales of Sidon’s arm. Maybe it wasn’t any real trouble for him to simply occupy the Prince’s bed all evening while his body betrayed him. It wasn’t like he would actually be in anyone’s way. Yet still, there was the lingering desire to avoid being vulnerable and piteous before someone whose opinion mattered so much to him and that alone made his skin itch with the old, familiar bitterness and self-loathing.
Lastly, the lingering questions inevitably resurfaced; was Hyrule really his to save? Was it his fate to do so? Was it something he could not challenge, avoid or ignore forever? Worst of all, what horrible thing would come to consume all he held dear, if he didn’t answer his deity’s call? He probably hated that more than anything else; now that he actually had something he cared to protect, his heart was the final link in the chain that shackled him to this awful duty.

“If I don’t leave now, I’ll never be able to,” he answered at last, moving his hand to pat the Zora’s forearm in reassurance or perhaps gratitude.

“I understand,” Sidon whispered, dipping his head lower so that the point of his brow bumped the top of the Hylian’s head. His nuzzles were soft and doting, everything about him gentle, even despite how disappointed he likely was. Link couldn’t be sure, but he assumed; the Prince had always been that way, hadn’t he? His first request of Link had ultimately been his last and no matter how Sidon felt, he refused to burden the Hylian with expectations and demands.

Sidon always set him free, even when it hurt to do so.

“Do you have any clue how long you’ll be gone this time?” he asked, pushing aside the loneliness and anxiousness that threatened to overwhelm him. Sidon knew better than to allow his feelings to take control, so he would reason with them, if he could.

“I need to ride to Akkala to meet someone,” Link explained, shrugging idly. “I haven’t been to the area before, so it might take a few days.”

“Why not stay here for now, then ride to Akkala after the Blood Moon?” the Zora gently suggested. As it was, they were closer to Akkala in Zora’s Domain. “It would make more sense than going all the way back to Hateno Village, first.”

“Sidon,” the Hylian spoke up, his voice taking on a chastising tone. He was already fighting himself, just to find the will to leave without the Prince giving him perfect excuses. Also, though Sidon was unaware, the distance wasn’t entirely relevant.

“I’m sorry,” the Zora apologized.

Link wanted to say ‘don’t worry’ and ‘I’ll come back’, but he didn’t have any means to explain away the Zora’s fears, so he would just have to let Sidon weather them, for now. Stretching his neck and straightening his back, the Hylian lengthened himself to reach and offer affection in the place of words that held no weight. In the end, Sidon had to be the one to see the searching blue of Link’s gaze and lean himself down to receive soft, lingering kisses that seemingly held unspoken promises.

Meandering hands moved from the Prince’s arm, to his chest, Link’s palms roving across the smooth surface of Sidon’s white scales. When the Hylian’s touch unwittingly located a roughened patch, he turned his attention to it, his eyes looking upon an uneven line of scales, which formed a gently curved seam just near the Zora’s collarbones.

After the battle for the fort, Link had seen his fair share of wounds on a Zora, so he could recognize one, despite the physical differences. When a Zora was injured, their scales interlocked to close the wound, essentially zipping it up. It made them a great deal more resilient to physical damage.

It was also why things such as flirtatious biting couldn’t gravely harm them.

Curious fingers came to trace the uneven scales once again; they had almost fully healed and realigned, with only a little crookedness remaining. The bright morning light made the mark much more apparent, however.
“What is this?” Link asked, feeling sure he already knew what it was; it was the ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘who’ that he was more curious about.

“Oh,” Sidon uttered, quickly reaching up to brush Link’s fingers aside, while his own hand touched the mark, shielding it from sight. “It’s-

“Oh dear!” a surprised, embarrassed voice exclaimed suddenly, capturing the attention of both the Prince and the Hylian. Their two sets of eyes shot up to see Laflat standing in the doorway, hugging books and papers to her chest, wide-eyed and flushed.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” she asked, utterly apologetic.

“Yes,” Link answered without hesitation.

Sparing an awkward glance down at his rather frank companion, Sidon let out a nervous titter before clearing his throat. “It’s quite alright, Laflat,” he spoke, attempting to recover from the awkward start of this exchange. Standing, Sidon gestured to his desk, where normally Laflat delivered his work and he offered the usual friendly smile. “Please, please, come in.”

“My apologies,” she spoke in an oddly quick way, her words running together and making her embarrassment that much more apparent. A curt bow was offered, then she hurried to Sidon’s desk, laying down the paperwork she had come to deliver. Once her burden was placed aside, she turned her attention to Link again, trying to remain casual as she spoke up. “It’s been a little while since I’ve seen you here, Hylian Champion.”

“I’ve.. never seen you here?” he responded, slightly confused.

“Ah,” Sidon cut in to offer explanation. “You’re always asleep when Laflat comes by. In fact, you’re usually still sleeping by the time I’ve gotten dressed and finished a heap of paperwork.”

Laflat laughed at this explanation, though she hastily ceased when Link, himself, did not laugh at all. Instead, she awkwardly turned back to the Prince, continuing as if this entire bizarre exchange was otherwise irrelevant. “So, your Highness, I should remind you that there’s a sentencing this afternoon. King Dorephan wants to see it handled as soon as possible; something about resources.”

“Hm,” the taller Zora nodded in understanding. “Father likely wants it out of the way, so to keep the focus on our forces tonight.”

Laflat shrugged, her eyes averting for a hesitant moment, then she started to speak again. “It might be more than that, but-”

“Sidon,” Link interrupted, sliding down from the bed in order to collect his discarded clothing and pull each article back on; he continued to speak while he hurriedly dressed himself, deciding now was probably the best time to just.. become scarce. “I need to get going. It’s a long trip and all that. Plus, I need to pick my things up from the Seabed Inn.”

“Uhh,” the Prince murmured, clearly unsure, one hand reaching out to the Hylian as though to bid him to wait, however, it stalled soon after and he was seemingly unable to say or do anything further. “Right, of course,” Sidon weakly conceded.

The Hylian sent one last longing stare in Sidon’s direction as he strode toward the door, smiling weakly before he turned aside and began down the spiral tower.
The sound of bells announcing the hour rang out across Zora’s Domain, reverberating, powerful and melodious, at the height of the city; the Palace of the Zora Royal Family. There were already crowds collecting just outside, lingering in the archways with hopes of hearing the court proceedings.

Gathered were bored nobles hoping for entertainment and Zoras who normally spent their days submerged in the Basilica halls, studying the laws of the Zorana Sovereign. There were elders and children, merchant class folk standing together to gossip, and even an Undercity Zora or two, stubbornly ignoring the glares they received for even being present.

Despite the crowd, when Prince Sidon hurried past, every person present stood quickly aside, shuffling on their feet to get out of his path. He managed to make his way into the Palace upon the very last toll of the hourly bell, grinning sheepishly as he took his place by Muzu’s side. The Grand Magistratus of the courts, and Sidon’s mentor, simply shook his head in casual displeasure at the Prince’s nearly late arrival.

“I should make you read ‘The Princely Manner’ all over again. Clearly you didn’t study chapter 14 well enough,” Muzu quietly grumbled, his voice half gravel and half unsurprised. He was constantly threatening his former student with this, as if he hadn’t punished him dozens of times with that very thing.

“It behooves the most genteel and proper gentleman to be strictly punctual, greeting the hour promptly and fondly, as one would a friend most dear and beloved. There is much to be said about the importance of timeliness, for time itself is measured and obeyed by only the most civil and educated societies.” The Prince directly quoted the chapter in question, exaggerating his refined, accented pronunciations that much further, in mockery.

“Mmhm,” Muzu raised a glare to regard the young Zora at his side, the scowl deepening the wrinkles of his weathered features. “I see you’ll never mind that sass of yours, either.”

“Please, Muzu,” Sidon implored his mentor, a playful smile on his face. “I arrived just in time. It doesn’t get much more precisely measured than that.”

Before Muzu could say anything further to chastise the Prince, a cluster of city guardsmen made their way through the gathering to come before the King and the assembled council. They walked with reasonable haste, with little regard for how their prisoners gracelessly stumbled about in the cuffs and chains which held them secure. The noisy clinking of iron lured the spectators into a hush of listening curiosity, the numerous eyes of the crowd following each of the prisoners, who all but one held their heads low in shame.

Once all four of the captured Hylians stood directly before King Dorephan, Muzu came forward as well, to his usual perch near the King’s throne. The elder cleared his throat, glaring upon the four shackled Hylians with contempt while he spoke their crimes for the court and onlookers to hear. “This group stands accused of cruelty deemed uncivil by the laws of the Zorana Sovereign, as well as the unprovoked assault of our fort soldiers, with the intent to hold them for ransom.”

Sidon glanced aside while other members of the council muttered and sneered; he was certain that his people’s prejudice against Hylians certainly wasn’t in the favor of these prisoners. Of course, he was personally disappointed by these particular Hylians, considering their actions weren’t exactly helping to ease the Zora people out of the long held hatred for their race, either.

The Prince’s golden gaze drifted to the crowd of onlookers and the expressions of disgust to be found upon most of their faces, regardless of age and class. A quiet, sullen sigh was set free from Sidon’s chest while he prayed these sorts of crimes did not become only more common. His people would be interacting with the Hylians that much more closely in the future, and he didn’t wish to see
the bitterness from an older generation continue in younger Zoras.

“If those accused wish to make their pleas, they may do so now,” Muzu prompted, clearly disinterested, and likely unwilling to truly hear out anything the prisoners would say. Still, those who studied and enacted the laws of the Zorana Sovereign were held to a certain standard of mercy in justice, so each prisoner would be allowed a chance to speak, regardless of how convinced the council was of their guilt.

The first three shackled Hylians went straight to their knees before the King, the young woman huddling near the eldest man’s side, her shoulders trembling in fear. Sidon assumed they knew nothing of the Zora justice system, so to their knowledge, or lack thereof, they could have be facing their deaths.

“Your Highness,” came the voice of the eldest man. The sound was gruff, yet tremulous while he fought to maintain his composure and he dragged one hand up as far as his chains would allow, pointing a single finger at the one among them who refused to drop to her knees and beg. “My family and I were horse wranglers and trainers before all of this. This woman, Swift, she belongs to a larger group of raiders who pillaged our ranch, killed my wife, then threatened to murder my two children if we didn’t work for them. We only followed her orders. We’ve been at their mercy for years and now we’re at yours.”

The young woman who was knelt at the pleading man’s side was wracked by a sob that she tried so hard to choke back as her father begged for their lives, or freedom, or whatever he believed was at risk. Sidon could feel it; terror, shame, despair. He had to shift his gaze elsewhere, pushing the surge of emotion away, to shield himself.

“Hmm,” the King’s deep voice was resounding and powerful in the vast chamber of the throne room, echoing with such strength that one could feel the vibrations against their scales. “Would you consent to having that claim confirmed?”

The Hylian man raised his head just slightly, his eyes only looking so far as the throne pool where the King’s feet rested. “I’m sorry, your Highness. I don’t understand what you mean.”

“It is within our power to look into your mind, to confirm whether or not what you say is indeed true,” the King explained, though the kneeled man’s brow was still furrowed in confusion. “Only if you permit it, however. Despite your crimes, it is against our laws to force you to submit to such a procedure.”

“I’m telling you the truth, your Highness,” the pleading man replied, shaking his head in desperation. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes to prove it.”

“Mmm,” Dorephan gave a gentle nod of his head, looking immediately to where his son stood and he gestured for the Prince to come forward. With the soft jingling of his various adornments, Sidon gave a nod of respect and acknowledgment, answering his father’s call without question. He strode from the line of council members, closing the distance between himself and the prisoners. The man was forced back to his feet by the guard standing over him, but Sidon quickly raised his hand to cease the unnecessary roughness.

“You may consent to this, if you wish,” Sidon gently explained, “however, you should also know that we cannot automatically condemn you for refusing. It is entirely your choice and your right.” Moreover, he hated doing this. In his experience, most people driven to horrendous acts had also experienced plenty of terrible things, all of which he had to expose himself to in the process of uncovering the truth.
The Prince’s empathic talent was not as rare as the healing skill which had been possessed by his sister, but it was fairly uncommon. A Zora properly educated in the law, who also possessed his level of skill did not exist; this duty fell to him, alone.

“I’ll do it,” the man uttered weakly, unable to raise his head high enough to look at the Prince before him. “For my children’s sake, I have to.”

“Very well,” Sidon said with a solemn nod. Immediately after, he gestured to his own face, speaking up to instruct the Hylian man. “Look at me here, if you please. Just focus on my eyes and clear your mind.”

The Prince felt a great many things, just in the few short heartbeats it took for the man to finally bring his eyes up to meet the Zora’s own; fear, awe, hope, humility. His powers were already reaching, his energies twisting around the man’s mind more tightly than the chains that bound him. When their eyes met, Sidon took hold of the Hylian’s psyche, delving himself inside of it, sifting through his memory and experiencing it all firsthand.

Sidon could see the man’s childhood, his rebellious phases, years spent wandering the remnants of Hyrule. He watched a fated meeting between the man and an unknown woman, their romance, their love, the years they rode the trails as scavenging merchants, bonding though they had little to their names. There were trials and difficulties, times of argument and grief. The birth of their son came unexpectedly soon; they took shelter from a storm underneath a cluster of trees while the woman delivered her child. The family settled down, building their home from nothing. They traveled once a year, wrangling entire herds of horses to be brought back to their ranch for breaking, training and eventual sale. When the boy was older, the mother conceived another child. She stayed home that year, while the men rode off to wrangle a wild herd. Their daughter was born. Her mother taught her the skill of mounted archery. Life went on in this same pattern, counting milestones and counting down the years full of love and happiness.

Finally, Sidon found what he was searching for, his frame growing rigid as he peered through the man’s eyes. The raiders came in the night with weapons and torches. They dragged all four family members out of bed and restrained them. While they held the man and his children at bay, blades and bows trained on them, the group did unspeakable things to the mother, jeering and laughing as she cried. They tortured her until she was silent, too exhausted and too deep in shock to move or utter a single word. They killed her then, forcing her family to watch just to drive the entire sick lesson home. The group made it clear that the same thing could happen to each of them, if they failed to listen and obey. The ranch was burned to the ground, all lost save for the dark flashes of recall slumbering in their minds.

“He has spoken true,” Sidon uttered when he pulled away, disengaging himself from the Hylian man’s thoughts and memories. It took a moment for the Prince to fully return to himself; his body often felt numb as though it were not his own when he severed empathic connections.

One of the guards reached out to steady the hazy Zora. The touch was helpful, as Sidon felt it and focused on that sensation, allowing it to remain while he slipped back inside his own skin. Shifting his golden gaze to the guard, he granted him a nod of gratitude and a quiet word of thanks before returning to the line of council members.

“That leaves only you,” Muzu spoke up to address Swift, who appeared just as disgusted and aggravated by this entire exchange as the Zora people who surrounded her. “Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“I’m not sure ‘in my defense’ is really accurate to what I have to say,” the short, broad woman hissed, snarling like a wasteland coyote. “.because I shouldn’t need to defend myself. I’ve only done
what it takes to survive and I shouldn’t have to be sorry for that. You fish still have stability and security in your big fancy city, whereas my people have to survive one day at a time. We have to do whatever it takes, and sometimes if it’s every person for their self, then that’s how it is. There’s no room for kindness when it comes to survival.”

“If that’s it, then the guards may take the prisoners away,” Muzu flicked his hand at Swift, in particular, his lip curling in disgust as he spoke. “The council will convene in order to decide their fate.”

As instructed, the guards took each prisoner by the arm and marched them back to whatever holding cell they’d been dragged from. Sidon dully watched, still a bit unsteady and taking long, slow breaths to catch himself up. In his vacant haze, he only just realized that he’d forgotten to don his broach which bore the crest of Dinraal; every other member of the council had their own fastened to the elegant scarves that draped around their neck and shoulders. The Prince stood by these people, not just a member of the royal family but a practitioner of the law. Indeed, it could be said that the royal family itself was merely the ruling branch of their justice system.

The Zoras who came together before the King were only a third of his council; they were the magistrates, scholars of the law, each educated by the Basilica under the emblem of Dinraal. Sidon, however, was probably the only one forgetful enough to neglect that very emblem. His mind had been so clouded by all the things he failed to say to Link before the Hylian rushed off and all the new worries which now plagued him as a result of their last exchange.

“I don’t personally believe spinelessness is any kind of excuse for savagery,” one of the older members of the council was spitting his words as though they left a bitter taste on his tongue. Sidon’s wandering attention only managed to be ensnared when he felt the intense wave of distaste radiate from the elderly Zora whose voice was raised for all to hear. He wondered how much had already been deliberated on, without him catching any of it. He blinked, giving his head a soft shake as though to set free all of the invasive, troublesome things that robbed him of his focus.

Muzu had long returned to the Prince’s side and he reached out to Sidon, realizing that the younger Zora was still reeling from his use of magic. The elderly Zora had a look of concern on his face when Sidon peered down, nodding to assure him that everything was fine. Maybe Muzu didn’t know, but sometimes his presence actually did make it a bit easier; at times such as these, he had a calm sort of focus which the Prince could somewhat absorb into himself, to keep himself steady in turn.

Clearing his throat, Sidon stepped forward just enough to remove himself from the line. As he did, the eyes of every member of the council and the King went to him and he straightened himself under their scrutiny. “As much as I hate to give the woman, Swift’s, words too much consideration, her point was true. The Hylians do live in a state of anarchy and survival, outside of the few villages that remain standing. They’re a product of their horrid situation, which is something we likely lack the perspective to fully comprehend. I would ask the council to keep that in mind when judging these people.”

“At the very same time,” another member of the council spoke up, “our laws are clear in regards to acts of aggression. If the people of the Zorana Sovereign tolerate violence out of sympathy, we’ll show ourselves to be weak. Moreover, at a time when we’re moving beyond our previous borders, we must not allow these Hylians to see us as pushovers.”

“Hmm, I agree,” Sidon immediately piped up in response. “However, the very fact that our people had strength enough to capture these offenders, bring them before our courts, and have them submit to the ruling of our laws paints a clear enough image of our power. We need not be merciless in
order to be powerful. Remember, too, that the Hylian people are meant to be our allies. The Calamity knocked them down to the vile place they find themselves now, struggling to survive. In order to be allies, we must aid them, not condemn them.”

“The actions of these Hylians were deplorable and indeed, unforgivable,” Muzu stated at last, stepping forward. As he did, the rest of the council went silent and even Sidon stepped back into line, though he gave his mentor a questioning glance. “Each of them should be made to take responsibility for their actions and be punished in some way, no matter how repentant they may seem. With that said, it perhaps sends a clearer message to make more of an example of their leader. There is also the fact that, at this time, it would be prudent not to waste resources on imprisoning Hylians. So for all but the woman, Swift, a more passive punishment would be in our best interest.”

A small smile found its way to Sidon’s face while the entire council idly hummed in agreement. It was odd how cleverly Muzu could do that, essentially stepping forward to back what Sidon had been attempting to get at all along, while wording it in a way the rest of the council would find more palatable. He still had his own prejudices, yet ever since the Hylian Champion had aided them with Vah Ruta, he’d eased up more than Sidon would have expected of someone seemingly so set in his ways. Then again, it also could have been the fact that, since the Prince was his pupil, he couldn’t help but wish to see him succeed.

Taking the commentary of the council into consideration, the King suggested a punishment for each of the captured Hylians; each suggestion was presented to the gathered magistrates and deliberated on, before at last they voted on their final agreement or disagreement. The process was clean and without much fuss, even if minor concerns about sentences being too light, or not long enough, inevitably came up. In the end, the group managed to find a place of agreement, and once they did, the prisoners were marched back out to hear their ruling.

The King was the one to announce the sentence to each of the prisoners and the guards pushed the first three nearer to the throne, nudging them from behind with the butts of their spears. The apologetic trio of Hylians once again fell to their knees as the King’s booming voice raised to address them. “Though the Zora people sympathize with the difficulties and tribulations experienced by all Hylians,” Dorephan began, “we cannot excuse acts of needless violence and aggression. However, because we consider your people to be allies and worthy of second chances, we’ve agreed upon a lighter sentence for the three of you. As your crimes were the result of attempted trade, the three of you are hereby stripped of trading privileges within Zora’s Domain and any territory otherwise claimed by the Zorana Sovereign, including the fort in the Lanayru wetlands. Let it be known that if any one of you are caught attempting to make any trade on Zora lands, you will be subject to further penalty.”

“Thank you, your Highness,” the eldest man of the trio muttered. These were words that his two grown children repeated, all three mumbling expressions of gratitude and disbelief while they were unshackled and escorted from the Palace.

At the same time, Swift was given a not-so-gentle shove and the chains that bound her were jerked until she began forward. She resisted every step, despite being ultimately powerless in this situation; she was left clinging to stubbornness like it was the only thing left to comfort her wounded pride. Once she was a proper distance before the throne, the King announced her fate.

“To one who thinks so little of kindness, there is much to be said,” Dorephan began, leaning to one side in his throne. “This very council serves under the emblem of Dinraal, the spirit of strength, order, justice and kindness. In our law, fairness is valued above all other things. Kindness is considered to be a holy virtue, so for one to have fallen so far from that virtue, directly into a life of violence and chaos, speaks volumes. As I’ve stated, we consider the Hylian people to be friends and
allies, and we believe punishment should be dealt with rehabilitation in mind, so long as justice is properly served. So to punish you for your wrongs, for misleading those who followed you, for cruelty and for the unnecessary use of violence, you Swift, are sentenced to five years of service within the Zorana Basilica. There, you will learn the virtue of kindness and you will carry it out, in turn."

Crazy girl had been left tied just before the Great Zora Bridge into Zora’s Domain, which meant Link now had to maintain a gait somewhere between a jog and a full run just to have enough time to get back before she pulled the entire city down.

All he needed to do was grab his luggage from the Seabed Inn, then he was free to be on his way, so long as he could slip in and out without letting Kodah talk his ears off.

The twists and turns of the glowing blue city were all too easy for Link to navigate, and he could find his way around with scarcely an upward glance. When he walked through the doorway to the Seabed Inn, he was forced to glance upright, if only because of how unusual it was not to be greeted right outside by Kodah.

The Zoras were not completely missing in action, however, and the Hylian hurriedly averted his eyes when he caught sight of Kodah standing just inside, hovering over Sasan and Finley, probably lecturing them about things that Link simply did not wish to overhear. Rushing past, he continued to where his bed and supplies awaited him, only to find Kayden sprawled atop one of the water mattresses.

Link pulled his two bulging rucksacks over his shoulders, then his weapons, treasuring his precious seconds before being forced to lift that damn Boulder Breaker; he was definitely over encumbered at this point. He spared the still, blue Zora another mildly concerned glance, guessing that he must have eaten some bad fish, or something of that nature. Then again, Link was also fairly sure that Zoras had more powerful digestive systems than Hylians, so maybe not.

A few cautious footsteps carried Link in for a closer look; Kayden’s breath was coming in soft, little pants and his scales had turned a pallid, powdery blue, as if he’d laid there long enough for a layer of dust to collect over his entire body.

Despite his concern, or else his sudden curiosity, Link decided it was best not to disturb the sleeping Zora. He probably needed his rest, anyway. Instead, the Hylian drifted toward the door just a bit more slowly, suddenly much more interested in whatever it was that the other three were discussing.

“No, no, I’ll be fine,” Kodah was saying, her voice a bit shrill as she attempted to sound pleasant and unconcerned. “Don’t worry, I can manage on my own.”

“But ma’am,” Sasan nervously stammered, “I don’t know where you want us to go. It’s pretty dangerous outside of Zora’s Domain and Finley is too small to defend herself.”

“That’s what you’re here for,” the woman asserted, though it seemed clear that she hardly believed her own words and was struggling with this.

Link could feel himself slowing to a stop, all too aware that he had little choice but to nosily intervene here. Sometimes he swore these weirdly convenient opportunities for him to present himself as some kind of hero and savior just set themselves up whenever he was around.

In order to get the attention of the group, Link cleared his throat maybe a bit too loudly, because
Sasan visibly startled at the sudden noise. Either that boy was incredibly jumpy or he just hadn’t heard Link speak yet, so this came as a bit of a surprise. “So, you guys are leaving Zora’s Domain?”

When the group regarded Link, he noticed that Kodah’s cheeks were wet and her eyes were puffy from what looked like a long night of weeping. Finley, oddly enough, wasn’t glued to Sasan’s side and instead was grabbing at her mother’s arm, a confused and nervous expression written on her face. The lone Hylian in the group appeared most confounded of all, like he never expected to shoulder such a heavy burden by getting involved in this interspecies romance. Relatable.

“Linny!” Kodah exclaimed, her yellow eyes focusing on Link like she was even happier to see him than usual, which should have been an impossible stretch of emotional expression. “Yes. Sasan is taking Finley and leaving Zora’s Domain. People here are getting sick, we don’t know what’s causing it; a lot of people have already died,” the woman’s words blurted out in a desperate garble of thoughts that were only barely strung together. She didn’t get any further before she broke down, a sob shuddering through her, her face falling helplessly into one hand.

Nodding awkwardly, Link shifted his focus to Sasan, unsure if he felt pity for him or not. This entire deal seemed like more responsibility than he asked for, but then again, Finley’s family had been providing him with food and shelter until this point, so maybe he owed them whatever assistance he had to offer now. “Do you think you can safely find your way to Hateno Village?”

“It’s a long way on foot,” the other Hylian man said with a hopeless shrug.

“I can take you as far as the nearest stable,” Link offered. “If you have the rupees to afford a horse once we arrive, I can make sure they sell you a good, tame one. The ride to Hateno Village is easy enough and I have a place there, if you need somewhere to go.”

“Yes, yes,” Kodah sniffled, smiling meekly. “Thank you, Linny. Thank you so much!”

“Yes, yes,” the Hylian said with a gentle nod of his head. He supposed it was the least he could do; even if he was technically a paying customer, Kodah and her family had been friendly and welcoming enough and perhaps he even had the actual capacity for sympathy. “I’m leaving now, though. So I’ll just wait just past the Great Zora Bridge for the two of you to get ready.”

Kodah and Sasan both nodded their heads, one a bit more exuberantly than the other, while Finley at last spoke up, pleading with her mother to accompany them, though even Link knew well enough that somebody obviously had to stay behind to take care of Kayden and tend to the Inn.

He didn’t stick around to eavesdrop any further, wanting to give them privacy for whatever goodbyes needed to be said. Link also needed a quiet moment to himself, to contemplate this dreadful, new information. Did Sidon know about this apparent illness? Would his people find a quick way to combat this, or would their entire population soon be vulnerable? What if Sidon.. No. No. Link wasn’t even going to allow his thoughts to traverse that grim corridor. The Prince was fine and he would remain that way. Nothing was going to happen to him.

Link wondered if this was how Sidon always felt about him, worrying for his safety in this big, dangerous world full of awful ways to become unexpectedly deceased.

The dark procession of Link’s innermost thoughts was suddenly brought to a halt by a procession of another kind. The Hylian came to a forced standstill when his path was blocked by a long line of Zoras, most of which appeared to be city guardsmen. Two of the armored warriors roughly grasped at a shackled, Hylian woman, who did not appear at all willing to go with them without a struggle; she was flailing and spitting like a wild animal and if Link had to wager a guess, a muzzle was likely in her near future as well.
Bringing up the tail of the line was the Guard Captain, who was either trying to keep a stern face because he was very serious about his job, or else he was moderately annoyed with the wild and crazy Hylian captive. From what Link could tell, the Zoras were escorting their prisoner to the lower levels of the city, and he supposed he was just curious enough to follow after them in order to find out what was going on. He had a little time to spare now that he’d committed himself to waiting on Sasan and Finley, anyway.

Falling in just near Bazz’s side, Link played it casual while he waited for the Guard Captain to notice him. It served to remind him about Betaal’s comment in regards to how thoughtlessly he often interfered with official business, but what good was his Champion title if it didn’t enable him to interrupt people who were supposed to be working?

“Oh, Master Link.” Bazz noticed the tiny Hylian walking at his side easily enough and Link gave a nod of greeting. The black Zora didn’t seem at all inconvenienced by the smaller man’s sudden appearance, but his tone did sound a bit more flat than usual; he must have been under a good bit of stress with all that was going on.

“What’s happening here?” Link calmly inquired, gesturing at the still flailing woman while the line of guards proceeded down one of the sloped walkways to the lower levels. “Who’s the riff-raff?”

“Hmph,” Bazz scoffed, raising his head to look in the direction of the prisoner, sparing exactly zero sympathy for her current situation. “Some kind of raider merchant who thought she’d get away with attacking our fort soldiers. She’s been sentenced to serve our Basilica.”

“Basilica,” the Hylian repeated the word, feeling each unfamiliar syllable with his tongue as he did. He had vaguely heard this ‘Basilica’ mentioned here and there but he wasn’t actually clear about what it was.

“Right, uhh,” the Zora immediately caught on to the Hylian’s obliviousness. He was, of course, used to being able to speak about the Basilica with the assumption that most others would be aware of what it was. A Hylian, on the other hand, didn’t have any real way to acquire that level of awareness, given that only Zoras could physically reach it. “So the Basilica is basically a temple at the bottom of the Undercity trench. It’s a big part of our society, as we not only pay worship to Hylia and the three great spirits, but it’s also where a lot of us acquire an education. Some dedicate their lives to scholarly studies, others study the law and become part of our justice system, and a select few become Knights who serve the Basilica, specifically. Well, depending on your social status, anyway.”

While Link nodded his head, listening to what he assumed was a fairly concise explanation of something hugely important and incredibly prevalent to Zora culture and society, he also found himself yet again disappointed that Sidon never bothered to tell him these things.

“I wouldn’t have guessed all of that was down there,” he muttered, actually fairly impressed; in fact, he hadn’t even thought the water was that deep. He just hoped that some kind of shrine challenge wasn’t lurking down there, because diving to the crushing, lightless depths did not sound even slightly appealing.

“Most wouldn’t, I guess,” Bazz’s armored shoulders moved in a half-hearted shrug. “It’s probably comforting for some, knowing that we have a sacred place that is safe and unreachable to all but us. During the Calamity, that’s where most of us took shelter.”

When the line of guardsmen reached the bottom tier of the city, many of them were forced to usher bystanders out of the way, as a crowd of what appeared to be Undercity Zora had gathered along the perimeter. Most of them were a head or two shorter than the city guards, and they shuffled along
with irritable scowls written across their pale, silvery faces, while the armored Zoras shouted, “Clear out! Move along!”

The prisoner, meanwhile, was just lucky that the Zoras escorting her didn’t dunk her underwater to calm her ass down. Link remained at Bazz’s side, just watching as the screaming, gnashing, kicking woman was pushed into a large, iron, bell-like structure, which had a steel gate that shut and latched at the bottom. Once the prisoner was inside, they snapped the door shut and locked her in, all while she violently kicked, determined but ultimately pointless.

Link sort of chuckled to himself, because at this very moment, he was entirely certain that these Zoras had managed to capture the Hylian version of Crazy girl.

While the woman screamed some incredibly colorful things, the Zoras began to lower the bell into the water; it was attached to a massive length of chain that slowly extended by means of a crank which took three guardsmen to operate. Within a minute, the chain extended enough for the bell to fully submerge, so that all was silent and nobody could hear the woman’s screeching and cussing any longer, save for herself.

“So, I’m guessing there’s air inside this Basilica?” Link spoke up in question, taking advantage of the pleasantly quiet atmosphere left behind.

“Oh yeah, there’s air,” the black Zora answered, nodding his head. This all must have seemed commonplace to him, but he was fairly unbothered while he explained. “The Basilica, like our city, is a marvel of Zora ingenuity. Similar to the diving bell being used to lower the prisoner down, the shape of the temple holds air inside, though I’m pretty sure a lot of work goes into maintaining the quality.”

“And it’s safe for a Hylian prisoner to be taken there?” Link put particular emphasis on ‘Hylian’. “I didn’t even know Zoras took prisoners that weren’t their own kind.”

“I think before the Calamity, our people had some sort of agreement to send any Hylian troublemakers to Castle Town for the Hyrulean courts to deal with. Now we have to deal with it ourselves, which is probably more pleasant for the prisoners in the long run. I heard the Kingdom of Hyrule had strict laws and harsh penalties, back then. The Basilica, on the other hand, isn’t exactly a dungeon. The prisoners still get a bed and food, and they’re only really asked to perform duties and chores for a reasonable amount of time each day.”

“Yeah, but how do you force them to do it?” Link asked, that much more curious now that he knew even a small bit of information.

“We don’t,” Bazz shrugged, somewhat grinning to himself at the cruel cleverness of their system. “But the pressure at those depths would cause severe harm to a Hylian, not to mention that if they tried to escape, they’d drown before they made it back to the surface. Without our assistance, they’ll never see the light of day again.” Bazz paused for effect, a smile coming across his features before he gave Link a playful poke. “...and by that, I mean they eventually give in to the inevitability of being stuck down there, and decide on their own to do their part out of sheer boredom and a desire for social interaction.”

“You actually had me scared for a second, there.”

Bazz chuckled, loosening up now that the chain appeared to be almost at its full length. He gestured to a handful of standing guards and on his command, they dove into the water, assumably to secure the prisoner within her new area of confinement. “So, are you sticking around to help clear the path to the fort tonight?”
“I can’t,” Link uttered, growing only more and more ashamed of his single night of complete vulnerability each time someone brought it up. He glanced aside, letting out a sigh and remembering that he had to set out for Hateno Village. It suddenly felt as though he’d simply been searching for distractions from that fact, so that he wouldn’t have to leave Zora’s Domain.

“I have to go,” he blurted suddenly, adjusting his luggage and turning on heel at such a pace that if Bazz had said anything further, Link didn’t hear it.

There wasn’t a word in existence that properly described Crazy girl’s annoyance with the situation. Or was there? Was there a word that defined a state of being absolutely livid, yet also reflected an attempt to tolerate the very thing making one irritable? Would it also make clear the bouts of twitching, head-swinging, bit chomping, kicking and random bolting that only a very enraged horse with a horrendous attitude could tirelessly provide?

Suffice to say, Crazy girl was pissed. Like, more than usual. Firstly, tying her to anything was a huge no-no and since she had to tolerate a whopping ten minutes of that, she was already the horse equivalent of an inflamed bomb barrel, ready to blow.

Secondly, she was ridiculously impatient and preferred to run just a few notches below warp speed at all times. In her opinion, the very best way to enjoy the scenery was to be galloping fast enough for it all to blur into something vague and abstract. So, being forced to walk slowly enough for a Hylian and a tiny Zora girl to keep up had Crazy girl ready to veritably implode with enough force to rend the time-space continuum, creating multiple alternate timelines.

Lastly, by the time the Foothill Stable came within the horse’s auditory and visual range, Crazy had figured out what this meant. Her immediate reaction was to rear up, leaping ahead with all the power and rage contained in her hindquarters. She then shot forward with the destructive force of a Gerudo sandstorm, rolling across the land with booming thunder, dry crackles of lightning and air that was murky and not breathable. A great deal of yanking at her reins ensued, which did nothing to convince her to stop and she flew past the stable by a good distance, only for Link to eventually turn her around so he could attempt to take her back.

Thankfully, some of the stable workers decidedly became bystanders when they noticed the spectacle which Crazy girl made of herself. When Link rode past the second time, a handful of them were waiting with shit-eating grins spread smugly across their faces.

“Catch yourself a wild horse?” One of them hollered to Link, while the rest of the group chuckled in amusement.

“Nope,” Link stammered in a shaky tone, his voice unsteadied by the bouncing, jerking, kicking horse beneath him. “She’s having a difficult time handling the grief involved with her thirst for stable worker’s blood. She already massacred the entire workforce of three other stables and she really wants me to consider the consequences of bringing her here, and to know that the bloodshed which will ultimately ensue is on my hands. Anyway, you all can take her from here.”

When Link slid himself down from his mount, she was breathless but still, her teeth bared, her eyes wide with her ears pinned backward; he chuckled to himself, extending the length of her reins out to the nearest worker. “Good luck!” he exclaimed in mock cheer.

Link actually felt a little bad about leaving his horse here but not because he was concerned for the workers; they deserved their fate. In fact, while the Champion watched the workers struggle to move his beloved mare anywhere at all, his own face quickly became written with a grin of sly amusement.
It was Crazy girl who he felt badly for leaving behind, knowing how much calmer she was when allowed to freely roam and how much she detested being confined or handled by strangers.

The stablehands had managed to coerce the maddened equine a few good feet by the time Sasan and Finley caught up. Link raised his hand to greet the duo he’d unintentionally left behind and they came up the path desperately fanning their hands to try and clear some of the dust out of their breathing space. The little Zora girl was sneezing relentlessly, having probably never breathed such dry, gritty air in her entire life.

While Link was paying for his horse’s stay, he requested to purchase a horse that was ‘the opposite of the one I just brought in’, for his friends. They offered him a rosy, speckled mare for three hundred rupees and he took her for a test ride while Finley assessed how much money they would have left for food, after buying the horse.

The blushed mare was probably everything that anybody other than Link would want in a horse. She was gentle, calm and fairly clever. The short ride he took on her was perhaps the most peaceful, therapeutic experience he’d ever had, to his memory. Anyway, he hated it, but she was perfect for Sasan and Finley.

When Link returned to the front of the stable, he gestured his approval and the tiny Zora delivered the appropriate rupee amount into the hands of the seller; actually, from what Link could see, it appeared that Finley paid less than the asking price. He sat astride the horse, snickering over the entire matter and wondering if her ability to haggle came from her business-savvy parents, or merely from the fact that she looked small and helpless, despite being as clever as any adult.

It was good, because Link had been worried about Sasan. However, now he was sure that everything would be okay, because the meek, young man had Finley to take care of him.

Finally, after fastening what little luggage they had to their new steed, the duo rode south for the Dueling Peaks stable, and Link stood, waving while he watched them disappear into the sunset; not literally, just kinda metaphorically, since the sun actually set in the west and it wasn’t quite evening just yet.

Once they were out of sight, Link smiled to himself and grabbed the Sheikah Slate from his belt, tapping at the screen in order to bring up the map. Under his breath, the Hylian quietly, mockingly muttered the words, “I’ve looked at a map before, it’s not possible to reach Hateno Village in one day,” then he chuckled in amusement as he tapped the warp button.

Teleportation was a bizarre experience and Link wished he could fully understand just how it worked. On top of that, he really wanted to know if his inability to die was some kind of necessity to the process. Upon his safe arrival at the shrine in Hateno Village, it occurred to him that he could present these inquiries to Purah, forcing her to reassess her opinion on his claims of immortality.

Then again, he needed to get home as soon as possible and he could wait until he met this ‘Robbie’ guy to bring up any further pseudo-scientific curiosities. Maybe he’d be less weirdly uptight than Purah pretended not to be.

Link made his way to his quaint, old-fashioned little house, which was still empty apart from a stash of weapons and supplies and hopefully, a bed. The Hylian clicked across the wooden bridge, approaching the front door of his home. He had left it unlocked, feeling fairly sure that nobody in Hateno Village would bother trying to take anything, apart from maybe little kids whose parents would inevitably make them return any stolen weapons, because obviously swords were dangerous.

The door made a somewhat graveled noise when it was pushed open, following that up with a
squeak so nuanced that it sounded almost like words, as though the house itself had some kind of important message it needed to deliver. Link walked inside, his shoes making soft clicks against the wood floor that echoed throughout the mostly empty space. He took exactly three steps into the living area before a mysterious draft sucked the door shut behind him, so that it slammed with a harsh, resounding clash.

Within that same moment, Link himself fell to the floor with an equally violent clatter. Multiple unknown enemies descended from the rafters of his ceiling, striking him from above and pinning him helplessly to the ground. Despite being caught off-guard, he gave an immediate struggle, yet the assailants took hold of his limbs, spreading him flat across the floor and leaning their weight into him so that he had no hope of wriggling free.

All Link could manage to raise was his stare, his eyes wildly searching for the identity of his attacker and any means necessary for him to flee this suddenly desperate situation. Even his face was forced harshly into the wood beneath him, but he was able to peer up just enough to catch sight of the numerous masked faces menacingly hovering over him, emblazoned with the eye of the Yiga.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

This was it, wasn't it? His enemies had taken him, they'd won, and Link couldn't even say that he understood why these masked bastards were so adamant in their pursuit of his torment and death. There was something so hollow in that confusion, in that fear, yet what left him most empty of all.. he was going to suffer to his very last breath, and had failed to say any proper goodbyes to his beloved Prince. Now he would never have that chance.

Chapter Notes

Hello my friends. What is this? An update on the right day and actually somewhat early during the day? Wow, wild. So, let me hit you guys with a warning; this chapter goes to some kinda darkish places. Enjoy friendos. :)

The light inside the cottage was a dull, dusty flicker, and the shadow of a moth bumping again and again into one of the lantern covers was cast across the floor. It was a quick, black flutter, which Link found his blue eyes focusing on as he attempted to recover from a harsh blow to his head. His gaze was unmoving and glassy, his awareness too dim to acknowledge anything more than that stupid moth, trying so hard to bring its own delicate body to the flame and its death.

The subdued Champion was harshly grappled, his still frame hauled carelessly across the floor and deposited somewhere away from the door. He didn’t even try to move or object, his consciousness ebbing away like the dying embers of twilight on the horizon, turning to a deep, dark blue.

It was a fever dream, a restless night of sleep, dreaming with ones eyes half open; Link could still see and hear but only so much of it filtered in. His desperate, hazy thoughts filled in the blanks with imaginary things. The moth kept tapping, its wings flapping about. The metallic clink of the door being locked caused Link’s ears to twitch. Numerous feet quietly pattered across the floor. A harsh kick suddenly struck him with the force of a sledgehammer.

Letting out a choked cry, Link curled inward in a vain attempt to protect himself. It did little good, because there were hands grabbing at him all over again, pulling him down flat against the floor while the previous assailant kicked him again, and again, and again..

He opened his eyes; he was tied upside down in a tree on the Great Plateau, his skin a patchwork of bruises and slash marks. He was flat on his back in Hyrule Field. He was battered and broken in the bottom of a ravine, staring up at the towering height he’d fallen from. He was pathetically close to the entrance of Kakariko Village, lying in the gorge and shuddering through his last seconds of life with a mounted bokoblin’s arrow buried in his chest. He was hypothermic and fading away, looking up into the beautiful, mournful face of Prince Sidon..

“That’s enough,” someone said and the others immediately backed off. Link managed to hear these
words spoken, the sound of it echoing and unclear. It was a feminine voice, compassionate, yet commanding and.. familiar? The Hylian coughed, thick streams of blood-tainted saliva rushing across his lips, then he raised his head, attempting to blink away the blurriness from his vision.

Standing in the darkest corner of the room, wait.. A slender Hylian woman, with golden blonde hair braided around her face, her slight frame adorned in a flowing white gown; Princess Zelda? No, that wasn’t right..

He closed his eyes again, allowing the darkness to fade in and out, as though he’d simply forgotten his confusion and forgone seeking any further answers. When he finally opened his eyes once more, he saw nothing but another Yiga footsoldier lingering in the corner.

It was difficult to tell whether or not this particular footsoldier was attempting to stay out of the violence, or if they simply didn’t wish to be involved in such a menial task as brutally beating the life out of someone. They did appear to have some kind of additional adornments and insignias but none of that meant anything to Link. An extra leather belt hung around their hips, upon which there was a single pouch which seemed to house.. A book?

One detail did hold some spark of recognition, however, as inconsequential as it might have seemed. The captive Champion noticed a flaw in this particular Yiga’s bodysuit; a slash across their belly that had been mended. It was almost unnoticeable, save for the seam left behind.

“You,” came the roughened, quiet sound of Link’s voice as he attempted to pull himself to his knees, despite the injuries sustained. He glared in bitter accusation from beneath the muss of hair that fell into his face. Turning his head just slightly, the Hylian managed to spit blood directly onto a nearby Yiga’s foot, then he looked back in the direction of the one hovering in the corner. “You’re the one that I allowed to escape.”

Shaking his head, Link continued, the other Yigas not simply stomping him into silent submission because they, too, were looking in the direction of the footsoldier the Champion was addressing. “I could have killed you but you threw your hand up, pleading for your life, and I let you escape.. Guess that’s what I get for being soft, for even a moment.”

The Yiga clansmen surrounding Link peered almost awkwardly between the Hylian on the floor and their fellow, like they were awaiting answers or perhaps just to be given the order to continue stomping the life out of the Champion. It brought up a very good question; why hadn’t they just killed him? Wasn’t that their purpose? Wasn’t that their intention? They could have done it already, so why hadn’t they? Link’s eyes flicked quickly, desperately about his surroundings. There was a pile of weapons that he could easily make use of, if he could just reach them. He supposed he could either kill the lot of them or provoke them into finally killing him; either way, he ultimately benefitted.

“You think you showed me mercy that day?” responded the lone footsoldier. Their voice no longer sounded like the Princess’s; it was confused yet seemingly heavy with anger at the very same time. “You attacked me first. You pursued me when I fled, almost fatally injuring me in the process. Then, even when I laid at your feet, you only hesitated for a moment, just as you said. You did everything in your power to kill me, despite the fact that I had done nothing to harm you.”

The Yiga let out a sigh that was muffled beneath their mask, turning their head to peer elsewhere while their arms crossed tightly over their chest. “I might have been questioning the moral consequences of taking your life, and whether or not I believed it was necessary for our goals to be met. You answered the question for me.”

“Right,” Link bitterly hissed, though he managed to chuckle sarcastically while gesturing to the
metaphorical pack of dogs waiting to rip him apart. “I’m the aggressor. I was the one in the wrong. Go ahead and kill me, then. You obviously deserve at least one free kill for your trouble.”

“You’ve let your invulnerability go to your head,” spoke the Yiga, their tone disappointed, maybe even morose. “I’m sorry, but this is bigger than you, Hylian Champion. To prevent the continued dominion and cruelty of your people, your life is a small price to pay.”

“What are you talking abo—” Link was disallowed to finish his sentence or speak any further. The hulking Blademaster at his back delivered him to the floor with a merciless stomp, the tread of his jika-tabi boot being pressed hard into the Hylian’s back, to keep him down.

“Quiet!” the Yiga man’s deep voice commanded, to which Link had little choice but to obey, the surrounding footsoldiers descending on him all over again, to pin him in place. “How much longer?” he asked, his question obscure to the battered Hylian, yet there was dire impatience to be heard in his voice. He was probably just excited at the idea of delivering the Champion’s head to his boss.

“At midnight, when the Blood Moon peaks in the sky, he’ll be fully immobilized,” the Yiga who Link had encountered in the Great Plateau tower answered concisely, the information rolling off their tongue like it was a well-observed fact. It was, but Link was unsure how the hell they actually knew about that. “We have a couple of hours until then.”

“Can we remove the rune before then?” came the inquiring, impatient voice of the Blademaster. He must have outranked the other, or he was otherwise just an incredibly pushy, aggressive individual. Link laid still, trying his best to listen to their conversation, since they were unabashedly having it right here in front of him. What rune were they talking about? Something from his Sheikah Slate?

“Yes,” the footsoldier confirmed, though they were audibly hesitant. “It would simply be more ideal to wait. The procedure is delicate and once I’ve begun, it’s very time-sensitive.”

“We can’t risk waiting that long,” spoke the Yiga clansman with his foot pressed into Link’s back, his sense of impatience suddenly taking on a nervous tone. “We have to strip him of his immortality as soon as possible.”

“My what?” Link uttered, suddenly not feeling quite so unperturbed. His head perked upward, being dragged up from the floor by a few mere inches, yet it was just enough to enrage the Blademaster at his back. The man’s foot was lifted, violently stomping upon the Hylian’s head, slamming Link’s face into the floor with a painful crunch that left the fallen Champion squirming, while choked cries escaped from between his clenched teeth.

His nose was broken, his eyes brimming with tears from the sting of the unexpected blow. He gasped, his shattered nasal cavities suddenly bubbling with blood which dripped to the floor, puddling at the point where his face was pressed into the unforgiving ground. Link’s pained writhing shifted into desperate struggling; he pulled weakly at his arms, his legs kicking, his body wriggling, but he only earned additional kicks to his already bruised or broken ribs for his trouble, while the tight hold the multiple clansmen had on him made the struggle ultimately fruitless.

He was forced to lay still, fighting for each breath in quiet panic. Did these Yiga clansmen really know about his ability to resurrect? How? How was that possible? How could they know about something Purah outright denied to his face? And worse- they somehow knew enough that they could actively remove the ability? Could this really be so? Could it really be possible?

Even beyond the tight hold the footsoldiers had on his arms, Link could feel his hands trembling, the voices of the two conversing clansmen turning to an indistinguishable echo, suddenly so far away, Link’s head might as well have been underwater. He coughed, sputtering blood, his eyes closing, his
mind hiding in the darkness behind his lids, trying to escape the fear and pain. He saw them, suddenly, hovering over him, their hands tight around his neck, his head pressed roughly to the basin at his back, a dull, blue glow overhead, highlighting their obscured silhouettes. White haired men and women, their foreheads proudly adorned with eye-shaped markings. Standing just behind them, an older woman with glasses, observing with a brutal kind of neutrality on her face. Just near her, a younger man stood, his own expression furrowed with guilt despite how his conscience had been otherwise bound and abandoned.

Link opened his eyes, the lamplight of his home stinging at his blurred vision, even in the vast shadow of the group which hung over him. He thought perhaps he heard the voice of the Princess calling to him again, but it was as inaudible and distant as everything else.

A sudden, violent rip managed to drag the Hylian back to a state of partial awareness. His body was lifted momentarily from the ground, his tunic being torn open from behind and he flopped bonelessly against the floor, his entire frame virtually empty as he lapsed in and out. A rush of cold hit his back, the footsoldiers leaning their knees into his arms to keep him pinned while they pulled the fabric of his torn tunic aside.

What were they doing? What were they doing to him?

Quiet footsteps, which crept silently as a shadow, approached where the Hylian laid; he just barely registered the creak of the old floor beneath the Yiga’s feet. It was the one from the tower; Link could see the last sliver of light on the floor eclipsed when they came over and kneeled down next to him. A stray, gloved hand tucked underneath him, just enough to unlatch his Sheikah Slate and relieve him of it. The device was slid across the floor, set down somewhere near where his swimming head laid, and his ears twitched at the sound.

Link flinched, his ears pressing backward when the footsoldier from the tower took hold of his wrist. His hand was brought to the screen of the Sheikah Slate, one finger being manipulated into tapping the screen, setting something into the Slate which he was unaware of. The feeling of the long, slender fingers around his hand brought him further out of his reverie and he yanked his arm back, shoving the footsoldier away from him in yet another attempt to fight his way to freedom.

With his one free hand, he clawed at the floorboards, his fingernails making only slight purchase in the furrows of the wood but he managed to move himself perhaps a fraction of a centimeter toward where his stash of weapons waited, before the rest of the Yiga clansmen bared down on him that much harder.

“I’m going to need to use his hand,” the footsoldier from the tower muttered in minor annoyance as they righted themselves.

“Not a problem,” the deep-voiced Blademaster hissed, almost glad to be given further excuse for cruelty. He reached down to take hold of the Hylian’s wrist, dragging his arm back with a hard, merciless yank while he pressed one foot into the back of Link’s shoulder. Another clansman pressed both hands over Link’s mouth when he began to cry out from the pain, stifling any shriek of agony that risked drawing the attention of neighboring Hylians. The broken Champion’s screams were set free against the muffle of gloved fingers when his body snapped under the pressure, his shoulder dislocating with a grotesque pop.

His arm was dropped at his side, but his cries did not cease and the footsoldier whose hands were pushed against his mouth bared down that much more. Link’s body shuddered, a tormented sob of pain wracking him and escaping without his consent, though the gloved hands pressed hard over his lips didn’t allow the sound to be set free.
The Yiga from the tower again took Link by the wrist and dragged his useless arm to the screen of the Slate, tapping some kind of command into it now with ease and sighing over this entire scene like it was some awful inconvenience. “..I’ll use his Sheikah Slate to place him under stasis once he’s open. We have to do everything perfectly, because if he dies, he’ll be resurrected with his memories of this event intact, whereas we won’t remember it.”

“But if we’re successful, he’ll stay dead.” The Blademaster’s tone was utterly cocky; his victory must have felt very assured, at this point.

“That’s correct,” the footsoldier from the tower spoke in confirmation, not nearly as confident as their superior.

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep him still,” the deep rumble of the Blademaster’s voice reassured, a chuckle of dark amusement coming from him as he gave Link a nudge with his foot. “He seems pretty docile now.. Probably in shock. So much for the last true Hylian Knight, I guess.”

Indeed, Link was now utterly still, apart from the tremors that wracked his frame. The footsoldier whose hand was still pressed over Link’s mouth now bent his head down ever so slightly, a soft shushing sound audible from behind his mask, and he smoothed his other gloved hand across the Hylian’s disheveled fringe, patting him like he was an old dog about to be put down. What kind of sadistic shit was this? He couldn’t have been sincerely attempting to comfort the Champion, so it must have been some warped form of mockery, yet even so, Link didn’t have the will to resist. He was only barely holding onto consciousness, focusing on each bloody breath he had to force through his broken nose while his hold on reality slipped further and further away.

‘Is it wrong that I’m always thinking of you, always hoping for another chance to see you?’ Link’s ears twitched at the sound of Sidon’s voice, his eyes closing tightly and focusing on that beautiful sound. ’..that I fear I could lose you..”

‘You won’t lose me.’ The Hylian’s own voice resounded through the confines of his memory, so quick and doubtless and the same calm, hollow ring as always.

‘My dear friend, how can you say that? Does the path before you not give you reason to doubt?’

‘No. As long as you believe in me, I’ll never lose.’ A soft utterance of guilt and pain escaped into the muffling palm over the Hylian’s mouth. He had pushed the Prince’s feelings of fear and worry aside, writing him off for things that were perfectly natural to feel. What an over-confident, thoughtless bastard Link was.

He had taken this life and this power for granted hadn’t he? He hadn’t even wanted this cursed immortality, nor any of the responsibility that came with it..

And yet.. Now that it seemed he stood to lose it, to finally die once and for all.. he felt true terror bloom inside him as it hadn’t in so very long.. because suddenly he had something worthwhile in his life, something that he could lose.

He remembered his first real brawl against those bokoblins on the Plateau, the belligerence and utter rage that came from a potent mixture of suffering and fearlessness. All of it was stripped away, one painful piece at a time as Link’s understanding of his own mortality violently shifted; he didn’t fear excruciating pain and he didn’t fear the idea of his existence being extinguished forever.. but not living to see Sidon even once more? That scared him.

The cold touch of a blade and the danger it held as it was dragged across his exposed flesh brought Link suddenly back to full awareness. The pain was quick and sharp and hot, tracing along the
Hylian’s spine from his hairline, down to the space between his shoulder blades. A choked cry was set free against the glove of the clansman who was softly shushing him, a renewed struggle taking hold of the tormented Hylian, though it was comparable to a child wriggling in their parent’s grasp, at best.

The Blademaster had his knees bared down against the backs of the Hylian’s legs, his hands tightly grasping Link’s hips while he leaned his weight into his grip. After the first cut, the footsoldier from the tower rather cautiously took hold of the ensnared Champion’s tied hair, cutting it away with an easy swipe of their blade, then they continued their sadistic fucking work, whatever it was. The point of the blade was brought to the back of Link’s head, and slowly dragged downward, so the skin of his nape was sliced with careful precision.

The clansman from the tower leaned down close to Link while they cut him; their breath was heavy and audible behind that mask, and the single hand they had laid upon the Hylian to brace themself up was trembling against Link’s shoulder. Suddenly, a gasp came from them and the blade was pulled away from the ensnared Champions flesh with a start; Link laid still, trying to keep his breath steady in this single instant of slightly lessened pain.

The Yiga clansman from the tower uttered a confused and nervous, “What? What is this?” The single unexpected occurrence set them on edge enough that they backed off of the captured Hylian, almost as though they expected him to suddenly become unspeakably powerful and overcome the entire group which presently held him at bay. Though Link could not see it, the startled Yiga footsoldier sat rigidly upright, gazing here and there in nervous questioning.

When Link opened his eyes, prompted by some distant, hopeful curiosity, he found the floor that stretched out before his pinned body was softly illuminated by a hazy, blue glow. He could not raise his head, as his movement was tightly restricted by the footsoldier whose hand was pressed to his face, but he still knew exactly who it was.

At first, he was unsure whether or not to be pleased that Mipha had appeared to aid him, as it only meant that now these Calamity-worshiping bastards would just begin this awful, gruesome process all over from the beginning. However, as the warm, comforting magic began to dutifully mend his broken ribs, his shattered nose, his dislocated shoulder and the veritable dissection in progress, he couldn’t even inwardly reject the fact that his pain had been reduced; he was simply grateful.

Though a small bit of his vitality was also restored by Mipha’s Grace, Link remained as still and seemingly boneless as he’d been before. He could feel the strength returning to his frame, the exhaustion melting away from his pinned limbs and he could tell that the Blood Moon had yet to peak. As such, this presented one, final opportunity for fight or flight, so long as he did not tip off the group of Yiga clansmen to the last, tiny fraction of energy that he now possessed.

“Hmm,” the Blademaster sat himself upright, releasing his hold on the Hylian’s hips but not yet removing himself fully from Link’s person. “My sensor is reading a sudden concentration of GB energy. There’s a cloud of it hovering over us right now.”

“Oh, yes, you’re right,” the footsoldier from the tower uttered in confirmation, breathing a sigh of relief, which extended into a quiet, inquisitive pause. “Fascinating. I’m unsure if this effect is part of his rune’s healing factor. However, I’m certain that the excess energy needed to produce this heightened healing effect should eventually run out.”

That same footsoldier bent over Link once more to inspect, their hands palpatting the sides of his chest and his shoulder, inspecting the damage or else the sudden lack thereof. “Indeed, his previous injuries are no longer present,” they observed aloud with piqued interest that was only thinly veiled, moving their hands to check Link’s pulse, then taking a quick glance at the Hylian’s face; his gaze
was faded and distant, his pupils blown wide. “Yet he still appears to be in a state of shock. Either
the healing factor simply can’t adequately restore his physical stability or the Blood Moon must be
near enough that he’s beginning to be overcome by it.”

“We have around twenty to thirty minutes left before midnight,” the Blademaster confirmed his
fellow’s suspicions. While Link quietly listened, he found that their observations were only partly
inaccurate; he had decided to remain still by choice, yet he could, in fact, feel the beginnings of the
Blood Moon paralysis coming over him. His fingers and toes had gone numb and that numbness was
quickly spreading upward, toward the trunk of his body while the seconds passed.

His one chance to attempt escape had a time limit that was scarce and dwindling. He had no hope of
fighting this group, knowing that they would be able to physically overcome him with ease, now.
His only option was to flee, yet his chances there were equally bleak. More than likely, he would
expend the last of his strength, only to end up severely beaten and broken all over again, while still
enduring this twisted shit. He wished he’d waited just a few more minutes for Sidon, to speak with
him, to say proper goodbyes before walking away..

Maybe.. survival at this point was just selfish, anyway. Yes, Link wanted nothing more than to see
that idiot Prince’s smiling face, but perhaps in the end, Sidon deserved better. Maybe he was better
off without having to constantly carry the emotional burden that was his relationship with an
effectively unstable Hylian. The Zora Prince belonged with someone less troublesome and more
capable of returning his boundless affections..

As expected, the footsoldier who seemed to be some kind of morally defunct medic began their cruel
procedure again from the beginning, performing each incision with methodical care. A soft hiss of
pain was elicited from the pinned Hylian, though the hand pressed over his mouth muffled it to the
point that it was entirely inaudible. At the very least, Link’s ebbing ability to feel any sensation
lessened the pain, too.

Defeat now stood like a figurative specter before the Hylian, extending its hand to him, gently
offering him the option to just give up and accept what felt to be inevitable; it would certainly be
easier to do so. As it was, within ten of fifteen more minutes, death would be painless, effortless, and
final. Wasn’t that what he wanted?

He could just close his eyes, lay still and allow the damnable Yiga Clan to take his miserable life
away. He had regrets and unfinished business, sure, but when did death ever offer any regard for
those things? He could finally just go away forever and be free from the divine calling he had no
wish to respond to. He could, at last, die one final time and not be forced to suffer any further..
Maybe.

Yet while Link laid contemplating the idea of accepting defeat and figurative specters, a literal
specter remained standing over him; Mipha was being oddly persistent, considering she normally
vanished after healing him. The broken Champion’s dull blue eyes flicked upward by a minute
fraction, his fading mind quietly questioning why she was lingering. Mourning him? Waiting to
escort him into the afterlife alongside her? Attempting to remind him that he still had something to
fight for? Maybe she just intended to heal him again, since he was already being injured once more.

It must have been easy for a dead woman not to give up; her suffering was totally over and done
with. Life was something she could interact with, but it was optional. Link never understood what
she meant in following him as she did, so it wasn’t like he expected any brilliant epiphanies to strike
him now.

Link’s vacant gaze trailed downward, returning to the floor before himself. Surely it wouldn’t be
much longer now. He tried his best to think of Sidon, to just allow every image his memory had ever
retained of the Zora Prince to drift to the forefront of his mind; his charming smile, his warm, golden gazes, his gentle, affectionate touches, his calming voice and all of the sweet words of encouragement, reassurance and affection he’d uttered to Link. Even their final night of lovemaking, as careful and needful as it had been, was something worthy of reflecting on and cherishing. These thoughts filled the Hylian’s hollow chest with warmth, as they always had, as he always had.

Link wished he could ask Mipha if she missed the ones she’d left behind when she died. That was probably a stupid question; of course she did. As it was, Link couldn’t even feel the warmth of his tears when they slid quietly down his cheeks, like his body had already faded completely from existence.

But it seemed that as Link’s will to live vanished into oblivion, Mipha’s own unwillingness to allow this pitiful thing to occur pushed her to at last intervene. The Hylian’s attention drifted back to her hovering form when she began to move, her bangles softly jingling with her delicate movements, her ethereal form bending downward, suddenly shining and vibrant.

The apparition laid her fingertips ever so softly upon the surface of the Sheikah Slate, which still laid forgotten just near where Link’s face was pressed to the floor; it was close enough for him to watch, silent and unmoving. At Mipha’s touch, the screen of the device flickered to life, seemingly escaping the Yiga clansmens’ notice. Each of them were so focused on what they were presently doing, they didn’t realize that the Sheikah Slate was going haywire; not yet anyway.

Visible through the static, Link watched as the screen of the Slate navigated itself to the map, bringing up the warp selection. His heart skipped several beats, seeing his one narrow chance of escape literally just within his reach, so long as nobody noticed. Swallowing dryly, the Hylian waited and hoped that Mipha could somehow confirm the warp sequence herself. Despite his mounting hope, however, she faded away before completing it, in exhaustion or otherwise the inability to do so, leaving it to Link to make the final move and preserve his own existence.

It really would be the ultimate bitter slight to both Zelda and the Goddess she represented if Link let himself be killed here. But.. he’d be damned if he did that to the Prince, knowing that one last struggle could possibly bring him back to Sidon’s embrace. Sure, these clever bastards caught him at a time when he wasn’t strong enough to preserve his own life, for his own sake, but he could still preserve it for somebody that he mattered to; he had to.

With all the fighting spirit that existed within his small, angry body, Link tore one arm free from the slackened grasp of the clansman holding onto it, reaching for the Slate with desperate speed. Another footsoldier made a grab for him, their fingers digging into his upper arm while he lunged; his limbs were heavy from the peaking Blood Moon, his strength quickly waning as he struggled against the renewed hold, his fingers just short of the screen.

They pushed his arm to the floor, trying to pull it back from the Slate while the one from the tower gasped in horror at how very close the Hylian’s fingers were to it. Link dug his fingernails into the wood, crawling his hand along the floor with that tiny bit of leverage, one fingertip brushing the Slate, making just enough purchase that he slid it up under his palm and stabbed a finger into the confirmation button.

Link had never, ever been so happy to feel the bizarre sensation of his body fragmenting, pulling apart at the seams as the transference sequence initiated. His skin and bones lit to brilliant, blue luminescence, his entire being unraveling, but not before he heard the footsoldier from the tower gravely utter the words, “They’re the ones who really killed you.”
Link’s consciousness was a weak, wavering, unsteady thing. However long he’d lain here, it was only something he could vaguely guess at and his head wasn’t anywhere near clear enough to guess at anything. Awareness hadn’t fully returned to him after he reappeared and presumably he only opened his eyes a few minutes after the warp process was complete. The Blood Moon was moments away from reaching its peak in the sky and Link could only tell that much because as long as there was one clear thought in his mind, it wasn’t yet midnight.

But he didn’t have much time. Wherever he’d managed to warp, he wasn’t out of danger, because the Yigas could transport themselves in a similar manner.

The vast, starry sky stretched out endlessly above the helpless, grounded, Hylian while the foreboding, crimson orb amidst it all climbed ever-higher. The Blood Moon reflected itself in the dark shine of Link’s eyes and while he watched, he felt the paralysis of his body nearing its completion. Soon, his mind would be gone for hours and he’d be vulnerable to anything that came along with malicious intent.

Scarcely even able to feel the rise and fall of his own chest, nor the cool air chilling his unmoving body, Link fought the heaviness pressing him down flat like a drying flower, captured between the pages of a book. Even turning his head to observe his surroundings was a forceful effort of sheer willpower, yet he managed to spot his lost Sheikah Slate, laying in the grass just near his head.

With a grunt of effort, Link found some tiny shred of strength still left beneath the dead leather of his flesh and he took hold of it, fighting the heightening gravity that held him. He may as well have been wielding the Boulder Breaker with a single outstretched limb, his arms now worth a thousand pounds of force. One arm flopped almost pathetically before him when he heaved himself onto his side, fighting the seconds as they raced away. He couldn’t lift it and struggled just to extend his reach toward the Slate, one hand sliding slowly across the grass.

The Hylian gasped for breath, unsure if he was even breathing at all, his body wracked by the effort just to move slightly. The only force driving him was the intensity of his will, yet finding it was akin to sifting through the desert sand by hand, hunting for any drop of moisture.

With his shift, however, he now could see enough of his surroundings to ascertain where it was that Mipha had taken him. Starlight and flame glared, obscuring his vision, leaping here and there like the entire world was a reflective surface, a mirror that images danced across without limits. Even so, Link saw the dark, cavernous opening to the Shrine of Resurrection, recognizing it as though he’d stumbled out naked and clutching at his ratty, scavenged garments maybe only a day prior.

Even stranger, Mipha’s shining form now hovered in the entrance to the Shrine, her back turned to Link in favor of staring endlessly into the darkness just beyond the threshold.

What must she have wanted? What interest did the Shrine hold for her? Did she think that she could possibly to returned to life, herself?

There would be no answers to this mystery tonight, however. With what scarce energy and fragmented awareness remained within the fallen Champion, he bumped the numbed masses of his fingertips against the screen of the Sheikah Slate, almost unconsciously selecting the shrine in Zora’s Domain and pressing the warp button.

Chapter End Notes
How was it, friends? Let me know in the comments, below. :) 

ALSO, just one other thing! I'll be at a protest tomorrow, so kinda keep me in your thoughts, hey? :)
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

As the Blood Moon rose over Zora's Domain, the Zora people took up arms to fight the monstrous onslaught. Brivere and his team began their march Westward, while Betaal and her warriors from the Fort struggled to resist the descent into pure, overwhelming chaos. Elsewhere, though the Prince had volunteered to assist the Guard Captain in leading the teams from afar, his plans were swiftly altered when he sensed his Hylian lover's sudden and unexplained return to Zora's Domain.

Chapter Notes

OKAY; here it is, friends. I'm sorry it is so very late, but maybe it will be worth it, because this chapter is almost 16K words. That's short of two chapters by 4 thousand words. I am sweating right not, my gosh. I really busted the keys to get this chapter done, haha! This chapter is about how the Zoras handled their own business during the Blood Moon and it is REALLY action-packed. It was really exciting to write, so I hope you all enjoy it.

Oh, also. For those of you who aren't following my tumblr or don't have tumblr, I would really advise it, because I tend to post updates about the story, like whether or not I'm gonna be late. There's also art of the characters, which is fantastic. I haven't done an art shout out in a bit, so here we go; OfficialUrbosa, StupidBlackCat, I know I've mentioned you two before, but the art was awesome. :) Ryuuzakiroth, thank you for the wonderful birthday gift, which I was terribly late noticing. It was a joy to ogle, for sure. :>

The evening of the Blood Moon was bound for chaos and Betaal had more or less accepted that. She didn’t like it, but she’d accepted it. All of her life, chaos felt as though it were the true natural order of things. The only real order was disorder; maybe that had some merit. However, when one sought to prevent every little thing from descending into pure and utter madness, plenty of forethought was always required.

This was her way of remedying just a portion of the shitstorm that was headed in their direction. Also, it was just the right thing to do. Even if the people of the nearby camp were not her own people, she didn’t want to see them get slaughtered. So, despite the rough beginnings and the trouble caused for the Zoras by Swift and her group, Betaal made the decision to trust the entire rest of the camp, at least for tonight.

Her guardsmen checked various carts and bags at the front gate of the fort, while a rather assorted crowd of folk bustled in. Betaal oversaw the entire process from the fort wall, her single, yellow eye going between observing the group one person at a time, and the sun sinking on the fiery horizon. Each individual allowed through the gates was permitted to keep a single weapon in their possession, while the excess was taken into Zora care with the promise that all would be returned upon
departure.

Within the safety of the fort, there was no need to be so heavily armed and it was best to be sure that none of these people could cause any trouble. Thankfully, not a single person, regardless of whether they were Hylian, Goron, Gerudo or Sheikah, made a huge fuss. They all appeared aware that this was a gesture of kindness on the part of the Zoras and were simply grateful.

Yet even with her attention divided already between two different matters, Betaal still managed to catch sight of the sudden approach of additional Zora warriors from the river, their bodies gleaming with fancy Basilica armor. They maintained a strict formation while they swam downstream, paddling along in lines that resembled those of migrating water fowl. Betaal sneered while she still had the chance to do so, then she gestured to the sentry in the gate tower, giving them the signal to open the gates which were at water level.

Betaal made her way down from her perch, descending the tower stairs to the lower level in order to greet the reinforcements. She was forced to steel herself with every free moment, because if the Apostles of the Basilica were insufferable, the Knights were sure to have her wanting to rip her own forefins off. What was it about people in leadership positions, always assuming they were entitled to thorough ass kissing just for doing their jobs? The Sergeant absolutely refused to lower herself to that; likely the reason it took so long for her to rise up the ranks, but at least she managed to do so with some dignity intact.

Folding her hands behind her back, Betaal marched before the newly arrived company of Goddess Knights, watching them pull themselves up from the fort moat. The well oiled armor that adorned their shoulders and chests beaded with moisture as the water rushed off each one of them. Up front, the second Lieutenant to the Knight Divine straightened the crest of Farosh which held her shawl in place, her mismatched eyes already slowly observing the mess of outsiders lining the fort, distaste clear upon her features.

“Welcome to ‘Fort Boko’,” Betaal spoke a greeting, her tone the usual gruff, stern sound. It was odd; she never thought she would be thankful for the fact that she only had one eye, but she was for a single, passing moment, otherwise, she’d likely be stuck looking between the Lieutenant’s one yellow eye and her slightly darker, more amber-colored one.

“I think you mean the ‘Elegy Spire’,” the Lieutenant corrected in a tone very similar to Betaal’s own, with just a pinch more snobbery. The subject clearly held little real interest to her, however, as she moved past it without offering enough time for the blue Zora to respond.

“I wasn’t informed that we were offering shelter to the rest of the population?” The taller, more heavily armored Zora continued, still watching random Hylians pass by with donkeys in tow and young Gerudo women with huge packs strapped to their muscular shoulders. She appeared particularly disturbed by a lone, elderly Rito, who had perched himself on top of the sentry tower.

“The crowd you see here is from a camp which formed on Mercay Island, nearby,” Betaal explained, guiltless. She hadn’t gotten any higher clearance before she made this decision, but she also didn’t have time for that. Was assuming that her people supported compassion toward others really assuming too much? “They are being granted sanctuary for this night and will be asked to leave in the morning, when it is safe once more.”

“I don’t see why we should defend them, when they made the mistake of camping on dangerous territory. Now they’ll just make a habit of leeching off of our generosity,” the Lieutenant’s lip curled ever so slightly when she spoke, so that her sharp canines shone in her disgust. “We shed blood for this fort. They can’t say the same.”
“It is the duty of the strong to uphold and empower the weak. Or does the Basilica no longer teach
that?” Betaal wore a smile, despite her growing ire. However, since her badly faked expressions
tended to be terrifying, it had an effect which was pleasing enough. If her words didn’t have the
Goddess Knight crawling in her scales, the grin sure did the trick and Betaal reveled in the sudden
speechlessness of the other.

The fact of the matter was that Betaal had shed blood for this fort. This fancy Knight was only seeing
it for the first time today and what business did someone like that have deciding who should and
shouldn’t be allowed to enter?

In the momentary silence, it was Betaal who now moved on, preventing the other warrior from
saying anything further on the previous subject. She cleared her throat, fixing the Knight with her
sharpest one-eyed stare and said, “I assume you’d like to be shown to the pyre circles, which you’ve
been sent to defend? If you’d like, I can escort you there.”

“It’s quite alright,” the Knight declined, her tone anything but polite. “Ser Strata still remembers the
fort quite well; he’ll show us to where we need to be. You have other work to be doing. If I’m
wrong, well, just make sure you keep your Undercity brawlers out of the way of our properly trained
warriors.”

Betaal was forced to bite her tongue so damn hard, she may have well chewed it off just to keep
herself from initiating an all out throw down against that damnable Knight. ‘Don’t do it,’ she was
telling herself. ‘Honestly, it would just prove her point.’ She allowed the company to move past her
and out of sight. They would probably occupy all of the rest tents and lounge around until the fateful
midnight hour.

She really, really, really hated that. How convenient must it have been for those pompous Uppercity
Zora to constantly fling around the stereotype that their Undercity cousins were temperamental,
uncivilized, ‘brawlers’. It always effectively robbed them of their personhood and silenced them at
the very same time.

Apparently, not all of the Basilica Zoras had moved on, however. One rather short individual
managed to break away from the tail end of the group, only to sneak directly into the fuming
Sergeant’s blind spot. From there, she near tackled Betaal, throwing her arms tightly around the
slightly taller Zora, hopping up and down in excitement while the blue Zora gaped in very profound
confusion.

“Excuse you,” Betaal hissed, her bright red fins flared in considerable offense while she sharply
turned and tilted her head, doing her best to get a good look at the person attached to her. Whoever
they were, they wore a Basilica shawl which prevented any immediate view of their face and the
crest of Naydra; a scholar, not a Knight.

“Bett! It’s me! Loreen!” The young Apostle bubbled gleefully, bouncing on her toes and adjusting
the strap of the rucksack she carried. “I was sent to record tonight’s events. It took a lot of work to
convince the Most Wise One that tonight was sure to be a historic event, but I can be very
convincing when I need to be!” she paused, giggling to herself, then continued on, while the taller
Zora stared at her in confoundment. “I have so much to tell you! The play was such a success. The
children performed every scene so perfectly and the audience was into it the entire time. They
laughed and cried. It was just so remarkable. I wish you had been in Zora’s Domain to see it because
I am just so prou-”

“Wait,” Betaal cut in, putting her hand up to silence the rambling Apostle. “You’re Loreen? Like,
from the letters?”
“Yes!” The white Zora flapped her tail and squeaked in boundless excitement at finally meeting the friend who she’d exchanged letters with for years.

The puffed red fins of the fort Sergeant slowly flattened as the realization dawned on her. She stared down at the bubbly Apostle in flustered disbelief, a deep, violet hue bleeding quickly into her complexion. Opening her mouth to speak, a hundred different things came dangerously close to spilling out all at once, yet nothing but silence was issued forth. Betaal’s throat tightened while she dumbly stared at the pretty, young woman before her.

Sure, they were friends, but that probably just made things worse.

The blue Zora was trembling by the time she figured out to turn her back completely to the other woman, in utter desperation. With her hands pressed over her embarrassingly flushed face, Betaal finally managed to blurt out the words, “You couldn’t have written me, to let me know you’d be coming?”

“Uhh!” The Apostle tittered at her friend’s odd behavior, not even questioning it. “Well, I kind of wanted it to be a surprise. But, also, I only got the official approval early this morning, so I wasn’t sure.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit.. Um..” Betaal’s tail twitched while words just began erasing themselves from her vocabulary, threatening to render her unable to comprehend language at all. “..dangerous? For you to be here, I mean.”

“Don’t worry, Bett!” the pale Zora squeaked in gleeful reassurance. “I know how to defend myself.”

“Okay, well..” Glancing over her shoulder nervously, Betaal swallowed before attempting to speak while actually somewhat looking at her friend. It was a real challenge. “Why don’t I show you to the rest tents before those Goddess Knight prigs take them all?”

“Yes, that sounds great! We can catch up on the way!” came the thrilled response of the Apostle and she fell right in line with Betaal as the taller Zora marched off rather hastily.

The golden Knight heard the clinking of the river anchor suddenly shifting as the hour of battle neared; it sounded unusually loud and resounding. Slowly, he opened his eyes to observe the dark, unfamiliar waters rushing around him; it was a slosh of bubbling froth atop otherwise black rapids, all blurred together obscurely.

Unhitching from the anchor, Brivere brought himself to the surface with an easy kick, then he dragged his aching frame unsteadily up onto the rocky shore. The group of warriors had marched out to the checkpoint between Zora’s Domain and the Lanayru Wetlands earlier in the day, then they set camp in order to sleep until midnight, when the Blood Moon would peak, potentially resurrecting some of the monsters the Zoras had killed once before.

Brivere stood watching the other warriors arise from the river depths, the sound of the water hissing only further heightening the pounding pain throbbing underneath his long forefins. He’d hoped this headache which had set in during the march would subside before he went into battle. He’d assumed sleeping it off would prove successful, yet unfortunately, it was not so.

Maybe it was the heat or the stress. He wasn’t sure, but either way, it was badly timed.

The golden Zora had his head held between his hands, his fingers tucked under his forefins in an attempt to massage some of the pain away, when the sound of a voice captured his attention. The
words spoken ran together, as though the person talking never paused and never took a single breath.

Blinking and raising his head, Brivere found himself faced with the Knight Lieutenant of the Royal Order, who was looking at him expectantly, his expression patient yet clearly confused.

“Apologies, Ser,” the golden Zora uttered, his voice roughened from the unusual sleep schedule. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“You must not be much of a morning person, Captain,” the other Zora repeated himself, chuckling awkwardly. Brivere’s tightened pupils studied the other man’s face while he spoke, noticing the equally tired shadows upon his visage. He must have been looking for something relatable to say to the golden Zora, as they rarely spoke or interacted with one another otherwise. This was, in fact, their first time working together.

“I am indeed,” Brivere answered dryly. Thankfully, he actually managed to understand what was said to him this time, despite the bizarre ringing in his ears which accompanied the headache plaguing him. “Waking in the morning is easy. Waking at midnight after bedding down in the afternoon is...unusual.”

“I see. Yes, I suppose you make a fair point,” the other Knight replied, again laughing in that same awkward way. Brivere often got the impression that the Lieutenant was a good warrior, but bad at chit chat. Something about the way he’d come to address the golden Zora felt odd, however.

The Knight Captain had his suspicions confirmed when the other Zora cleared his throat, then spoke up again. “If you’re not up to the task of command, though, I can ask someone else to take over for you. I think Kree, in particular, would be well suited to lead, given how well she performed during the last mission.”

“Ser,” Brivere straightened himself, suddenly seeing clearly what this was all about. “I assure you, I’m quite alright.”

“Are you certain?” The Lieutenant persisted, his tail giving a tiny flick. “I just assume it must be difficult for somebody who isn’t from a Goddess-Blooded family to deal with the burden of leadership. I don’t want you to feel overwhelmed.”

“I’m certain,” the Knight Captain answered curtly, not wasting the time to address anything else that was said. “We should assemble our teams and prepare to mobilize.”

“Very well,” hummed the other Zora. His voice held the unquestionable sound of disappointment, but Brivere did not remain to acknowledge it. Instead, he marched away, taking a deep breath to steady himself.

Making his way to the cache where he’d stored his armor and gear earlier in the day, Brivere worked to quickly dress himself, buckling each piece snugly in place. He fastened the strap which held his sword against his back, then heaved the weapon securely into the holster, along with his quiver and bow. He was busily pushing his long forefins over his shoulder, and binding them to his tail when another warrior came along and stood quietly waiting to be acknowledged.

The golden Zora glanced back to find one of Bazz’s guardsmen standing straight and patient, only at last speaking up when Brivere turned to face him. “Your orders, Ser?”

“Assemble at the Oren Bridge, ready to march West,” Brivere calmly commanded, craning his neck to glance at the moon growing high in the sky. The midnight hour was soon to be upon them. “Stand ready to fight. We have no way of knowing what will occur upon the stroke of midnight..”
“Yes, Ser,” the guardsman answered, dipping his upper body slightly lower in a quick bow, then he hurried off to gather the team, as ordered.

While a small handful of others rushed to secure their own weapons and move out, Brivere checked over the arrows in his quiver; he had twenty arrows and five fire arrows, which he prayed he wouldn’t need to use.

At last Brivere marched down the path to the bridge, the rocky soil crunching in a way that was strangely loud beneath his webbed toes. Those under his command stood straighter when they realized he was present and he counted the warriors that made up his group; twenty of the city guardsmen and ten Knights of the Royal Order. He recognized most of the Knights’ faces, as all of them served under him, Kree included.

Kree’s eyes followed Brivere when he walked past, her mouth set in a straight line and he spared her a glance, though little more. Regardless of the rough start, he was otherwise certain that the night would be easy, though he would still be ready for the worst, as a matter of principle, of course.

At the Blood Moon’s peak, the group began their march to the fort, putting down a couple of confused lizalfos with ease. The warriors sniped them from a safe distance with a single arrow, each. A map was marked with care, one warrior diligently making note of where any enemy was killed and what it was, so the remains could be better disposed of. The group quickly scouted the trail ahead before doubling back and spreading their numbers out across the Zodobon Highlands.

The marching Zoras’ armor clinked and their toe claws clicked as they scoured the winding canyons of the Highlands. Brivere paused at the edge of the northernmost drop off, glad to see that the Hinox occupying the valley below was no longer present. The crew that cleaned up its remains took particular care dismantling the corpse of the beast and disposing of it. The golden Zora wasn’t certain of the methodologies involved with destroying the remains of monsters to prevent their resurrection, but it was a rather curious subject. Having seen so much death in his life, he often wondered why it was that monsters were gifted with eternal existence, yet everyone he’d ever lost was gone, permanently.

He hoped that one day his younger sibling would simply choose to become a Basilica scholar. Knowing what levels of focused dedication Estuu could manage, Brivere was confident that the boy could one day unlock these mysteries. For now, just convincing him to take his studies seriously was the challenge.

Once Brivere felt sure that the area was clear, the group condensed once again, returning to the trail. All was quiet and there was little to be encountered, apart from a delightful array of big game, which were thriving in the absence of monsters. The group of warriors even managed to meander quietly past a small herd of mountain deer; the buck watched the group from an elevated ledge, snorting in warning, but the deer did not feel threatened enough to flee.

The surrounding cliffs shone, the weather a seemingly indecisive thing. The rain came and went throughout the evening, offering comfort and relief to the soldiers and they raised their faces to greet the precipitation that misted their dry scales. The ledges all around the group were a wet, glimmering blue from the luminous stone contained within these rich lands. The Zoras took care while moving past patches of anemone weed; their lines narrowed to single file and they wove through the maze of great, branching pink plants which could sting through even a Zora’s scales.

The group finally came across a scout when they neared the Bank of Wishes, where the Guard Captain was stationed, maintaining control of communication. They reported their kills and were informed that the company traveling east had encountered some trouble with a group of moblins which managed to surprise them. The beasts must have been confused and angry; Brivere tried to
imagine what it must have been like to be revived by the Blood Moon’s evil. He peered up toward the sky as the clouds broke overhead, revealing the glowing, crimson orb.

Strangely, staring upward noticeably intensified Brivere’s throbbing headache, an accompanying chill moving down his spine and he took a drink from his canteen, thinking perhaps he’d become dehydrated. It seemed unlikely, but it was worth consideration. During the pause, the scout came to address the yellow Zora, offering a message of warning from the Guard Captain; beyond the canyon ahead, just past the Bank of Wishes, there had been a camp of well-armed lizalfos. As the river did not run through the area, there was no way to check ahead to ascertain whether or not the lizalfos had been revived, so Brivere was advised to take caution.

While the Knight Captain listened to the scout speak, he nodded awkwardly, finding that he was having a difficult time hearing the words. It was similar to the incident with the Lieutenant, each sound coming late and echoing indistinctly, so the words overlapped and combined into a slurry of verbiage that was challenging to make sense of. Just attempting to be attentive quickly brought out an aching, nauseous feeling in the pit of the Zora’s stomach.

In the end, he uttered the word, “Understood,” just to stop the scout from speaking anything further. He was sure he’d gotten the gist of it, after all, he remembered the very camp he was being warned of. It had given the Zoras a great deal of worry the last time they passed through; Sidon had to stop the entire company in order to strategize. The golden Zora would merely stick to the previous tactic, since it was flawless before.

The group continued their westward trek, and Brivere quickened his pace so that he neared the front of the line. Out of the ten other Knights that marched alongside the guardsmen, only one of them walked near the front and the Knight Captain matched her stride, coming near in order to address her. “Kree,” he spoke softly, the effort of speaking increasing the pounding in his head.

“You remember the technique we used to surround the camp in Tabahl Woods the last time, correct?” the Knight Captain asked, sure that she would, as she had also been present during the last mission.

“Yes, Ser,” Kree answered plainly, though her cheeks were already visibly dimpled by a grin spreading slowly over her lips. She must have welcomed battle, if only for the chance to prove herself. As someone who was obviously vying hard for a higher rank within the Order and a higher position among fellow nobles, it wasn’t surprising.

“I’d like for us to make use of the same strategy this time, just to be safe,” Brivere explained. “There’s little likelihood that we’ll encounter the sheer numbers we did before, but even one lizalfos armed with shock arrows could make itself a huge problem to us.”

Turning his head to look upon the other young Knight, Brivere at last posed the suggestion he had in mind, “Can you lead the splinter group?”

“Yes, Ser,” Kree gave an enthusiastic nod of confirmation, her wide, spotted forefins flapping softly against her cheeks. With that, Brivere halted to split the group, assigning each member to a team with careful consideration of every soldiers skill sets; he wanted to be sure that both groups were equal in strength and range capabilities.

Once the new assignment was complete, the group crept cautiously through the tight canyon which
lead into Tabahl Woods, splitting off where the cliffs at last opened up to the wide, forested valley. Brivere cut off to the right, ducking low in the grass of the softly rolling terrain. The wooden towers which had been previously present were long dismantled but the shadows of the trees swaying in the foreboding, red light cast across the valley served to trick the eyes.

The Knight Captain led his team along, slow and careful, his own breath coming out soft and controlled. Light and darkness skirted across the land, forming shapes which danced and teased the golden Knight’s constant state of hyper vigilance; Zoras had reasonably good vision in low light but perhaps that just made Brivere all the more tense.

Both groups made a wide arc around the previous campsite, surrounding it, then they paused once in position. Kree’s group awaited a signal from Brivere, at which point they would tighten the circle, moving slowly in toward the camp. Brivere attempted to concentrate his electroreceptive sense, searching the area for any trace of lifeforms large enough to identify as lizalfos. He gave himself a few quick moments, yet he found there to be some kind of interference; it was most likely lightning keese, though there was potential for it to be shock arrows. Brivere just wasn’t sensitive enough to make out the difference. He would have killed for Sidon’s heightened senses.

The Knight Captain gave a gesture to his team, and two warriors raised spears adorned with luminous stone, which twinkled visibly from across the wood. They waited for the signal to be returned by the splinter group, which came within a few quick seconds. Beyond the stretch of grassy hills and the clusters of trees, two brilliant dots of blue light cut through the shadow.

The Zoras formed a tight line, the front proceeding carefully through the tall grass with shields lifted in preparation to block and deflect any projectiles. After the death of Rivan, the Zorana city guardsmen in particular were on edge, even with shields and spears ready.

The team took one wary, creeping step at a time, marching through the misty, silent wood with care. Archers followed on the heels of the shield line, bows raised and arrows nocked. All seemed still as the two teams steadily closed the distance between them. That was, until a faint clicking sound caught Brivere’s attention and he immediately raised his hand to halt the line, his head inclining while his gaze slowly traced across the surrounding treetops. The leaves appeared to wobble, even as the wind went still and he squinted, his pupils swollen to great, black circles in the low light. Even the tree trunks began to bend and sway while he stared out into forested abyss, and he was beginning to think maybe he was just going crazy, since every one of his senses were determined to betray him.

Then, the soft creak of a bowstring being drawn taut served to banish Brivere’s doubts and his eyes shot directly upward into the black and red of the canopy. A camouflaged lizalfos had cleverly tucked itself among the branches and foliage; a shock arrow crackled and flickered in its grasp, the illumination providing one instant of warning to the Zoras below. It let out a high pitched chirp and all across the camp, the dancing sparks of shock arrows sounded down from the treetops.

“In the trees!” Brivere had only a few seconds to hiss in warning before the lizalfos hovering above let its arrow fly. The golden Zora nimbly leapt out of the way, the burst of electricity buzzing violently, sparks snapping and chasing him as he just barely escaped the range of the blast.

Before the nearest enemy could reach for another arrow, Brivere sprung into the branches above, brandishing his Silver Longsword. His upper body dipped forward at the peak of his jump and he tucked himself into a flip. The blade whipped forcefully around while the Zora’s body rotated, gaining speed, a heavy slash coming down hard toward the beast. The lizalfos realized only too late that its target somehow escaped the previous shot and though it attempted to fall upon all fours and scurry away in haste, Brivere’s strike still landed, the heft of the blade catching the reptile in its back, slicing cleanly through flesh and bone, all the way to the wood below.
The creature’s blood splashed and dribbled down the trunk, its halved body sliding lifelessly to the ground below with two simultaneous thumps. Brivere paid that little heed, giving a yank to free his sword from the wood and he returned the huge blade to his back. The Knight Captain quickly crouched upon his treetop perch for a better view, taking stock of what had occurred so that he would know how best to proceed.

His archers had successfully shot down two other lizalfos in the time it took him to eviscerate the nearest one and they remained ducked low, awaiting additional orders. From his heightened viewpoint, Brivere could see that one other enemy remained and it had Kree’s group pinned down. They were crouched behind a ledge, with the one enemy steadily firing shock arrows in their direction, hoping the bursts of electricity would somehow manage to strike the hidden Zoras. The golden Zora easily spotted the flash of the arrow strikes shining on the reflective, metallic surface of the other Zoras’ armor.

Brivere drew his bow from over one shoulder, though from such a distance, it seemed a long shot. Still, if the Knight’s group moved in to attack, they would be put at great risk, whereas Kree’s group at least had some degree of shelter from the peril that could take each of them with one fatal strike.

With the shroud of darkness and the electric arrows, all of his senses were rendered almost entirely useless. If Brivere missed the shot, he would alert the enemy to his presence, losing any further element of surprise. Perhaps, however, the confusion would offer Kree’s team the chance to counter or flee; he had to try.

The gold Zora quietly drew an arrow from his quiver and took aim. He could hear the pitchy echo of the lizalfos war cries resounding through the densely forested valley, but the clearest indication of where it was hidden was the flash of light that its arrows emitted just before they were fired.

The Knight deeply inhaled, his chest rising then falling, one last breath smoothly escaping him before he ceased to breathe at all, perfectly stilling himself as he let his arrow fly across the dark wood before him. It cut through foliage and clusters of greenery, sailing across the wide gap of distance between the Knight and his target, at last meeting its final destination, though Brivere could not see where it ended, only hoping his shot was precise and his aim was true. He leapt down from the tree, drawing another arrow just to be safe, while ducking low and striding back to his waiting group.

Brivere waited, slowly straightening himself while he listened carefully to the sound of silence whispering through the trees, carried on the thick fog that drifted past. He was just the same as the mountain buck, with its head held high, its ears perked forward and alert. The sound of aggressive chirps and the buzz of shock arrows was absent, but Brivere decidedly remained wary. The enemy could have fallen still, now aware of other threats within its vicinity.

“You,” Brivere’s voice was low and he gestured to one of the guardsmen who was armed with a bow. “Make your way over toward Kree’s group. Have them signal if they’re out of danger.”

The deep, raven-scaled guard gave a nervous nod, but steeled herself in determination, stalking carefully across the wood and eventually, out of sight. The rest of the group remained in the defensive position as they waited to see the signal; within a few short minutes, they caught sight of the vibrant, blue light and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Stay alert,” the Knight Captain uttered quietly, before leading his team toward the dismantled camp. The two groups converged and spread out across the wood, scouting the area thoroughly, then at last they set out upon the trail once more.
An hour past midnight and the fort was utterly, unexpectedly quiet. Betaal had walked the perimeter multiple times, checking over and over the preparations, just in case there was any oversight. Archers and pikemen lined the guard walls above, warriors were stationed in strategic places below, while the refugees from Mercay Island simply tried to stay out of the way.

Quite honestly, the silence was much more overwhelming than constant, hopeless battle. Battle made sense; the pressure and speed gave the blue Zora’s mind and body clarity. It awakened her senses to their peak performance. But this safe, still, quiet? This clouded her head and filled her with anxious doubt, so that all she could do was pace about, while expecting everything to crumble all at once.

It was Dunma who finally managed to still the fort Sergeant, reminding her that she’d yet to issue a report for the communication team.

“I knew I’d forgotten something,” Betaal grumbled, forgetting, too, that Dunma was absolutely lovely for all of one, quick moment. Once the shorter Zora properly processed the dulcet voice, however, that moment was over and Betaal’s puffed, red fins immediately flattened. “I mean, uh. Not that there’s anything at all to report.”

With lively energy that was begging to be set free on monsters, the Sergeant strode toward the area just near one open gate at water level; it was agape to allow the convenient comings and going of messengers, as it was otherwise inaccessible to bokoblins. The team of messengers hovered nearby, all four perched at the edge of the moat, much too relaxed for Betaal’s liking.

Upon the Sergeant’s approach, the group clambered to their feet and stood at attention, with one pale, lavender guardsman stepping forward. Betaal assumed this lavender Zora was the team control, the one who would send and receive all messages on her team’s behalf. Dunma, on the other hand, knew this particular Zora much more familiarly and spoke up in greeting.

“Aunt Gaddison!” she blurted without thinking, though she hurriedly corrected herself. “I present Sergeant Betaal, Sir.”

Dunma had gotten so comfortable in her friendship with her superior, sometimes she actually forgot that she was on the job. It was completely outside of her typical behavior, because even working alongside her father, she always remained entirely serious about work. With her yellow gaze downcast in embarrassment, the young Zora just hoped that nobody noticed the hot flush coming over her features.

Betaal, however, did not fail to notice. In fact, she was suddenly intrigued by the sheer notion that she wasn’t the one making a complete imbecile of herself in front of attractive women. Clearing her throat, the Sergeant’s voice spoke up in Dunma’s silence, addressing the lavender-scaled Zora. “And I’m guessing that you’re Guardsman Gaddison.”

“Yes, Sir,” the pastel guardsman confirmed, grinning in slight amusement over Dunma’s antics.

“It’s alright, there’s no need for so much formality, since there’s nothing to report.” Betaal grinned, but actively attempted to keep herself from outright smiling, not wanting to scare the living daylights out of everyone around her. She placed one hand on her hip, gesturing to the young, violet Zora at her side with the other. “I’m not surprised that Guardsman Dunma is delighted to see a familiar face, since not many of these fort soldiers worked with her previously. So, the two of you are related, then?”

“Not exactly,” Gaddison purred, her voice as soft and cool as her scales. “I’m a friend of the family, Sir.”
“She was part of the Big Bad Bazz Brigade,” Dunma clarified, almost accusingly, one hand splayed across her face while she did. “With my Dad. ‘The Heroine,’ Gaddison.”

“The Big Bad Bazz Brigade?” Betaal repeated with a chuckle. She couldn’t be any more glad that Dunma had finally learned to always stand on her left, where Betaal could see her, because she was sure that this was a rare, beautiful sight; Dunma, smiling, comfortable, happy. She hadn’t been so carefree since she’d come to work at the fort and the blue Zora was glad to see her find even one simple moment of enjoyment.

“Sir!” came the sudden, frantic sound of another’s voice, interrupting the casual calm of the moment. “There’s a problem. It’s the Goddess Knights that arrived earlier.”

Betaal said nothing, going back to complete seriousness in a quick instant. She strode off with the guardsman who’d run to her in a panic and he began to lead her straight toward the rest tents, which the Knights had predictably hoarded all evening. Dunma followed right in her superior’s wake, making a habit of being always available for any order the Sergeant issued, wanting to help in any way she could manage.

When the trio arrived at the first tent, the deep blue Zora slapped the canvas flap aside to find four Knights flat on their backs, as though they were simply sleeping and nothing more. The young Apostle, Loreen, was kneeled beside the unresponsive Knight Lieutenant, a troubled expression wrinkling the soft pale of her face.

“What’s wrong with them?” Betaal asked, her single eye looking from one sleeping Knight to the next; their scales shone with cold sweat and they laid as still as the dead. Dunma stepped away to peek into the other tents, finding only more Zoras who had fallen into a slumber they couldn’t be woken from.

Loreen’s careful hands reached out to the Lieutenant, her fingertips tracing the other Zora’s lips and peeling them back ever so slightly, just to catch a glimpse of her darkened gums, which had turned from a pale blue to a deep navy.

The young Apostle had already seen too much of this where she worked, in the Basilica, and she shook her head in woe. “It’s Water Blight.”

“Water Blight? The Water Blight?” Betaal growled in confused dread, her fins softly flaring. “You mean like the Water Blight that broke out right after the Calamity?”

“Yes. It’s the same as it was then,” Loreen vaguely tried to explain through her sudden nervousness, gesturing rapidly when her words didn’t come quickly enough. “The symptoms and physical signs are the same, it has the same high mortality rate and it kills in the same quick span of time.”

“How can you just say it’s the same, when nobody ever figured it out before?” The Sergeant hissed, her sharp teeth flashing while she snapped her words. “They never figured out what caused it, how it spread, or how to treat it. It disappeared too quickly.”

“Trust me,” the white Zora gravely uttered, “I’ve already seen enough of it to know.”

Before Betaal could even speak a poorly thought out response, the entire fort was struck by something powerful enough to shake the stone walls, a deafening blast resounding throughout. The explosion was chorused by shattered stone violently scattering across the lower level, and splashing down into the moats, then finally the wail of the warning bell sang out with rapid, fretful cries.

The Sergeant cringed from the haunting ring left behind in her ears, all other sound too soft to drown
out that painful buzz; she could see that Loreen, too, had folded herself inward, her trembling hands pressed to her ears underneath her forefins.

Betaal turned on heel to exit the tent, to ascertain what level of Hell had broken loose while she had her back turned, and as she pushed open the flap, she ran headlong into Dunma, knocking her backward. Quick and reflexive, the blue Zora grabbed the young guardsman by her narrow waist to prevent her from falling, holding her steady while she regained her balance.

“What happened?” The Sergeant’s voice was rushed and dire, though her hands were firm and steady and Dunma unconsciously clasped the Sergeant’s wrists as she blurted her answer.

“Almost all of the Knights are unresponsive and a hoard of bokoblins armed with bomb arrows just rushed the fort.”

Betaal nodded, giving quick orders and counting on Dunma to diligently carry them out. “The medic is alongside the warriors near the southernmost wall. Bring them back here to care for these sick Zoras.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dunma determinedly uttered, pulling free of the blue Zora’s grasp and hurrying off to complete the task.

Equally hurried, Betaal pushed open each tent flap, checking within every one to see just how many of the Knights were out of commission; the answer was too many. Some of the Knights had emerged from the tents, but were left standing in distress and confusion when their leader did not appear. The looks on their faces when everything fell apart was disgusting and pitiful and Betaal marched right up to them, hollering orders that they couldn’t seem to figure out on their own.

“The Lieutenant isn’t gonna be waking up any time soon, so you’ll be following my command,” she harshly blurted. “Those among you who can still hold a weapon, form a perimeter around the pyre circles, since that’s all your Basilica found important enough to protect!”

“Yes, Sir,” the group spoke in unison, some still confused, some hesitant, but nevertheless, they obeyed.

Betaal stepped into one of the last tents, finding that Loreen had already tucked inside and was again kneeled at the side of a Knight; this one was conscious, but struggling for breath while trying to heave himself upright. He was a tough-looking, older Zora who wore the scars of true battle, likely against the monsters that invaded during the Calamity. Even now, he refused to give up, trying hard to resist the weakness overcoming him, saying, “If I can just get to my feet…”

The small Apostle woman shook her head and coaxed him back to a reclined position, uttering the words, “You can’t fight in this condition.”

“The medic is on the way,” Betaal attempted to reassure her friend, immediately wishing that their meeting had come under better circumstances. She was about to say, ‘Stay here,’ when she realized that the white Zora had already buckled a weapon holster at her waist, which held what appeared to be a book in one pouch and what was definitely a dirk in the other.

“I have to get to the main tower,” Betaal informed the other, only for the Apostle to clamber to her feet.

“I’m going with you, Bett,” she fearlessly insisted. “I have to document this, it’s why I came.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Betaal hissed, another blast shaking the fort and causing the both of them to teeter sideways. Loreen’s hands pressed over her forefins, squishing them tight against her ears, but
her eyes still shone with persistent courage.

“I told you, I can take care of myself!” She spoke much too loudly, unable to hear her own voice from how she’d covered her ears. “Don’t try to argue. I’m not a soldier, so I’m not gonna take any orders.”

“Stay right beside me!” The taller Zora growled, one finger raised and pointing into her friend’s face.

When Betaal strode from the tent, she found herself faced with an oddly familiar and slightly ironic sight; the fort was overflowing with bokoblins, which were crawling over the walls and coming through the holes they’d inflicted with bomb arrows. They’d seemingly caught the Zoras off guard, which was perhaps only their way of repaying the favor, but irony be damned, Betaal wasn’t gonna hand this fort back to those creatures.

A handful of tiny, red and blue beasts screeched, laying their sights on Betaal; their eyes gleamed red with malice, their bodies adorned with messy war paint. They were gathering just near the tents when Betaal emerged and she bared her teeth right back at them, pulling the spear from her back as she prepared to fight the lot of them.

Five or six rushed at the two lone Zoras all at once and though the Sergeant raised her spear, she was immediately given reason to pause. The smaller Zora at her side quickly drew her hands up, crossing them before herself, somehow shoving the entire hoard backward with an invisible force. Betaal did not spare a second to question it, charging in to flay and impale the unlucky beasts while they were helpless on their backs.

When the deed was done, Betaal hurried off, but turned a curious, one-eyed stare toward the Apostle at her side.

“Magic,” Loreen spoke plainly. The taller Sergeant nodded in understanding; of course an Apostle of the Basilica was Goddess-Blooded, that should have been obvious from the start.

The duo fought their way to the main tower, their combined strengths making the struggle less strenuous. Betaal held most everything at bay with her fast and powerful strikes, her body a mere vessel, which contained explosive force that only mounted as she fought. Hardly a single foe came near enough for the Apostle to be given reason to expend her magical energies, except for when they climbed the first of the tower stairs, only to find the way littered with enemies.

Loreen sent the creatures flying from the tower in sheer impatience, and the duo passed without further delay, making their way to the top to find the bell-ringing sentry incredibly relieved to see them.

“How did these damn things get in so quickly?” Betaal growled, the sound of her voice somewhere between authority and threat, though she looked out over the walls for her own answers as quickly as the sentry could speak up.

A huge force of mounted bokoblins had surrounded the fort; there were even clusters of stalkoblins among the hoard. They often wandered the ground at night, easy pickings for Zora scouts. Yet here they were in droves, as though they had all been lured or otherwise rallied, marching in from the direction of Hyrule Field.

“The first wave came in on rafts, Sir,” the sentry explained, their voice shaking. Betaal peered down toward the river, and the single open gate, indeed catching sight of a number of wooden rafts pressed against the walls by the river current. “The rest of them rode in as quickly as I could sound the alarm.”
Loreen had whipped the book from her leather pouch, her hand hastily jotting everything she heard and saw while she stepped out of the Sergeant’s way. Without giving the Apostle any chance to follow, Betaal leapt over the side of the tower, toppling all the way to the stone below and landing in a crouch. She was in a hurry and though Loreen’s skills were helpful, it was faster just to fight her way through.

Betaal’s feet scurried across the stone and she gave orders as she fought; she ordered warriors here and there, sending them from one of the more secure areas, to places of greater importance. A small handful were sent to protect the main tower, while others were commanded to guard the now helpless Knights. Yet more were instructed to defend the damaged fort wall, where the majority of enemies had gotten through. The senior guardsmen held control of each area without need for further orders and Betaal was able to move quickly between them.

By the time Betaal made it back to the messenger team, the open gates were being laid siege to, with the messengers themselves unable to exit and doing all they could to fend off the hoards attempting to enter. Dunma was there, fighting fiercely at Gaddison’s side, their two spears like the tusks of the Calamity Beast, itself, rending piles of enemies so the moat ran thick and red with blood. The other three members of Gaddison’s team were standing aside, firing arrows in rapid, tireless succession, at every beast that was foolish enough to enter. Unfortunately, that was many.

“We have to get word to Bazz about this,” Betaal declared in a fiery tone before she simply leapt into the moat, paddling through the crimson muck, emerging just outside the fort, then she burst from the water to land atop one of the numerous rafts. She shook the makeshift, wooden devices with the power of her landing, her spear coming down to flay one enemy, a sharp kick knocking an uncounted group to a watery demise.

The battle hardened warrior danced between clumsy strikes with ease, parrying and throwing a dozen more attacks than the tiny beasts could hope to return. Even the sheer force of her weight upon the unsteady surface became a weapon at her disposal and she delivered a series of precisely aimed blows in between leaps here and there, shaking the rafts, flipping them and tossing the beasts astride them to the mercy of the river’s wrath.

Soon, Betaal noticed one of the messengers dive through the gate, swimming free of the fort and heading upstream to carry word of their plight. The Sergeant hoped their next news would be that of victory and she paddled back into the safety of the fort walls.

But just as soon as Betaal thought she’d gained a bit of ground, the fort walls began to shake all over again, though this time the tremors were not accompanied by the explosions of bomb arrows.

“What now?” the blue Zora grumbled, rubbing the back of her arm against the rounded crest of her brow, brushing beads of sweat and likely blood away from her eye.

The warning bell immediately provided an answer she did not want at all. The sharp pattern of pings indicated an entirely new situation and she made haste toward the stairs which led up to the tower walls, with Dunma following at her heels.

“It’s a hinox,” the blue Zora breathed, every ounce of feral spirit in her coating the simplicity of her grave statement.

“I thought they disposed of its remains so it wouldn’t respawn?” Dunma spoke up, moving nearer to where Betaal stood, her eyes seemingly fixed in a glare, her breath a rush that was impossible to catch.

“They did,” the Sergeant answered bluntly, her webbed feet pattering noisily against the stairs in her
hurry. She emerged above, striding out onto the walkway of a fort wall to get a good look at the beast lumbering past. “It’s a different hinox. It must have been energized by the Blood Moon and the smell of the carnage is attracting it.”

To Betaal’s perplexity and surprise, however, the massive creature defied her postulations, heading instead for the path which led toward Zora’s Domain, rather than the fort. This came as no relief and she growled the words, “That’s not good,” before she hurried back down the stairs to the lower level.

Rejoining Gaddison, Betaal spoke in immediate warning, saying, “I know we just sent one messenger, but now we have to send the others.”

“What’s the situation, Sir?” the lavender Zora asked, standing straight and tall, like all out battle was of no real concern.

“There’s a hinox headed East on the path toward Zora’s Domain,” the Sergeant explained, her words quick and sharp. “You have to send one messenger to the Bank of Wishes, to inform Bazz at control, and one other to find the team marching in this direction, or they’ll run headlong into the beast.”

“The last I heard, that team was still in Tabahl Woods,” Gaddison spoke, shaking her head in concern. “The river doesn’t run anywhere near their last position. The hinox will find them way before the messenger.”

“Damn it,” Betaal swore, her sharp teeth bared while she weighed her options, and fast. “Then we have to pursue the hinox ourselves, to give that team a better chance.”

“Sir,” Dunma cut in, her tone astounded but somehow steady. “We don’t have the numbers here that we should, because more than half of the Knights collapsed.”

“I think we do,” Betaal spoke up, gesturing to the fray of battle, scattered across the fort. The younger Zora glanced aside where her superior pointed, noticing only now that the refugees from Mercay Island were mixed in with the Zora forces. Groups of Hylians with swords and shields formed random, unbreakable circles which the bokoblins attacked to little avail. Gerudo women stood shoulder to shoulder with Zora warriors, wielding spears with wildly different technique but equal proficiency. That old Rito had apparently even been armed with bomb arrows, himself, and he was circling the fort from above, raining torment down on the gathered mobs just outside.

While they watched, the small form of Loreen pushed past random monsters, leaving them disabled in her wake while she ran toward Betaal’s group. “There you are!” she hollered in bitter distress, panting for breath as though she’d been running back in forth in search of her friend. She had her dirk brandished and bloodied, so it may well have been the case.

“Dunma,” the Sergeant said, regaining the attention of the younger Zora. “I’m going to take a group of the fort soldiers and pursue the hinox. I’m giving you command while I’m gone.”

“What?” Dunma gasped, immediately shaking her head, not even close to feeling ready for that kind of responsibility. “Sir, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” Despite everything, Betaal smiled and surprisingly enough, the violet Zora didn’t cringe at the sight. Her expression was troubled and fretful, sure, but not because of Betaal. “You take everything as seriously as I do. You’re organized and cool-headed, and you’re slightly bossy. That works out nicely.”

“No,” she pleaded, her eyes shining with nervous tears. “Sir, I can’t. I can’t have lives in my hands. I can’t live with the fault of any more death, because of this pla-”
“Dunma,” the shorter, blue Zora interrupted. Her voice was stern and commanding; as much as she hated to overlook and outright ignore the fears and doubts of the other, they simply didn’t have time to debate. No, she knew Dunma was strong enough. She believed that. “It’s an order.”

“.yes, sir,” the violet Zora hesitantly spoke up, her voice fading back to the usual steady, serious sound. For better or worse, that command reminded her that this was her job and she was a warrior, and she had no choice but to follow orders. Betaal was not her friend, but her superior. And yet, just as the older woman began to turn on heel, hurrying off to answer the call of battle, Dunma reached out to grab her by the arm, stopping Betaal in her tracks. The Sergeant paused, lifting a confused, questioning eye to meet Dunma’s gaze, but the violet Zora quickly averted it.

“Be careful,” Dunma bid, not imploring, but demanding, perhaps as her first order in charge. All that was required from Betaal was a gentle nod for Dunna to set her free and the Sergeant set off without further hesitation, the pale Apostle chasing while she went.

Gaddison, however, spared a moment of pause. She busied her hands slaying any bokoblin that approached, holding them off to allow the exchange. Now that it was done, though, she peered in Dunma’s direction, giving the younger Zora a look of protective suspicion and concerned inquiry. Of course the violet guardsman had no time for it with the new burden of command placed upon her and she hurried toward the main tower, where Betaal had been meant to stay.

“We’re marching!” Betaal cried out, her spear swinging, twirling, knocking enemies aside so that she could make her way to the largest standing group of fort soldiers. These newly trained warriors were young and inexperienced, but Betaal had drilled each and every one of them, and she trusted their grit. Every single one was also from the Undercity, so half of their tenacity was in proving their worth to the world. Betaal wanted to give them all that very chance.

Among the warriors that rushed to meet their superior’s call was the silvery, young woman, Tetra; Betaal recognized her as the overly brave recruit who’d dared to look her in the eye. It seemed she was just as proficient in action as she was in speaking, the spear she wielded spinning impossibly quick between graceful leaps and flips. She moved on her feet, as any other Zora would in the water.

Roughly counting the group, Betaal figured she had approximately twenty soldiers at her disposal and regardless of whether she believed they could muster the force to slay a hinox, it was going to have to be enough. She led them before the main gate of the fort, her voice raised for all of them to hear. “Be ready! When the gate goes up, the enemies outside aren’t going to allow us to leave without a fight!”

Her single, yellow eye was cast upward, in the direction of the main tower, where Dunma now presided. The Sergeant raised her hand, gesturing for the gate to be opened and the violet Zora returned the gesture in acknowledgment, ordering the sentry to man the crank. The band of Undercity soldiers crowded near the powerful iron and sturdy wood of the giant door when it clicked and began to heave upward with a graveled groan.

The warriors at the front of the line held their shields and spears ready, while archers hovered just behind, arrows nocked and aimed ahead. When the gate lifted out of the way, a hoard of bokoblins predictably stood along the bridge in opposition, and the Zoras immediately fired a volley of arrows into the crowd.

Soaring overhead, the Rito archer circled the bridge at the front of the fort, dispersing and destroying the impassible cluster of bokoblins with carefully aimed bomb arrows. Dirt, stone and destroyed flesh erupted from the impact of the explosives; the Zoras dipped their faces behind lifted shields for safety, stumbling back only slightly before they rushed bravely forward.
The shield warriors used what little leeway was granted, slamming forcefully into the remaining opposition, buckling the smaller creatures and shoving them aside. Spearheads jabbed, a powerful, flickering sting that greeted one enemy after another. Steadily, the Zoras pushed their way out of the fort, gaining the attention of the bokoblins which attacked from horseback.

Thundering hooves stampeded in a whirl of chaos at the edge of the bridge. The horses bellowed and cried aloud, the bokoblin riders echoing their mounts with feisty war cries and swinging spears. The Zora archers managed to shoot down some of the riders, one at time, though the process began to feel slow as more and more mounted bokoblins rode over.

At last, Betaal took a running charge toward the back of her own lines, leaping into the air and sailing overhead. She landed directly among the hoard of enemies, twisting round, the length of her spear swinging in a wide arc that cleared a circle of space around her. The scrambling beasts were slashed and stabbed, those attempting to rush in parried, kicked aside, wasted at the end of the Sergeant’s wildly flying weapon.

With the encouragement of their leader’s deadly skill, the warriors cut a line through the forces attempting to push them, fighting their way through the hoard and marching with dire haste in the direction of Zora’s Domain.

Brivere’s team had regrouped from the situation in Tabahl Woods and were thankfully no worse for the wear. He supposed his team handled the incident with the lizalfos well enough, considering nobody was hurt and the monsters were defeated. It wasn’t as flawless or glorious as it had been when Sidon led the team but only the results truly mattered in the end.

The group had at last put the tight cavern which led out of the forest behind them. It wasn’t quite a cave, but it was still lined with lightning keese and bramble which the group had to take care to remove without injury.

The Zoras now traversed the narrow pathways at the height of a great, wide open canyon. The steep trail wound downward, in the direction of the river which had chiseled its way through the mountains over the thousands of years since the great sea receded. Tiny stones shifted audibly underneath marching feet, rolling down the path and over the side of the drop off, falling such a distance that scarcely a sound of landing could be heard from below.

“Watch your step,” Brivere called to those ahead of him. Just peering in the direction of the hazardous ledge caused a violent rush of vertigo and the golden Knight was forced to stop and steady himself, simply allowing the ranks to march ahead.

The pounding in his head hadn’t lessened at all and he felt quite doubtful that the rapidly shifting altitude helped in any way. Changes in pressure normally were no problem for any Zora, but what else could explain this suffering that had Brivere so troubled? He’d marched these paths at least twice recently, so not even his newest best guess really held any weight.

One hand pressed against the stone of the cliff face, sharp fingerscales finding purchase in the tiny cracks. Brivere took a few deep breaths and continued, his body feeling incredibly heavy, each little movement sluggish from the increased effort. He fussed with the straps that held his longsword in place when he began to walk again, thinking maybe he’d fastened them incorrectly because they were strangely bothersome all of a sudden.

When the group at last made it to the bottom of canyon, they walked the banks of the Zora River, expecting to be preyed upon by antagonistic octorocks within the narrow corridor. The archers of the
group had their bows in hand and arrows ready, but there were few enemies to be found. Scarce light reached so deep into the canyon, so the river visibly ran black as ink, the stony face of the surrounding cliffs varying shades of obsidian and shadow.

The electrical input still felt strangely hazy, at least for Brivere. He suspected that it could have been the buzz of other various lifeforms lurking in the dense, tree-lined area that stood up ahead. There was also a chance, though, that his senses were merely betraying him, much as he wanted to deny that possibility.

“Can you sense any enemies from here?” The Knight Captain posed this inquiry to one of the archers at the tail end of the company. The Zora in question wore the armor of the Royal Order, the same as the golden Knight, yet he gave Brivere a slow up and down glance before finally catching sight of the insignia which designated Brivere’s rank.

Answering bluntly, the archer spoke the words, “Only birds and bugs, Ser.”

“You don’t feel there’s an unusual static?” the Knight Captain asked, his words soft, each one a labor for him to utter.

Again, the other Knight glanced at his superior, only vaguely concealing a look of concern. He didn’t even need to answer; Brivere could already assume enough from his expression. “No, Ser.”

The company warily proceeded into the foliage-rich area along the river. It was a strange, miniature forest, all of these trees likely the descendants of those that made up Tabahl Woods. The seeds were carried downstream by the river and took root in the stone and silt, thriving despite how thin the soil was here. The ground beneath the marching Zoras’ feet was moist, moss-lined stone, cracked and uneven from the web of tree roots winding here and there. A soft, blue light was provided by silent shrooms, which thrived in the dark, wet valley. Tiny, momentary flashes of light, too, came from sunset fireflies clinging to the bark of trees; these were the last ones of the season before autumn would set in.

One would assume that such a place would feel tranquil and safe, but the edgy Knight couldn’t help but think that everything seemed much too quiet. His senses were thick with static and the tree-lined path almost appeared to stretch out infinitely before him, even though he knew it was not so.

Brivere blinked, rubbing his head and trying hard to will himself to pull it together. The fort was just beyond the length of this canyon, so there wasn’t much further to go, before-

Wait- there was something. The Knight Captain backed himself against a tree, one hand pressing tight against the underside of his crested brow. A pungent scent had crept between the fragrant pines and the fresh, wet air. “That smell,” Brivere hissed, recognizing the foul reek, though it took his mind a moment to sort through the memories attached to it.

“Ser?” The same Knight from before glanced back at Brivere, who had fallen a few paces behind. “I don’t smell anything unusu-” However, before the other Zora could finish his sentence, the trees around them began to tremble, errant leaves gently fluttering to the mossy ground before the last peaceful moments ran short.

“A hinox!” Brivere called out, his own voice a harsh, dizzying echo to his ears. He vaguely wondered if this was how Estuu felt all the time. He was glad that his brother wasn’t here for this disaster, even moreso as the sound of trees cracking and being torn up by their roots chorused a bellowing roar just short of where the group was positioned.

The Knights and guardsmen quickly brandished their weapons, but Brivere knew this was folly.
Within such a narrow, enclosed space, especially one so rich with trees and boulders that the beast could easily weaponize, the Zoras were at a heavy disadvantage.

“Retreat to the waterfall!” Brivere shouted his commands while the beast rapidly tore its way through the forest in order to reach them.

“Ser, we have a chance if we simply make use of the river,” Kree spoke up, pointing at the body of water that sliced a path through the narrow canyon.

“It’s too shallow here!” the gold Zora hissed, raising an arm to shield his face from falling branches, splintered bits of wood and stone raining down. “Retreat now while we still have time!”

After one too many seconds of hesitation, the group holstered their weapons with renewed haste, diving toward the rushing river when the wailing hinox came barreling for them, the ground and water trembling with its movements. Brivere leapt down to the water at the last moment, wanting to be sure that everybody went before him and they swam for the fall, paddling easily out of the hinox’s range, though it made a dive for them, grabbing blindly.

Brivere bolted aside to avoid the beast’s lunging fingers, twisting a bit too near the earthen ledge of the bank; he managed to slither through the dangerously tight gap between the stone and the creature’s hand, but not without brushing it with the kick of his feet. The beast’s hands pursued in a desperate attempt to capture the Zora, its ferocity seemingly heightened by the nearly achieved success, yet Brivere fled out of the way just in time.

The band of Zoras fought their way up the towering waterfall with a bit of effort; their kind typically fought gravity and currents with relative ease, but climbing waterfalls which dropped the entire height of mountains did take particular endurance. Brivere was utterly breathless once he made it to the top, his head spinning from the effort. He bent himself over for a moment, panting to regain the air which escaped him and dryly swallowed to moisten his parched throat.

He raised his head just enough to observe the team under his command and get a count of his forces. To his surprise, he saw nothing but Zoras adorned in City Guard armor, without a single Knight of the Royal Order to be found among them.

“What?” he uttered through his fatigue, straightening himself and spinning on heel to peer over the falls they had just climbed. Below, the hinox was still bent down, hungrily thrusting its hands into the river after Zoras who swam past and dodged its clumsy strikes. It was immediately apparent that either all of his fellow Knights had managed to get left behind, or they willingly defied him in order to fight the hinox.

“Remain where you are,” Brivere gave a quick order to the guardsmen who had followed him to safety. “If you encounter a messenger, please report the situation to them.”

He said little else before diving into the river and descending the fall once more. The height of the drop caused Brivere’s stomach to rise uncomfortably into his throat and he slowed his descent just near the bottom with measured kicks. Swimming furiously, he sped downstream to close the distance between himself and the other Knights.

When he was near enough to get a better look at what was going on, it was apparent that the Knights were using the cover of the river to swim back and forth through the hinox’s wide stance, taking cheap shots at its back before it turned around again. It was a dangerous and nearly futile tactic that could surely only work for so long, without incident.

Brivere kicked his feet, propelling himself toward where the Knights were fighting, breaking through
their ranks to locate Kree, who was launching arrow after arrow at the beast. When he surfaced, Brivere called out to the gray Zora while she decorated the back of the hulking monster’s head with enough arrows that one might assume it was merely being used for casual target practice.

“Kree!” Brivere called to her, unsure if his voice was audible over the rushing water and the creature’s bellows of discomfort. “I ordered the retreat. Fall back now!”

“You ordered the retreat because you’re a damn coward!” she growled in reply, letting an arrow fly before ducking under the water and swimming upstream when the hinox began to turn around. The golden Knight gave immediate chase and when they resurfaced, numerous Zoras continued to aim their arrows at the hinox’s back, while Kree faced Brivere, her sharp teeth gleaming in a frustrated snarl. “You give orders from the back, while others fight. You send lone soldiers into the fray, just to be sure its safe for you. You’re not fit to be a warrior, nor a leader and that’s precisely why we don’t normally allow people from your station into our ranks.”

“And you’ve allowed your success at the fort to go to your head,” Brivere spoke in retort, his voice turning impassive and sharp. “Now retreat, or face reprimand for insubordination.”

Before Brivere even finished his sentence, the other Zora dove beneath the river current in order to swim underneath the hinox once again, but this time Brivere did not follow. Instead, he dipped below the surface, padding a slight distance back from the struggle he seemingly could not prevent. Everything in his life felt to be so fragile, so impermanent, always subject to question or doubt. There wasn’t one thing he’d strived for that he could even hold on to; not this position, not his hopes for his younger sibling, not even the emotions he’d dared to have for another person. Everything always fell through, no matter how hard he tried.

What he could do if these Knights of the Royal Order simply refused to follow him, despite his rank? They all saw it as an insult that he’d overstepped his boundaries, that he’d been so bold as to exist among them. He was just something standing in the way of them having what they deserved and what he never would.

While Kree and those following her fired continuously at the creature to little real avail, it finally began to flail in frustration at the stinging pain, slamming its hands down into the river, splashing and stirring the silt. For a moment, it backed away, resorting to another tactic since it could not capture the slippery Zoras, otherwise. It’s bleeding shoulders heaved, and it screeched, lifting the largest boulder resting nearby above its head. The single, giant eye glared toward the river below, before it slammed the stone down, blocking the flow and shaking everything from the river bed, to the walls of stone.

The Knights emerged from the depths in chaos, disoriented, scrambling for what to do now that their previous tactic had been prevented. One screamed out, “Where’s Kree? Where is she?”

Some of the desperate Knights leapt from the water, easily vaulting themselves over the stone which had been forced into their path, determined to see this fight to the end despite the obstruction. A gallant few were successful, but the hinox had little remaining patience for the games of these nimble Zoras. Still consumed in blind rage, it lifted a broken tree into its grasp and began making wild, battering swipes for the Knights attempting to bypass the makeshift dam. The monster’s unpredictable and ferocious tactics caught several of the warriors by surprise, knocking them from the shelter of the river and sending them rolling across the bank, into trees and the walls of the cliff; regardless of where they landed, many laid still, unable to recover from the stunning blow fast enough to slink back to the river and safety.

Brivere shot out of the water in alarm, landing upon the shore opposite the beast. The hinox was reaching down, scooping up unconscious, injured Zoras, its tongue lapping against its lips in hunger
despite its previous ordeal. How quickly it forgot.

The Knight Captain hurriedly pulled his bow from over one shoulder, nocking a flame arrow to his bowstring and taking quick, desperate aim. The fire from the arrow flared, the light glaring in Brivere’s darkened vision. His feet spread apart, his stance widening, the wet sand gathering, rough and gritty against his webbed toes. All of the noise in the canyon pounded in the golden Zora’s head; his balance swayed, but his target was large and his strike was an easy one to make.

The arrow shot across the blackened sky, tiny embers forming a burning path while it hurdled to meets its target and buried itself in the hinox’s great eye with a burst of flame and a howl of unexpected pain. The bloodthirsty creature dropped its prey immediately, its hands pressed to its face in an attempt to alleviate the suffering.

“If you’re uninjured, take those who are and carry them up the fall. Retreat!” Brivere called over the confused and suddenly leaderless soldiers, in Kree’s absence. To his surprise, this time they complied. Taking hold of their unconscious, injured fellows, the defeated Knights began the swim upstream to where the rest of the group waited.

“Kree is trapped underneath the boulder!” One of them cried out, diving under the water in what was likely an attempt to rescue the stubborn soldier.

The hinox managed to pry the arrow from its eye, its cries shrill and pained, though as it blinked profusely, a gurgling growl escaped it, its fury boiling over now that it had recovered. Brivere let another fire arrow sail toward the monster, this time taking aim for the wooden armor and rags which adorned it, lighting it to flame; this would provide at least a few more moments of distraction.

A small handful of Knights remained behind, willing to fearlessly fight until Kree was rescued and Brivere peered across their faces, witnessing with scarce belief the way they all now looked to him for leadership, despite their hatred for everything he was. They were little better than the beast they’d wanted so badly to face, but the gold Zora had no time for their prejudices in this moment. He secured his bow and dove to the depths, counting the seconds he had before the hinox figured out how to put out the fire.

The water was shallow, so finding Kree was not difficult. She was tightly pressed to the bottom of the river bed, the massive boulder having landed upon her legs when she attempted to swim through. Blood was drifting and pooling around her and it was a wonder that she hadn’t lost consciousness from the pain, as surely everything from her knees down had been shattered or crushed.

The expression on her face was one of pain and fear, her eyes desperate and panicked when Brivere swam down to her. If the hinox realized she was here, she had no chance. If they didn’t rescue her and soon, her chances of survival were little better. She reached out pleadingly for Brivere as he looked over her dire situation. He dug at the river bed, pulling handfuls of lose stone and sand out from where her legs were wedged underneath the stone; it would take some effort, but she could be freed. He just had to give the soldiers time to accomplish it.

The golden Zora placed a reassuring hand against Kree’s shoulder for a single moment before he returned to the surface. As expected, the hinox had hurled itself into the river, whimpering and gurgling from blisters and burns that it splashed with cold water, which only offered slight relief.

“Two of you swim down to where Kree is and try to dig out the riverbed enough to pull her free,” Brivere ordered with a point of his hand. “The rest of you, we have to keep the beast distracted. We’ll lure it further downstream- I have a plan.”

Brivere scurried past where the hinox stood in the river flow, whistling at the creature to get its
attention. Its injured eye rolled up to focus on him with difficulty; through numerous, rapid blinks and blood, it set its sight on the challenging Zora. It didn’t fail to let out a deep, rumbling growl, its will to fight a thing that apparently could not be stifled, no matter how it suffered. The water rushed and frothed when the beast dragged itself upward, lumbering after the golden Zora, as predicted.

The Knight Captain backed away slowly while the hinox dragged its feet, eventually pulling itself up onto the river bank in its pursuit. Once it was on dry land, the Zora bolted away, luring the creature into a chase. He spared a glance in the direction of the river, spying three other Knights swimming alongside the beast, looking quite unsure of what their leader was planning or what his orders would be, but seemingly trusting him.

Brivere ran just far enough to give the others the space they needed to safely rescue Kree, then he dove back into the water, crossing to the other side of the river with quick, nimble movements. He brandished his bow, drawing out another fire arrow, which the beast immediately recognized. It warily shielded its eye, gurgling in anger at the fight its perceived prey was putting up.

“Now, attack its legs!” Brivere called out to the warriors following along. They did not hesitate once the strategy was made clear, leaping from the water with spears raised. Their weapons stabbed at the creature’s ankles and knees, aiming to render it unable to walk.

The hinox noticed right away the pain that stung unexpectedly and it’s gaze shot downward at the tiny Zoras before it, its hand still raised to shield its eye all the while. “Quickly,” Brivere commanded, “return to the river before it has a chance to attack!”

At the sound of the Captain’s orders, the Zora Knights dove back into the water, disappearing beneath the depths. Brivere would not allow the creature’s attention to remain on them, however, and he shot an arrow into the back of the beast’s hand to make sure it kept its focus on him, instead.

Relying on the massive monster’s dim wit would not win the battle, though. Brivere distracted the creature well enough to allow the small band of warriors to strike it a few more times, but the stubborn beast refused to go down, no matter how its injuries mounted. How could any living creature possess that kind of blind will to fight, Brivere wondered. The answer was clear; somebody had to make a final blow and Brivere knew all to well that he was the only one who stood any chance of it. He could attempt the whirlpool technique, which he’d been practicing day in and day out.

He hadn’t been able to perfect it on land, but perhaps a real cause was all he needed for final motivation. Either way, his plan would have to be carried out soon, as he was quickly tiring, breathless and heavy from the constant struggle, every inch of his trembling frame wet and strangely cold, despite how his heart was pounding.

The hinox was unusually blurred, the bellows and gurgles it made now distant echoes which rang in the Knight’s ears. Brivere’s head was light and hazy, while the rest of his frame was sluggish with fatigue. He thought he had much better endurance, but apparently the constant spars against that hasty Prince, who was always so hurried to finish, had worn down his need to last.

Brivere fired his last flame arrow into the hinox’s eye; a lucky shot. While it shrieked, shrill and sharp, the golden Zora exchanged his bow for his sword. He’d heard all about how the Hylian Champion had stabbed this same species of monster into submission. His weapon was madly driven so far into the beast’s eye that its brain was destroyed in the process; that’s exactly what Brivere knew he had to do.

Taking a deep breath, the Knight quietly uttered the words, “Show the enemy no fear,” before righting his stance, twisting on one foot, then the other, letting the weight of his sword heighten the
power of his swing, then he leapt across the river, straight at the hinox’s head. His body rotated in the air, the point of his sword driving hard toward the beast’s eye, only for the creature to quickly raise one hand and knock Brivere aside.

The Zora toppled to the ground, striking the stone head first and rolling away from where the beast stood. His world turned black and hazy, but he could still feel the rumble of the ground underneath him while the hinox approached. Everything spun around him, but he tried to drag himself upright, not fast enough to scramble away before the beast’s fingers encircled him, squeezing his body in what was surely excitement and pleasure at finally capturing its unruly prey.

Brivere’s arms were pinned at his sides and he could hear faded voices screaming, the sounds all running together into an indiscernible mishmash. The creature’s mouth was open wide, its bundled fist pressing Brivere ever nearer to his demise, when suddenly the sound of something slicing the air cut past Brivere’s head and buried itself in the hinox’s eye.

Screeching at having its eye yet again mercilessly assaulted, the giant creature dropped the gold Zora aside and he weakly raised his head just enough to try and focus on the monster while it teetered backward. Through the blur that shrouded his gaze, he could see the weapon that had been his salvation mere fractions of a second before he was made into a meal; the end of it jutted out from the soft gelatin of the beast’s eye.

“A spear?” he murmured, just before another person rushed to his side, to aid him.

“That was so close!” A woman’s voice bubbled in what sounded like adrenaline-laced exhilaration, with notes of sympathy buried underneath. Brivere forced himself to his feet with a grunt of effort, turning his head toward the sound of metal scraping against stone. With what little focus he could muster from his hazy vision, he laid his yellow eyes upon a young woman with white scales, who was heaving his giant sword up by the haft and dragging it over. “Here!” she said, offering it to him.

The spear that pierced the hinox’s eye was quickly reunited with its owner. A blur of blue sailed through the air, straight onto the flailing hinox’s face. Betaal stood directly atop the beast’s head, one foot braced against its horn as she took hold of the spear buried in the creature’s eye and yanked it free, gruffly declaring, “I’ll take that!”

She leapt down behind the monster, the head of her spear a brutal sting, plunging into the back of the hinox’s knee again and again as though she were an enraged courser bee. The flurry of strikes did not cease until the creature finally crumbled from its great height, down onto its knees, its ruined joints unable to hold up its weight.

A veritable squad of fort soldiers rushed in alongside the three lone Knights who had been fighting the hinox under Brivere’s command. The golden Knight raised his sword, the musculature of his arms and chest tightening in response to the familiar weight, yet he still teetered to one side, too weakened and exhausted to maintain even simple balance. The white Zora worriedly reached out to steady him, saying, “Maybe you should just take it easy from here.”

The entire world was warping, twisting, turning this way and that. Regardless of the newly arrived Zora ushering Brivere aside and attempting to help him down into a seated position, he was going down, permitted or not. Why was he so weak? That little tumble shouldn’t have put him out of commission. His yellow eyes peered up at the pale Zora assisting him, who was an Apostle, it seemed, from her garb.

“Wait,” he mumbled, “I recognize you.”

The fort soldiers mercilessly set free a barrage of arrows at the hinox’s eye, until the wailing creature
covered it, crying out like a tiny child being bullied by someone bigger and stronger, regardless of the opposite being true. When its hands were pressed to its face, other soldiers rushed at it with spears, stabbing away until every inch of its massive frame was dripping with blood.

Once again, Betaal launched herself at the beast’s head, clambering up and rearing back, her body arching when she raised her spear, her muscles rippling forcefully when she drove the weapon through the monster’s eye and into its brain. The thin bone at the back of the creature’s eye socket cracked and shattered, its mouth going slack; the bloodied spear was torn free and Betaal flipped gracefully aside before the hinox fell. One last, great quake shook the canyon when the beast toppled back, then finally went still with one last, noxious breath.

The warriors poised on the embankment and bobbing up from the river, Knights and Undercity soldiers alike, all victoriously cheered, “Zo ra ra ra! Zo ra ra ra!”

Brivere pushed himself back to his feet, fighting the vertigo and nausea on sheer willpower alone. His breath came in quick, rapid pants, but he placed one foot in front of the other, his goals more important than his own personal suffering.

He found his way back downstream, to make certain that Kree had been successfully rescued. Slowly, the golden Zora forced past the narrow space on shore between the towering cliff and the hinox’s hulking corpse. Betaal was still standing triumphantly atop the beast, her spear digging into its girth and she casually leaned against the pillar that her weapon provided. “I would have expected better;” she called out when she noticed Brivere slinking past, “from the Knight Captain of the Royal Order.”

Not a moment of pause was spared in reaction to the biting words. Brivere bypassed the hinox and the mockery, not paying the fort Sergeant any heed; he didn’t have time for nonsense, even if her words surely managed to find their way past the armor of his apathy, settling into the back of his mind, waiting to weight him down and whither away whatever self-worth he clung to when everything else subsided.

Before the gold Zora made it beyond the massive boulder where Kree had been trapped, however, one of the other Knights leapt from the river and approached him. “Ser,” they spoke up, their voice tired but calm. “Your orders?”

“Kree?” He spoke dimly, his own tone dull and weak. “Is she safe?”

“They got her out, Ser. She’s badly injured.”

With a curt nod of understanding, Brivere issued his commands. “Fall back to where the rest of the group are waiting. Have them to carry the injured upstream to Zora’s Domain. Those who remain, we proceed to the fort.”

“Yes, Ser.”

The Guard Captain was pacing, fins flared in worry, while he awaited some word on the situation. Nearby, Prince Sidon was faring only slightly better, not nearly as tightly strung at Bazz but the taller Zora was certainly beginning to show a wrinkle of concern where normally beaming smiles could be found.

The entire night had been a shit show; first with the bizarre cluster of moblins, then the lizalfos with shock arrows, the fort getting nearly overrun by bokoblins and now there were reports of a hinox.
Bazz and Sidon waited in uncomfortable silence for what felt like hours but was realistically actually just one hour, without any further update.

Bazz had inwardly begun to decide whether he needed a life of greater piety or utter depravity, in his desperation. His willpower was normally much more steely, but ever since the death of his closest friend and this strange plague, he was starting to wear thin. After this, he planned to either break his streak of several years ignoring the Goddess and swim to the Basilica to throw himself at her mercy, or else he was going to toss his life savings away on Fleet Lotus Seed Wine and drink until his emotions were comfortably numb again. He’d already been working toward the latter.

The Prince at last cleared his throat, taking a few small steps in the sleek, black Zora’s direction. “Guard Captain, are you going to be alright?”

“Hm?” Bazz uttered, almost startled by the sound of Sidon’s voice. “Oh, yeah, I just.. really hate waiting around like this. I know leadership sometimes means staying out of the fray, but it’s just so.. Nerve-wracking.”

“I understand,” Sidon spoke, his voice warm and calming, yet still managing to be professional and distant. “If it gives you any comfort, the messenger is on their way here, now.”

“Uhh,” Bazz edged himself ever nearer to the river, leaning out and peering downstream for any sign of the promised update. “I don’t know if that makes it better, Highness, but thank you, anyway.”

A few more tense minutes passed in silence, before one of the Zoras from Gaddison’s team came paddling upstream and pulled themselves up onto shore. They caught their breath from the night of tireless back and forth swimming, their gill slits still wide open. “The hinox situation is under control, sir. There are injuries but no dead.”

“Well, thank the Goddess for that,” Bazz breathed, his shoulders loosening, though he didn’t allow his relief to take his mind off the job for more than a few quick seconds. “We have the emergency rafts for this exact situation. Are you able to swim one downstream to the team?”

“Yes, sir,” the messenger spoke with a sharp nod, pushing back into the water while Bazz dragged the raft down the bank. Yet while the black Zora remained focused on the task at hand, suddenly, it was the Prince who was entirely distracted. While the Guard Captain alone pushed the raft into the water, Sidon was rooted to where he stood, his entire body rigid and unmoving, his eyes distantly gazing into nothing.

After the messenger set off with the emergency raft in tow, Bazz strode back onto land, immediately noticing the distinctly troubled expression that had come over the taller Zora’s handsome features. “Prince Sidon?” Bazz’ smooth voice questioned, though his attempt to gain the other’s attention was unsuccessful. “Highness? Are you okay?”

“I’m very sorry, Guard Captain,” Sidon softly spoke up, raising his eyes to the black Zora’s questioning expression. “It’s just.. The Hylian Champion.”

“What of him, Highness?” the Guard Captain asked, confusion and additional concern being heaped onto the already frazzled state of his nerves. “I thought he left for Hateno Village.”

“He did, but he’s back. I mean to say, I sense his presence, so he must have returned.” The Prince’s golden stare flicked here and there as a thousand concerns filtered through him; Bazz’s tension wasn’t helping, but Sidon certainly couldn’t blame him.

Why would Link have returned so suddenly? Sidon found himself mulling over the unusual incident
that was his first meeting with his dear friend; he remember all too well how helpless Link became when the Blood Moon peaked and it was already beyond midnight.

Something must have happened, for him to be here now. He had been so determined not to be a burden for the Prince, but surely he would come here, if he were desperate for any reason.

“Something must be wrong,” Sidon murmured, his arms folding against his chest while he shook his head. “I’m so sorry, but I simply must return to Zora’s Domain, to see to the Champion’s safety.”

“It’s fine, your Highness,” Bazz immediately reassured, gesturing for the Prince to hurry on his way. “Master Link always was a reckless sort. Go help him. I’ll take care of things here.”

Nodding, Sidon scurried down to the river and disappeared beneath the rapids with a quick kick of his feet. He had always been a very fast swimmer, happily darting to and fro with unmatched speed, however, tonight his sense of dread would carry him away with more haste than he’d ever managed. This worry for his dear friend’s life wasn’t something he could endure, so he would push himself to shorten the wait, no matter what it took.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

When the young Prince found his dear lover, it was immediately clear that Link's condition was beyond dire. In order to save the Hylian, Sidon was forced to do something that was normally against his clearly defined morals.

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody. :) So, this week I'm actually on time, though this chapter is a bit on the shorter side since I had fewer days to get it finished up. I think you'll all really enjoy it, though, because it's very heavy on SidLink feelings. It is angsty as all Hell, but I think most of you generally expected as much, haha.

The arcing pathways of Zora’s Domain were empty of life, the entire city quiet and slumbering. The only ones still out were stray groups traveling in between their homes and Zambezi’s Cantina, which lurked in the seedy depths of the Undercity. There was, as well, the occasional Zorana City Guardsman, though the patrols were light at this time.

Sidon was glad enough that there was nobody about to gawk and no crowds to fight while he sped up waterways and pattered down slippery staircases without a single misstep. Then again, he couldn’t feel glad about anything while his heart raced in apprehension, so maybe it was something he would try to be grateful for after he made sure his dear Link was safe.

The Zora’s senses traced the way ahead, locating the helpless Hylian at the shrine of Ne’ez Yohma. It wasn’t difficult; Link had been there, unmoving, during Sidon’s entire journey back. The Prince hurried past the statue of his sister, sparing a glance up at her immortalized youth. The intense worry that had near overcome Sidon was, in part, because of Mipha.

He’d mentioned nothing of it in the past, but more than once he’d sensed the overflow of her familiar energies, blooming mercifully forth to offer aid and healing. He felt sure that this was just an illusion, given that his sister’s healing abilities had apparently been left to Link; what he believed felt like Mipha’s presence was surely just the resonant strength of her magic, something he couldn’t help but associate with her physical existence. What worried him now, though, was the fact that he could feel her energy hovering, lingering, a faint whisper which delicately shadowed Link’s own unique energy signature. It was as though she were there, refusing to leave, or else her magic was taking a very long time to effectively aid the Hylian.

Either way, this did not bode well for Link, nor Sidon’s assumptions of what his situation must have been.

The Zora’s skipping heartbeat rushed wild with fear when he descended the stairs to the hollow chamber which housed the shrine. He hadn’t wanted his panicked expectations to be proven right; no, he wanted more than anything to be wrong, to be overthinking, to be playing the role of a fretting coward, as always. But on more than one occasion in his life, the lurking anxiety extended its
tendrils and showed him real, true reasons to be afraid. Unfortunately, this was one of those awful times.

He wasn’t even at the bottom of the stairs before he laid eyes on the form of Link, curled and battered upon the dais of the shrine. Sidon tried hard not to measure the damage in terrified assumptions, fighting off the voices immediately whispering the worst possible outcomes into his mind. For a single instant, fear struck the Zora full of hesitation, bidding him to shield his eyes, to comfort himself with ignorance, but he could not.

Somewhere in the darkest depths of his gentle soul, he was still that young boy, peering into his sister’s mind, seeing and feeling every awful detail while she bled to her last breath. It was that reminder of shattered innocence rendering the Zora breathless, his gait faltering to a stop, his webbed toes planted in the shallow water of the lotus pond. Trepidation tore away all sight and sound, leaving Sidon’s body wracked with tremors while he pleaded with his own stubborn psyche.

Pushing past the relived horror that had frozen him in place, the Zora closed the last few inches which had allowed him to keep himself safe from loss, from the fear of it. His claws softly tapped the stone surface of the pedestal just before he kneeled at the unmoving Hylian’s side. The Zora’s golden eyes were polished glass, heavy with unshed tears while he bent lower to peer into Link’s own; they were a deep, staring, starless blue that held little sign of life. His skin was cold, bruised and stained with blood, his pulse a faint, tiny flame that could have been extinguished with one soft breath.

“No, no, no,” the Zora uttered, his throat almost too tight to allow his voice to escape. He feared to even touch the tiny, delicate Hylian, should his clumsy hands only make things worse and he definitely knew better than to believe that he could do anything to assist, at all. It was the subtle clink of a patrolling guardsman’s armor that pulled Sidon away from Link’s side and he hurried to the perplexed and near startled passer-by with hasty commands.

“You there!” The Prince called out, his tone as full of authority as it was urgency. “I require assistance. The healer, Estuu. You’ll find him at the Basilica. Go now and retrieve him.”

“Yes, sire. Uhh, sire!” the shaken guardsman replied, having not expected a real emergency to interrupt her quiet patrol, and certainly not orders from the Prince, himself. She sped off at his command, taking it with utter seriousness, as it was clear that this was an emergency.

Sidon waited just long enough to see the guardsman out of sight, then he hurried back to his friend’s side, not wanting to allow Link to be alone and afraid. The smell of blooming Fleet Lotus was sickly sweet, yet it only barely cloaked the bitter, coppery scent of blood. The dais was smeared with messy crimson; it had stained into the Prince’s hands and knees but he cared not, kneeling right into it all over again.

With utmost care, the Zora rolled Link onto his side, placing a hand underneath the Hylian’s head to cushion it. Link’s cheek pressed into Sidon’s palm by his weight alone, his neck bending without any control, as weak and delicate as a baby sparrow.

“Don’t fear, my friend, I’m here,” Sidon cooed, sliding himself ever lower on the pedestal until he, too, was laying on his side, face to face with the injured, unresponsive Hylian. Maybe Link was as still and silent as any given person on the brink of death, but the Prince knew he was still there, lurking inside his own helpless body. He could feel the emotions screaming on the inside; terror, anguish, hopelessness, regret, sorrow.

He’d never sensed such a vibrant, yet terrible array of emotions from his dear friend, but now that he had, his heart clenched in guilt. If only he’d persisted a bit more in nagging Link to remain in Zora’s Domain, where he would be safe, this wouldn’t have happened. Sidon would think of that later,
however, placing his own regrets aside, because those mattered little to him when Link was in such a
desperate, turbulent state.

“You’re safe now, my beautiful one,” Sidon spoke words of promise, hoping his soft voice and
cradling touch was of some reassurance. Careful fingerscales tenderly brushed tangled locks back
from Link’s blood-stained face and though he tried to hold back, the Prince’s tears fell while he
looked over the wretched state his dearest one was in. He leaned himself only nearer, pressing his
lips softly to the Hylian’s brow; he lingered in this closeness, breathing the words, “I won’t let any
further harm come to you, I promise.”

Examining fingertips gingerly traveled elsewhere, taking stock of every bit of pain which had
wrongly been forced onto the helpless Hylian. Sidon had promised, in the past, that he would not use
his powers to invade Link’s mind unpermitted, but rather than wading into the liar’s pool, he tested
the waters, one foot in, one foot out. His touch traced over the smaller man’s bared shoulders, the
bruised, swollen skin aching where his tunic had been torn away. Without words, Sidon’s magic
gave him the means to ask, ‘What did they do to you?’ and to answer his own inquiry. He could feel
the pain which had been inflicted, bringing it into himself to sample, yet remaining cautious of
allowing the full extent to wash over him.

He told himself that this was only a means to ascertain what damage had been done, though in truth
he believed he deserved to suffer through every moment, as penance for not preventing it.

When the guardsman returned, the first words on her lips were those of apology and Sidon had never
felt so bitter at hearing the phrase, “I’m sorry.”

“The Apostles said that the healer is apparently unable to use his magic, at the moment, your
Highness,” she explained, her voice tremulous and soft. The deep red Zora scarcely moved while she
spoke, only glancing back in the hopes that she managed to bring someone, at the very least. Indeed,
another Zora, who wore the Basilica shawl and the crest of Naydra, came alongside the contrite and
fretting guardsman.

“Let me take it from here, young one,” the Apostle said to the armored woman, the sound of her
words much gruffer but the guardsman gladly gave a bow and scurried off. The smokey, pinkish
elder hobbled toward where the Prince hovered over the Hylian, looking like a predator guarding his
prize.

“Highness, I assure you, I’m not second best to a fussy youngster with rare magic,” the elderly Zora
tutted, her tone ringing with offense that she was not the first one summoned.

“Then you can help him?” Sidon spoke up, his voice a worried and overprotective sound.

“I’ve been a practitioner of the medical arts since the Great Calamity and I’ve seen much worse states
of injury than this.” Her wrinkled hand gave a flick to brush the Prince aside and he moved
begrudgingly away, though not so far that Link was out of his reach for a moment. With a grunt of
stiffness, the pinkish Zora bent low next to where the Hylian laid, her slitted pupils slowly moving
across his slashed flesh.

“Are you trained to work with Hylians?” the taller Zora prodded, unwilling to simply trust his dearest
one’s fate in just anybody’s hands. Then again, he wanted to believe that even this grouchy, old
medic was better than nothing.

“They’re much different from us, to be sure, but I’ve worked with them,” she stated with a curt nod
of her head. “Might you happen know anything of how he got into this state? Details would be
helpful, of course.”
“I don’t,” Sidon answered, his forefins bobbing softly as he shook his head. “This is how I found him.”

“Don’t you have the ability to look into the minds of others? You might find something helpful, if you use that,” the old Apostle suggested dryly, almost as if to say, ‘Why haven’t you already done this?’ Lowering her head for a better look, the pink Zora pushed back the Hylian’s eyelid for quick observation, then her prodding fingers moved to his lips, checking his gums for any sign of the discoloration that came with Water Blight, finding none. “He must have suffered some kind of head injury, too, to be unresponsive like this.”

“Though it is concerning, I understand that this vulnerable state is ‘normal’ for him. On the night of the Blood Moon, he is rendered paralyzed and only has a vague awareness of things,” the Prince explained what little he knew and understood. He quickly re-evaluated his own suppositions, however, not wanting to put his dearest one at further risk with possibly inaccurate details. “Please don’t let this stop you from examining further.”

“Again, clearer information would be helpful,” the Apostle stated, blunt or perhaps impatient. She took note of the Hylian’s weak pulse and shallow breath, hoping those faint signs of life were also part of this mysterious, ‘normal’ condition, though her best guess would be that they were related to the young man’s loss of blood. Hurriedly, she unbuckled a shoulder bag of tools and placed the collection on the ground, just within reach. With a diligent hand, she rinsed the grass and debris out of the massive cut which trailed from the back of the Hylian’s skull and down between his shoulder blades, taking great care as she worked. “Since Hylians lack scales, their wounds don’t knit themselves as ours do. They typically rely on herbal remedies, but since their potions aren’t compatible with our physiology, we don’t have them available. I’m going to have to stitch this. The cut is very clean, so it should be simple. It’s just going to take some work.”

Layers of hesitation were stripped away, one word at a time. Morality painted in shades of black and white began to blur together. Part of the guilt was in the fact that Sidon had already wished to overstep these boundaries and suddenly being given an excuse drew that much more attention to his shame. He’d always known there was so much more to Link than the Hylian cared to explain, but Sidon had wanted to allow his dearest one that privacy. He believed that Link would share his secrets, with time and trust, so what need was there for him to pry? But maybe the medic was right, and this was something different. These were answers that they needed, which the Hylian was unable to give.

“.very well,” the Zora breathed soft words of resignation, hoping that his lover’s mind wasn’t too clouded for him to make sense of whatever he found lurking within. Cradling Link’s head, Sidon uttered a gentle apology while gazing downward into the Hylian’s unblinking stare. Sidon’s mind
reached out to Link’s own, forging the connection between them with care not to reach too deeply.

Searching for recent memories was always easy, though reliving them almost never was. It was only that much harder to see and experience the suffering of somebody so close to him and even through the distraction of the magically forged mental bond, Sidon reached out to tightly grasp Link’s hand when he located the memories he was searching for. He wasn’t sure whether he was comforting Link or himself, but nevertheless, he sheltered the Hylian’s much smaller appendage in the careful grasp of his own.

Sidon watched as his dear one was ambushed and assailed, feeling the pain of the first blow resounding through the calcified cartilage of his skull. The flurry of emotions were unleashed as powerfully as the pain; the confusion, the fear and helplessness. Every shade of emotional distress echoed through the yielding Zora, so that fresh tears were set free to stain his pale cheeks before freely dripping from his chin and jaw.

Link’s consciousness faded in and out during the entirety of the ordeal and as a result, Sidon couldn’t make full sense of the static. The blurs came and went, each little thing happening so fast, while at the same time, it felt never-ending; the cruel, senseless beating, the pointless mockery, the sadistic experimentation, whatever it was. Sidon sat still on his knees, but his chest ached with each sharp blow that struck the Hylian.

The Prince felt as though his own breath was gone, his head leaning lower while Link struggled, heaving for air through the pain and blood. He heard the murmuring voices, odd talk of immortality which he did not understand. He was even able to perceive the way Link held onto thoughts of him, at this most weak and vulnerable moment; Sidon couldn’t help but smile bittersweetly through the pain. Then, through Link’s eyes, he saw a hovering, luminous, ghostly image.

Mipha? The Prince couldn’t be sure if he uttered his sister’s name aloud or not when he looked upon her, every inch of her once shining scales now a dull, translucent blue, rather likened to the statue that stood in memorial, but so much softer. Is this truly what Link saw? A cold chill whispered down the Zora’s spine which had nothing to do with his connection to Link’s memories and he finally pulled free from the vision, at the point that Link managed to miraculously, thankfully, escape.

Disconnecting left the Prince momentarily vulnerable, his vision dark, his senses lost in the void, slowly returning to him. He blinked away the images of the past, the framed stills which he’d torn from his dearest one’s psyche, his golden eyes refocusing on the sight of Link laying still in his palm. Releasing the Hylian’s hand, Sidon gently pressed his eyelids shut, as it occurred to him that Link himself was unable to do so.

“Well, Highness?” The medic prodded when she realized the Prince had finished with his magical, mental digging. Despite her words, however, Sidon remained still for a few more moments, just allowing the details of everything he’d seen rinse over him. Then, at last, he cleared his throat to reply.

“He suffered several injuries; broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a broken nose and indeed, blows to the head,” the red Zora explained, the words coming from him in a slowly spoken manner. His eyes moved across the Hylian’s frame, patches of exposed skin still bruised from the injuries suffered, while the more dire trauma appeared to have been remedied. It wasn’t a matter of much confusion; this was familiar to him as Mipha’s handiwork. Often times, when she focused her magic on healing things as energy-heavy as broken bones, she ignored more minor details, such as tiny, ruptured blood vessels in the skin. “It seems that some degree of these injuries were treated through healing magic, though I’m not sure how fully.”

“I’ll finish this up first and foremost, because closing this wound is my priority,” said the Apostle,
brushing her shawl back with a flick of her tail. “We’ll move him somewhere out of the way, afterward. He’ll need plenty of rest and observation. I’ll leave that to you, Highness.”

“Understood,” Sidon uttered, with a nod.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In the darkness of his unconscious mind, Link's fateful meeting with the Zora Prince replayed itself. It was the first time they had ever lain eyes on one another, and also, the evening of the Blood Moon. There was something peaceful to be found in recalling that single, precious evening. However, as peaceful times do, it vanished with reality's sobering harshness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Survival was his first and most valuable skillset, with wild, savage combat coming in at a very close second. Most of his time was spent alone, the ability to speak probably his least used skill of all. He scavenged anything he could and laid waste to enemies in his path. For some time after he freed himself from the Plateau, he refused to simply pass a bokoblin by without engaging it. He'd been sure that it was feasibly possible to rid the world of all bokoblins, and perhaps he would just move up from there.

Finding food and eating it was a cycling habit, a constant struggle which he met with a certain gluttonous tenacity. Sitting at fireside enjoying a meal was his only means of comfort in this wretched world and he clung to that. In between meals, killing monsters offered his heart some kind of twisted joy, their dying screams and bloodshed sating a hunger of another kind, which he believed all started with that very first bokoblin camp and all the torment he endured at their hands.

This was all he knew for his first waking month and it had seemed like fair basics to him. He couldn’t be permanently killed and with every fight, he grew stronger, wiser and that much more belligerent. He was certain that he’d learned the rhythm of this violent life; feeding and fighting were the two great truths and he’d mastered both. He had the same proud, complacent kind of sureness in himself as a pack of Maraudo wolves surrounding a single, helpless target.

That was, until he experienced his very first Blood Moon.

He had been somewhere between where the Great Plateau overlooked the endless fields and his destination of Kakariko Village. It shouldn’t have taken any person as long to reach the Sheikah village as it did him, but his sense of direction wasn’t at its finest and he’d journeyed far enough south to end up in the Faron Region before he thought to turn around.

The wind whistled in warning that night while Link rode across the vast, rolling landscape toward the Dueling Peaks. His head was lifted, his eyes gazing skyward when the foreboding, red orb began to make its ascent, its color bleeding across the darkening sky until it hung overhead, a thick, heavy crimson.

Of course, Link felt perfectly justified in just ignoring the unexplainable, yet terrible feeling twisting in his gut, because almost everything in this torn up world gave him that exact, same feeling; even the people. He also didn’t have time to waste worrying over celestial happenings, because he had other, more immediate troubles.
He’d yet to meet his favorite horse in all the world at this point, but the one he’d settled on was still fairly wild. They were in the middle of a swerving chase up and over the grassy hills that closed in on the mountain pass he thought would usher him to safety; mounted bokoblins thundered up at his heels, when the first bout of Blood Moon paralysis overcame him.

It was slow, creeping into his veins like the first frost of winter, ravaging every bit of summer growth. It didn’t help that he hadn’t eaten a proper meal in days, so when his limbs began to feel heavy, how could he have guessed that his entire body would soon go slack and unresponsive? When an arrow struck the flank of his horse, the creature gave a buck of pain and fear, throwing the Hylian aside with ease.

Link’s frame toppled helplessly to the ground, his usual reflexive ability to shield his head and roll back to his feet sluggish enough to be considered absent. Only once he came to a stop at the bottom of the hill was he even able to somewhat lift his body, though it was slow and difficult, and the bokoblins were on him much more quickly than he could pull himself together. He took a single shot from a Boko Bat to the back of his head and that was all they needed to finish off whatever strength he’d been clinging to.

That night was spent thrown over the back of a horse, his body a pincushion for arrows which he thankfully couldn’t feel. He was fearful, at first, his mind in a state of panic that his body was apathetic to, but even the chaos of his thoughts finally faded away into something dull and quiet. He genuinely suspected that because of his foolish overconfidence, death had decidedly caught up to him.

When he finally arrived in Kakariko Village, he definitely looked like something that had risen from the dead and brutally slaughtered a camp of bokoblins in furious, vengeful resentment.

That was an event which he wasn’t at all willing to repeat. And so, the very second time he noticed the moon’s red face peeking over the horizon, he prepared himself. He stabled his horse in advance, knowing that he couldn’t properly care for her while he was vulnerable. He messily packed his rucksack full with firewood, so it bulged to proportions that could rival that one traveling merchant who was obsessed with bugs; Link forgot his name.

With all that complete, he began his hike in search of somewhere hidden enough to offer decent refuge. He had plenty of reasons to mistrust the stables, having already had his rupee pouch stolen while he slept on more than one occasion. There was maybe an hour before the moon would peak, so he did his best to hurry along, sweating from the heavy weight on his back.

Finding himself in a torrential downpour was almost a thankful occurrence for the first few minutes, until the sky deepened into the kind of absolute darkness which could only be provided by nighttime overcast. He could still see, but not well enough to find a dry hideaway, which left him frantically searching, his body quickly turning soaked and frigid without proper shelter.

Link tugged at his hood, adjusting it for the hundredth time. The material was pulled forward in the hopes that it would protect his face but the harsh wind sharply whipped at him, stinging against his skin and pelting him with rain that blew into his eyes.

At last, the luminous form of Inogo Bridge cut through the mounting darkness and Link hurried for it. The gazebo-top towers seemed a fair enough place to build a fire and lay himself down to sleep out his night of paralysis and he couldn’t have arrived at it with scarcer time on his side.

The midnight hour was growing ever nearer, thanks to the unexpected setback, provided by the shitty weather. That familiar numbness had already spread through the Hylian’s fingers and toes, though it was difficult to guess at how much of it could be attributed to being soaking wet and chilled.
Fatigued and miserable, Link slowed his gait when he at last approached the tower, yet as he did, something odd and very unexpected occurred; a disembodied voice called out to him, leaving him warily searching his surroundings in suspicion that was palpable. Running into any given person at this time was the worst possible turn of events and his hand reached for the hilt of his blade, gripping it for reassurance.

“Say hey there, young one!” the voice raised in greeting, far too cheery and hopeful for the hour and the weather. As per his observations, most Hylians lived in a way that was never ideal and as a result, they were malcontent and downright bitter, almost never so full of excitement, unless a stout drink was involved. Exaggerated friendliness was a sure sign of deception and trouble to come, even more so as Link failed to locate the source.

“Up top, above you!” The sing-song tone elaborated; giving away one’s position was not in Link’s knowledge of tactics, but he was not eased enough to take his hand away from his weapon. He did, however, peer upward to notice an odd creature indeed watching him from above, as stated.

The scaley titan made his descent to meet the Hylian face to face, his every movement showy and elegant, though his landing shook the ground beneath Link’s boots. Graceful magnificence aside, Link’s first instinct was to assume that this man was a monster of some kind and the steel of his sword sang out when it was hastily drawn.

Link was clueless as to this creature’s origin or identity. It wasn’t as though he could remember ever seeing a Zora prior to now, though something about those vivid red scales and his regal, accented way of speaking felt not only familiar, but nonthreatening in a way that belied the man’s outward appearance.

The man’s slitted pupils flicked to Link’s brandished weapon, then back to his face in a way that was perfectly calm and casual. A gleaming, sharp-toothed smile graced his features and he placed one hand to his chest, bending his neck ever so slightly in polite, genteel acknowledgment. “Pardon the entrance. It was not my intention to give you a fright,” he explained, “I simply couldn’t help noticing that you happen to be a Hylian warrior. I would assume you to be particularly skilled, is that right?”

Link was unsure what the purpose of this unusual character’s approach was, but he very quickly got the impression that this man-fish was either about to ask random favors or attempt to sell him something. The Hylian wanted little to do with either of those options, so he smoothly slid his sword back into the sheath at his back and gave the vaguest of answers- a shrug.

Without missing a beat, the other man tittered in amusement, his hand rising from his chest to be pressed momentarily over his lips before finally shifting into a rather grandiose gesture. “Nonsense! There’s no need to be so humble!” The refined and yet oddly in-your-face character exclaimed, his every movement as exaggerated as his words. “I can tell from the way you carry yourself that you’re a warrior of extraordinary caliber—"

While the eloquently spoken man made his apparent sales pitch, Link surveyed the tower he’d originally wished to occupy. He didn’t have time for this other person’s spiel; he needed to start his climb soon, because it was already going to be difficult enough in this rain, nevermind the sheer impossibility of it if he became too weak.

“My eye for talent is unparalleled, after all, I am a Zora Prince,” the babbling man paused, clearing his throat in something of a fluster. “Oh dear, pardon me, I failed to introduce myself, didn’t I? Please know me as Sidon, Prince of the Zoras. And what is your name? Go on, please tell me!”
A Zora; come to think of it, either Link had heard prior mention of a race by that namesake or it managed to ring a bell with his otherwise failing memory. He was unsure which of these answers were correct, but he also wasn’t particularly invested in finding out, either. His sharp, blue gaze regarded the apparent Prince before him, vaguely wondering where his guards were and why he was here at such an hour. One would have thought that, whatever the reason behind this bizarre interaction, it was beneath a Prince of any race. Then again, the late King of Hyrule managed to transcend death in order to pester him.

Was there any way to ditch this guy, short of just walking past him?

“Link,” the Hylian answered the question simply, sure that his disinterest would be clear enough in his curt choice of words, yet the Prince reacted with boundless enthusiasm which made him seem ultimately tone deaf, or else desperately fake.

“Link?” He repeated the name as though the sound of it was pure pleasure for his tongue to pronounce, his voice making a momentary jump in volume and excitement. “Your name is Link? What a fantastic name! A strong name, befitting a powerful warrior such as yourself!” The man paused for barely a breath, his hand coming up to thoughtfully cup his chin, his gaze focusing elsewhere while he pondered. “..I can’t quite shake the feeling that I’ve heard it somewhere else, however..”

And, that was it, Link was done. He was way too impatient, on top of just not having time for this bothersome Zora. “Whatever it is you’re wanting, you’re really overselling it,” he uttered in blunt dismissal, turning aside and making his way over to one of the towers, instead. There was some degree of reassurance in assuming the other man was ultimately harmless, though that wasn’t to imply that Link wanted him to stick around. Apparently, the Zora Prince didn’t quite catch that.

Just as soon as Link walked past, the pestering Zora tailed after him, standing just near the base of the tower, while Link started up it, scrambling for a foothold on the smooth, wet surface.

“You may be right!” Sidon said with a rather pleasant laugh. “But with good reason, I assure you. You see, my home, Zora’s Domain, is at dire risk of being flooded from the endless rainfall produced by Divine Beast, Vah Ruta. We seek the aid of a skilled Hylian warrior and I believe you’re precisely the man I’m looking for!”

Link, in his concentration, allowed the Zora to trail off, not offering a response of any kind. The most he could manage were his grunts of effort when his shoulders flexed and he heaved himself up the wall, reaching and fumbling for his next grip, with each seeming worse than the last. He made it almost to where the tower curved inward, reducing the slope, only for a particularly heavy cascade to shift in his direction, causing his fingers to slip just as he was pulling his way up. The Hylian let out a gasp right before he slid rapidly to the ground, landing on his back with a defeated splash.

The impact of the fall held no pain, however, the burn of effort in his muscles beginning to ebb away with the steady loss of time which brought the Blood Moon’s peak ever nearer. “Does this rain ever slow down?” he groaned, gracelessly rolling himself into a seated position.

“I’m afraid it does not, and it will not until the Divine Beast is appeased,” Sidon explained, his tone at last sounding somewhat serious. “But you did quite well for the tower to be as wet as it is. Indeed, it was very impressive! Were you.. attempting to reach the top, by chance? Perhaps you’d like some assistance?”

“How do you plan to assist, exactly?” Link questioned, somewhat glaring over his shoulder at the bothersome Prince, who was now attempting to become helpful. He was only that much more annoyed that he wasn’t in a place to refuse any aid that came his way, much as he loathed to admit it.
“If it’s not too embarrassing for you, I could carry you to the top,” the Zora gestured, raising his arm aloft, then bowing lower to look upon the grounded Hylian. “You see, I can easily reach that height with a single leap. It’s how I got up there in the first place.”

“Yeah, okay,” Link bitterly agreed. He couldn’t believe he was doing this. He was just going to let another man carry him up into a high tower; a Prince, no less. Normally he wouldn’t dare stoop to such a humiliating low, but he was desperate. Sidon was likely reconsidering his attempts to have Link come and solve their problems, because right now the Hylian probably seemed more like a drenched damsel in distress than a true warrior. Maybe it killed two birds with one stone, anyway.

Clambering to his feet, Link waited while the Prince strode nearer and unabashedly scooped the tiny Hylian into his arms with hardly an effort. Link’s hood flopped wetly against his face, landing overtop of his eyes from how heavy it was with moisture and he gave it an irritated flick. The first sight which graced his vision was a much closer view of the Zora’s face, the grin of challenge tugging at his lips as he sized up the tower and mentally measured the force necessary to make the jump. His golden eyes shone in the crimson light of the moon, reflecting the orb which hung overhead, framed by dark rain clouds.

Link was pressed tight to the Prince’s chest when he made his leap, the Zora’s cradling palms holding securely onto him, making sure the speed of the bound didn’t jerk the tiny Hylian too violently. He might have been impressed by how spring-loaded this creature seemed, if not for the fact that his head was pinned against the Zora’s shoulder and he was unable to see much of the actual upward flight.

When they made their landing, Link was promptly and carefully lowered back to the ground. “Right, thanks,” he mumbled, entirely embarrassed by this ordeal. “That’s all I needed.”

“It was not a problem at all!” The Zora rather cheerily brushed off the minute offering of gratitude, though he also didn’t take the Hylian’s words as a sendoff. “So, what do you say? Would you be willing to aid us in our plight? The path to Zora’s Domain is rather swarmed with enemies at this time, but I’m confident that a strong individual such as yourself will have little problem braving the way!”

“Hmm,” Link idly hummed, wondering if this oddly persistent Prince would even take an outright denial for an answer. He dumped the terrible heft of his rucksack and weapons aside with a sigh of relief, rolling his shoulders before bending forward to wriggle free from the drenched cloak.

He carried his garment to the rail of the tower, wringing it over the side and draping it there to hopefully dry. It was followed by his tunic, which was caked with mud and clinging to the Hylian like a second skin. The weakness worming its way through him was all too apparent, the effort involved in disrobing much more difficult than usual. He did his best to wring out the second article as well, hurrying the task so that he’d have enough time to make a fire before he settled down.

The Zora was watching with a curious yet expectant look on his face, still awaiting an answer and Link was amused enough by this to keep him hanging. He pulled his rucksack open and dumped out the majority of what it contained, a pile of wood clattering noisily out upon the floor.

“Your bag was filled with.. wood?” the Zora commented, observing the Hylian as though he were some kind of nesting animal. “That is quite inventive, I suppose. I see, you were very well prepared, weren’t you? A true warrior is ready for anything, of course!”

A quiet chuckle came from Link while the odd character continued with all the pointless, insincere flattery. He must have thought he was quite the charming manipulator. Honestly, Link saw through it with such ease, it was almost comedic. “Yeah, I’ll just have to think about it; helping you with that
problem of yours, I mean,” the Hylian outright lied. He had no intention of helping at all. Why did everybody assume he was some kind of hero? It was like needy, helpless idiots were just drawn to him.

“Think.. You need to think about it?” the Prince mumbled, like he needed to repeat the phrasing just to process it. He went slack jawed, his world apparently upending and descending slowly into the void. Admittedly, the look on his face was cute, but maybe that was just the bitter satisfaction of disappointing someone so damned adamant.

While Link arranged his firewood and hunted down the stray piece of flint that had managed to escape when he dumped his bag, the Zora stood in silence. It reminded Link of the time his Sheikah Slate froze up after one too many pictures of Crazy Girl and he was wondering how one went about restarting a Zora. Actually, he preferred him quiet.

Link struck the rough edges of the flint against his blade, sending tiny sparks down upon the kindling. It took a few moments of concentrated work and Link raced against time while the moon crept higher. His arms were only barely holding up the weight of his sword and he was somewhat afraid of being overcome just as he bent low to blow on the embers. Being paralyzed with your head stuck in a crackling flame didn’t sound like a fun way to die.

He was more worried that the wood was too damp to light, though. Maybe his violent, invasive thoughts of a horrific death were just intended to soothe lesser, yet more prominent worries. He couldn’t hope to understand the state of his mind anymore, so he didn’t try.

It was as the tiny fire flickered to life that the silent Prince finally cleared his throat, the charming smile returning to his features; okay, he was fairly handsome for someone of a completely different species. When he spoke up, however, Link’s opinion shriveled back into complete and utter aggravation.

“Was that enough time to think?” the Zora asked, chuckling as if questioning it at all was just silly. “Surely! So you will accompany me back to Zora’s Domain, yes? You are absolutely the man for the job and I have nothing short of complete faith in your skills.”

“You’re relentless,” Link grumbled, hardly able to believe the nerve of this pushy, royal brat. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Why are you even out here at this hour? Go home.” He underlined his seriousness by swatting his hand at the Zora, to shoo him as one might an overly friendly Hylian shepherd.

“But you see, I simply cannot return without a Hylian to aid us,” Sidon spoke, hitting a strangely serious note. Link didn’t even care. He was just hoping that this stranger didn’t start pleading with him next. He plopped down next to the tiny, baby flame, rubbing his naked arms, which were still cold and damp from the rain; it felt as though he’d just absorbed the chill directly into himself and now it was lurking in every muscle.

While shucking his soaked boots from his feet, and huddling by the fire, Link spared a glance at the lingering Zora, finding that hopeful expression still written on his face. It was becoming difficult to even summon the strength to speak any longer, but Link forced his voice out, a quiet growl. “I can’t,” he said.

He didn’t know this person, nor did he trust him and he certainly didn’t like him, so his next words were begrudgingly spat, a vile, shameful confession. “At midnight, the Blood Moon will make it so that I can’t do anything at all. Why do you think I’m hiding out here?”

“Oh my word, that is quite a predicament,” the Prince murmured, his face taking on a soft wrinkle of
confused pity, which Link bitterly turned away from, not wanting to see someone looking at him like that. “I’ve never heard of such a condition. Do you always deal with this alone? That seems incredibly dangerous, knowing the world we live in.”

“You’re not gonna tell me how strong I am for dealing with such a thing? Now I’m disappointed,” he commented in the most cynical tone possible. “Just don’t murder me or rob me before you leave and I’ll be fine.”

“Just leaving you alone here doesn’t seem right.” The Prince slowly turned, glancing at the rain-rippled pool near the bottom of the tower while he quietly considered his options. Link could move just enough to turn his head and watch the Zora, his body otherwise slumping into the rail at his back. His awareness was already beginning to grow dim, but he felt that the Prince looked like a person whose plans were unraveling.

“I’m fine,” the Hylian muttered, as though to reassure his uninvited guest, rather than to usher him off. This strange character wasn’t aware of it, but Link had weathered much worse storms. A night of paralysis wasn’t a problem, so long as monsters didn’t catch on to his whereabouts and murder him over and over.

“Just go.” His words came out a dull whisper, like the quiet utterings of somebody drifting peacefully off to sleep. All feeling had slipped away, sensory input a mere trinket lost in the darkness of the night. He could retrieve all that in the morning, along with his awareness, which wandered freely on the borderline of consciousness and slumbering delusion. He probably hated that even worse than the overall vulnerability, if only because of the bizarre terrors which tended to overcome him. The Blood Moon never failed to carry his mind to a land of horror, leaving him questioning what was real and what was not when at last he awakened.

Those quiet hours drifted by without any acknowledgment, until morning light finally struck the Hylian’s face, the burning brightness of it aching in his vision and forcing his body to move reflexively. His heavy eyelids blinked tightly shut, a stream of tears wet and cool upon his cheeks in the crisp, morning air. He couldn’t be sure if he had wept unconsciously amidst his strange visions, or if his eyes had just been open all night long; the sting could have indicated either to be true. While he rubbed at them, he received an answer, almost as though he’d asked the very question on his mind.

“Your eyes,” came the sultry voice of the Zora from the previous night. “They sort of shine in the dark, like mirrors.”

Link raised his head from his hands, blinking away the blur left behind by his night of helplessness. He took note of the fact that shutting his eyes prior to paralysis would probably be better for him. Luckily, he recovered quickly enough.

“Hylians’ eyes reflect light in the dark, so that we can see through the shadows,” he explained, his voice broken and groggy from sleep or whatever you would call the total loss of consciousness he suffered from. “This Sheikah girl from Kakariko Village told me all about it. It seems like there’s a story about all of our senses that somehow involves the Goddess. Our ears are long and pointed in order to hear the voice of Hylia. Our eyes shine with her light, so that we are never left helpless in the night. She didn’t tell me any stories about our sense of smell, but I’m fairly certain that all of this reeks of bullshit.”

“Aha!” the Zora laughed aloud, though his voice was also graved with exhaustion. “Yes, that’s quite amusing. You are very funny, indeed.”

For a moment, Link just stared into the fire which he vaguely remembered building just before
midnight, though now it had newly added logs crackling with warmth in the rainy chill of the morning. The sun managed to twinkle through the neverending rainfall, having not risen high enough in the sky to be blotted out by the cloud cover. The golden light refracted and danced through the glassy droplets, a rather beautiful sight to wake up to.

This was a much better ‘morning after’ experience than with his last Blood Moon. Though he was still half undressed, his skin was warm and dry and he could actually say that he felt.. not bad. He climbed a bit unsteadily to his feet, stretching into a standing position and raising his arms above his head with a yawn. He immediately turned to the Zora sitting nearby with his legs curled near himself so that he looked a bit smaller than he really was; he yawned too, when Link did.

“Did you really stay here all night?” Link asked, a confused scowl furrowing his face. It could be said that he took issue with people who went out of their way to be charitable, or kind to him, because all that meant was that he was obligated to be kind in turn. Not caring was just so much easier and more convenient.

“I did,” Sidon confirmed, smiling as brightly as the morning sunshine. The light of his features was absolutely warm and pure, yet Link couldn’t help but imagine that there was a touch of smugness to be found in the Zora’s expression. As persistent as this guy was, he certainly didn’t guard the Hylian for free and though he said nothing of his previous request, Link was able to assume that he expected something in return.

“However, my original plan was to leave for the Riverside Stable, just when you came along. I expect that this tower was equal, in terms of comfort, truly,” the Prince decidedly added.

Link chuckled, his sour mood immediately dissipating. He wasn’t sure how this Zora discovered and shared his contempt for the stables, but it was definitely a bonding moment. “I’m convinced that their mattresses are stuffed with straw that the horses used first and I haven’t been to a single one that didn’t have a raging bedbug infestation.”

“You see!” The Zora slapped his knee while he laughed right along. “You managed to save me some trouble.”

Link’s joints cracked as he sauntered over to where his clothes waited. His tunic and cloak were still a bit damp, but he supposed they were bound to get even more wet, soon enough. After pulling the blue garment over his head, Link let out a deep sigh, turning a look of defeat to the Prince who had managed to ensnare him with kindness.

“Alright,” he grumbled, “I’ll help you.”

“Oh?” Sidon perked at those words, jumping to his feet as though he were made of tightly coiled springs. “That’s wonderful to hear! Yes, exquisite! Thank you, Link, you are indeed the man I thought you were! Zora’s Domain will be saved for sure!”

“Yeah, yeah,” the slumbering Hylian mumbled blearily, his lids still lowered, though his eyes were moving underneath in a state of placid dreaming. “Don’t make me regret it.”

The indiscernible muttering quickly captured the attention of a very worried Zora, who was watching over the helpless Hylian, just the same as the night they met. Sidon was beyond physically tired, his evening long and sleepless, though his senses had yet to fail him. He raised his head at the soft sounds, his eyes glancing up from the reports concerning the military operations of the previous evening.
No sooner than Sidon realized that Link was talking in his sleep, he placed the reports aside and approached the bed where his injured love rested. Very gently, he lowered himself to the edge of the water mattress, doing his best not to jostle the surface and disturb the Hylian. A concerned gaze traced across the bruised, swollen flesh exposed from beneath the blankets, which loosely hung just around Link’s hips. The stitched wound had since been bandaged, but just because it was out of sight didn’t mean it was out of mind.

The moon had, at last, dipped low on the horizon, the light of the morning sun chasing away the blood red hue which had cast an ominous crimson glow across the sky. With the power of the Blood Moon waned, Link should have been able to regain his mobility and awareness; for now, he appeared to be sleeping normally and he certainly deserved his rest.

Sidon reached out to very gingerly touch his dearest one. The soft, white scales of his palm stroked Link’s tousled head, his fingertips almost mournfully caressing the jagged locks which had been haphazardly cut. He clasped a single, pointed ear, capturing the soft flesh between his fingers ever so gently, though Link unconsciously twitched, his ears flattening at the contact.

Slowly, Link’s dreams of the past faded away and the light of awareness filtered through the dull, blue windows of his glassy gaze when he opened his eyes. Sidon had been fretting that Link may never come out of the bizarre Blood Moon trance this time around, as he’d never quite understood the condition and he was even less sure of what effects devastating injury would have on top of it.

“My dear friend?” the Prince uttered, his voice a tremulous sound, brimming with both hope and fear. He ducked lower, laying himself onto his side in order to be at eye level with the waking Hylian. Sidon’s state of emotion was ragged and confused, a burst of joy issuing forth somewhere in his chest at just seeing the brilliant blue of Link’s eyes, while anxious concern still knotted in his gut, refusing to be moved until he heard the Hylian’s voice. He kept one hand extended to his dear one, stroking his hair in an attempt to comfort him and coax him carefully back to a state of consciousness. “Link?”

“Nnn,” the Hylian groaned, blinking while very slowly fighting his way toward the waking world; it felt like a steep slope that he didn’t possess the proper stamina to climb. He immediately noticed that his eyes were less sore than usual, but while he rubbed at them, his dim awareness processed the sensation of another hand touching him, gently patting his head and even half awake, he jolted sharply upright in reaction, one hand harshly shoving the contact away from himself, his fists tightly bundled and trembling.

“It’s me!” Sidon blurted in surprise and concern, jerking himself back to a sitting position with a start. “It’s just me.”

“Don’t,” Link hissed. The first emotions to greet him upon waking were anger and fear, familiar friends who unified for the purpose of self-preservation, even now, when they weren’t needed. It was instinct; before Link was fully awake, before he could register who was beside him, or even recognize his own lover’s voice, he could fight.

“Don’t pet me,” the Hylian spoke, his voice calming fractionally from his moment of panic, attempting to blearily explain the cause of his reaction.

“Alright,” the Prince easily agreed, nodding and raising his hands in submission. “I won’t.”

With a hastily roused state of awareness, Link’s body remained rigid for a few passing moments. His fear-sharpened sight flicked about his surroundings, observing for as long as it took for him to realize where he was and who was next to him. Once he did, he let out a breath, his body slumping, then going taut all over again in lingering pain.
“Ahh,” Link hissed, one hand reaching toward his shoulder, slowly moving over it in investigation of the burning, stinging pain pulling tight and flaring up and down his back.

“You should try to stay still,” the Zora instructed in concern, his hand extending toward Link’s own but not making contact. He was still unsure of his dearest one’s state of mind and didn’t wish to upset him further. “Don’t touch that. Your wounds were tended and bandaged, but not fully healed.”

“What?” The smaller man blurted in confusion, his brow furrowed and his eyes clouded with exhaustion. “How did I get here?”

“I believe you teleported yourself to the shrine here just before you lost all awareness,” Sidon explained, his voice soft and slow, allowing Link as much time as he needed to process what surely amounted to a very traumatic night. “I found you there and saw to it that you were cared for.”

“I’m sorry,” Link apologized, sitting otherwise still and quiet while he went over all that he was able to recall; the ambush, the beating, the attempted vivisection, the escape. It all felt like a faded dream, the images just real enough in Link’s mind to be painful, even in reflection. The physical torment and the possibility of finally dying weren’t things that could scar him any longer, but all that he felt in those moments left fresh wounds, marking new pathways in his mixed up head, changing him from the inside.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, his voice nearly refusing to come out, shaking all the while as it was forced. He couldn’t even process all the awful things which had unveiled a deep and terrible shame somewhere inside him, but he knew he felt it and he knew he needed to make amends. Eyes that were a clear and mournful blue slowly turned to gaze upon the worried Zora at Link’s side and he reached for Sidon’s hand, pulling it near, welcoming and allowing the touch now that he knew whose it was. “I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” Sidon was utterly confused as the Hylian repeated his words of regret, but he moved near enough to allow the smaller man to lean against him, one arm wrapping cautiously around his back and sheltering him. “Nothing at all.”

“Yes I do,” the aching Hylian pronounced, feeling as though speaking was the only thing that wouldn’t hurt, yet it did all the same. “I’ve never been anything but an insufferable prick to you. I’ve never deserved your kindness, nor your friendship, nor..”

“.nor my love?” Sidon hesitantly spoke up to fill the silence where Link trailed off.

“That, least of all,” the injured man’s voice was a weak and dismal sound, low and quiet. He turned his head toward Sidon, pressing his face into the Zora’s scales. “How did we even get to this point? Who set your standards so low, for you to care about me at all?”

Sidon’s frame shook with a soft, bittersweet chuckle. Of all things for Link to be feeling, what in this world had made him decide on sudden, guilt-ridden unworthiness? “It wasn’t easy, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You were always such a damn flatterer,” the Hylian reflected, the images from his dream still fresh in this mind. “At first I saw through every word, then somewhere along the way, I started to believe you. So much for all the strength and inspiration and other things I supposedly gave you, I guess..”

“No, please don’t think that way, my beautiful one. Your friendship has indeed had many positive effects on me. I never uttered one single lie about that.” The Zora verbally leapt into reassurances, only for Link to upturn his gaze, a dubious expression written there. He didn’t need pretty words any
longer, he needed the truth. However, it wasn’t that Sidon was lying, but he rarely spoke a criticizing word, even reasonably truthful ones.

Beginning again, Sidon took care with every word he said, doing his best to clearly consider all the difficulties this relationship had entailed, explaining them truthfully but gently. “...But that isn’t to say you ever made things particularly easy. Our friendship came with struggles and difficulties, of course, however, I understood that there was reason for your behavior, and I also acknowledged that your anger and bitterness were legitimate emotions to express, given your situation. Also, I knew that these weren’t the only things which you were capable of feeling.” Sidon paused, taking a deep breath and shaking his head. “I will say, though... had it not been for my empathic abilities and my extremely stubborn nature, we probably wouldn’t have gotten this far.”

“You say there’s more to me than anger and bitterness, but I’m still not convinced,” Link muttered, his mind and soul a defeated thing, just broken pieces too scattered to be properly mended. All he could remember of this entire relationship was his anger and spiteful words, without ever a rebuke from the Prince, who was much too patient and understanding for his own good. “You’ve always believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, but your beliefs are probably just unrealistic.”

A silence hovered between them, Link managing to accomplish the impossible by quieting Sidon’s ceaseless praise. Maybe he was just confused, because what could he say? The Hylian wasn’t going to accept any reassurances, and he didn’t necessarily deserve to be degraded.

“You need someone who will treat you with care and understanding and love that is as absolute as your own,” Link at last spoke up, filling the void with his own doubts. He wasn’t Sidon’s problem to fix or deal with. The broken pieces of his shattered psyche weren’t for the Prince to cut himself on in useless attempts to put him back together. His behavior wasn’t something for Sidon to excuse or enable any longer. But realistically, was there any way Link could ever be the person he believed Sidon deserved? “...I’ve tried to change. I’ve tried to be better, but I don’t know if I will ever be good enough.”

“.I can’t lie any longer, my dearest one,” Sidon sighed, a profound and wretched longing audible in just his soft release of breath. “Constantly giving and giving does become exhausting when nobody returns the favor. I realize that most people can’t simply grasp emotional states with the same degree of accuracy that I can, but I’ve been patiently waiting for somebody to try, for me. I want to be cared for and understood and I’m more eager than words can properly express. However, for now, you are the one most in need and I couldn’t think of making this moment about myself. So please, don’t apologize to me.”

“Then, will you smile at me?” Link implored, leaning his head instead against the Zora’s shoulder, his neck inclining so that he could get a better view of Sidon’s pretty face.

“Smile?” Sidon repeated, confused as to the meaning behind his dearest love’s odd request.

“Your smiles have always been like precious items that you save, just to offer them to me, like gifts,” Link stated this as plainly as any other fact. “I’ve always felt that way.”

“My dearest friend,” the Prince muttered, the corners of his lips upturning until his mouth formed a soft curve upon his visage. As he’d stated, he had always known that there was more to Link than anger and it was rare moments such as these which reassured him of that fact. He would cherish and nurture this side of the Hylian, hoping beyond hope that one day it would be the most prevalent one.

“Come on,” the Hylian coaxed, reaching up to cup his lover’s face until at last Sidon’s sharp, gleaming teeth were exposed and his smile was at maximum brightness. Just the sight of it brought an ache to the Hylian’s chest, relief finding a way to painfully stamp out all of the fear of the
previous night, yet somehow it managed to be overwhelming to the point that Link’s tired eyes turned glassy and tearful.

“That’s it,” the Hylian whispered in gentle approval. “I was so afraid that I’d never see that smile again.” Despite his lingering pains, he dragged himself up, onto his knees, his hands falling upon the Zora’s shoulders for balance while he pressed his lips to Sidon’s own. He kissed him in relief, in affection, cherishing every inch of the Zora’s existence, his arms slowly slithering around behind the Prince’s neck, holding onto him tightly.

How would he ever find the will to tear himself away from this man, who he held dearer than the entire rest of the world? How could he ever hope to continue onward, to leave Zora’s Domain, to destroy the Calamity, to do any of that?

He definitely couldn’t think of leaving Sidon’s protection for his lonely and potentially hazardous home in Hateno Village any longer. He wasn’t going to offer his enemies any gratitude for reinforcing his dependency, but it was strange how easily they stripped the last of his stubborn pride away. What good had it been? What purpose did it serve?

He’d just allow the Yiga Clan to stay in his house, in that boring town. They’d be waiting for a while, maybe to the point that they joined in to all the petty gossip out of boredom.

That was, unless they managed to ambush somebody else in Link’s place. He went taut in Sidon’s careful embrace, his breath leaving his body for a few panicked seconds when the realization dawned on him- Sasan and Finley would be arriving at his home in Hateno Village, and if those clansmen were still lingering about, they wouldn’t spare any mercy. In their defeat, it was even more likely that they would kill the two hapless intruders out of sheer spite.

“Oh no,” Link muttered, panic and adrenalin racing through him so rapidly that his hands shook and his pain faded away underneath the apprehension. “Oh no, oh no,” he repeated over and over, pulling free from the Zora’s loving touch and scurrying out of the bed. “I have to go.”

“What?” Sidon interrupted Link’s racing train of thought, his tone confused but abhorred, on the brink of becoming that authoritative sound he used to command his warriors. “No. You can’t go anywhere, injured as you are. You shouldn’t even be out of bed.”

“I’ll just have to find somewhere to buy a heart potion later,” Link blurted, disregarding his own state of injury in the fear that he could suddenly leave Kodah mourning both her husband and her daughter. No, no, no, he couldn’t be responsible for that.

“Link, please,” the Prince faltered, turning fearful and desperate. He pushed himself up from the bed, his hands folded together, the look on his face forlorn and pleading.

The Hylian paused for all of a moment, his chest clenching, his bitterness rising up to angrily regard this bizarre fate of his, which always cursed him to play the part of a hero, even when it was the last thing he wanted to do. He wished that he had the luxury of turning the other cheek, and staying by the Prince’s side, but..

“I don’t have a choice,” Link explained, “I’m sorry.”

Sighing, Sidon gave his head a disappointed nod, his entire presence written with discontentment which was harsh and wretched and awful. “Your clothes are in tatters and you arrived without any weapons.”

“Then I’ll need to trouble you for a sword, again,” Link spoke, his words running together in his
“As for my clothes, I’ll just have to make do. I don’t have time to concern myself with it.”

“Very well,” Sidon gestured to where his own regal adornments had been neatly stripped and set aside. Alongside these items was Link’s ripped tunic and the Hylian rushed over to throw the horribly torn and stained garment over his fresh bandages, buckling the straps in place a bit tighter than usual, hoping to prevent the fabric from slipping off of his shoulders.

“Here. Just take this,” the Prince muttered, every doleful word stinging at Link’s heart. The Zora pattered over to stand just near his Hylian lover and Link watched Sidon’s busied hands, while he fastened his own bracers.

Sidon unfastened the sword he typically carried at his hip from his showy, silvery belt, then it was offered to the rushing Hylian. “Please, don’t come back to me in such awful condition again.”

“I promise,” Link stated, his voice steady and genuine, belying the uncertainty that was growing inside him. If the Yiga clansmen were still there, he would either be too late, or he would be walking right back into the same trap as before, only now he was in worse condition than he’d been the first time, and likely stood even less of a chance. Still, he didn’t have time for such considerations, because his friends’ lives were on the line.

Chapter End Notes

How was it, friends?? Did you all enjoy this chapter?

I have one important thing to say and I need all of you to heed me now. This will be the last time I mention physical copies of the story here, because as someone pointed out, I should probably be careful. SO, if you would like to receive a physical copy of this story once it is completed, you will need to be watching my Tumblr or my Facebook Fanpage, because those are the only places I will be posting any other info about this subject.

My Tumblr pages are: BanishedOne and BanishFics
My facebook fanpage is: BanishedOne
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The Hylian Champion found himself on a war path that he was certain would lead to his enemies. Perhaps it was not as direct as he was expecting, but nevertheless, while blindly swinging into the darkness, he struck the serpent's coil and it pulled him deeper into its den of secrets.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was likely for the best that uncertainty and hesitance had actively morphed themselves into that familiar, thoughtless rage. Nothing at all mattered but the death of his enemies. So, when Link’s body was torn asunder, into particles and light, shot across Hyrule, then reformed at the shrine near his home, he found himself marching from there like he was going to war.

This would be the day he showed the Yiga Clan who really put the ‘Hate’ in Hateno Village.

It was still fairly early in the day, much earlier than Link normally awakened, so he hoped by means of that timeliness, Sasan and Finley wouldn’t have arrived yet. His hopes were quickly dashed when he stomped across the wooden bridge to see the rose-pelted horse calmly grazing just outside of his cabin.

“Damn it,” Link cursed, his pace jumping in speed so that his boots thumped the ground while he stormed toward the door, one hand already on the hilt of the sword lent to him by Sidon. His mind was still a hazy mess, but he desperately tried to recall the numbers he’d faced last night.

There were at least four or five of the footsoldiers, which were normally easy enough to defeat despite their refined combat skills compared to other enemies. The most difficult one to best would be that Blademaster, but at the same time, it was going to feel so damn good when Link had that guy caught on the end of his sword.

The Hylian’s veins raced with fire, his soul a beast reborn from the ashes of the former night’s weakness, hungry for vengeful, gruesome retribution. He was going to paint his walls with the blood of his enemies this day and it was only a shame that Sasan and Finley were apparently going to be forced to watch him do it.

Link tore the door open, his blue eyes gleaming like icy flame, his sword drawn and ready, yet when he stepped inside the cabin, the only abnormal thing to be seen was a table which hadn’t been there before. A table, yes, with a cloth draped over it and a simple vase adorning the center; at this very table sat the young Zora woman and her Hylian lover.

The duo both peered in Link’s direction when he charged through the door, eyes wide in questioning, hands still and clasping what appeared to be new teacups which steamed with a fresh brew. In fact, the entire house smelled of Hyrule herbs and warm safflina, or else like a home that was truly lived in.

In a slow, awkward manner, Link sheathed the blade, though he didn’t proceed any further, his eyes
warily searching what he could see from the doorway; there was no sign of the Yiga clansmen, but that didn’t mean they weren’t present. “Finley,” the Champion called to the confused, young Zora, his voice a steady sound that gave nothing away. “What is your mother’s name?”

“Uhh, did you forget again?” the young girl uttered, her big eyes full of questioning, with only the slightest tinge of annoyance. “Kodah.”

“And she has a nickname for me,” Link continued, taking a few careful steps closer to the kitchen table, which he hadn’t possessed just the night before. “Do you remember that?”

“Not really.” The young woman mumbled with a shrug, not seeming very amused with this sudden game of questions. She took a sip from her cup, kicking her short legs idly, apparently unwilling to think any further on the question posed to her. Sasan looked between the other waiting Hylian and his tiny girlfriend in an awkward, expectant way, then finally he quietly piped up, “Doesn’t Kodah always call him Linny?”

“You must pay pretty close attention,” Finley responded, staring across the table at her boyfriend, partly impressed, partly guilty. She took a deep breath, setting her cup aside, then she let out a tiny sigh, her little tail giving a flick. “So what’s with the twenty questions? You’re young, but not that young.”

“You’re.. earlier than I expected,” Link uttered the poorly thought out response. It did little to explain his suspicions, but maybe it was better that way.

“We got a refund for our stay at the stable and left early,” the tiny Zora woman commented, her voice sharp and very telling of a poor night’s sleep. “I’m pretty sure the mattresses are stuffed with straw that the horses used already.”

“Yeah, the expensive beds are the ones with fresh straw,” Link explained, his voice deadpan and lined with cynicism.

Though Sasan seemed unperturbed and unsurprised, Finley’s inner businesswoman must have been cringing at the idea of such practices. Maybe it was because her family owned an inn that she was so horrified by the terrible standards of Hylians. “Anyway,” she cut in, all too happy to move on from the previous topic, “when we got here, some man in pink came poking around. At first he just wanted to make sure that we were actually invited to stay, then he offered to sell us some furniture. He said that you shouldn’t be having guests over with your house so empty, but I guess it worked out, because he sold us all of this for a hundred rupees.”

“A hundred for all of this?” Link repeated, his suspicion falling away to make room for how utterly impressed he continued to be with Finley’s bargaining skills. Anyway, this was definitely the same young Zora he knew and not a Yiga clansman in disguise. With his guard loosening, he took another look around at the much homier house he now had with all of the additions; a cutting counter, shelves, a nice rug, some additional lanterns. “It looks nice.”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Finley said, “you can just pay me back later.”

“Right,” the injured Hylian muttered, his voice coming out slow and quiet. Finley definitely had some sort of future in business. “Well, uh.. Make yourselves at home. And maybe just keep the doors locked. If any other strangers come by, it’s probably best if you’re just a bit warier.”

“Umm,” Sasan spoke up nervously while the other Hylian headed toward the stairs, to the upper-level where all of his things had apparently been stashed. “There were these two women that came by. They brought us the herbs for the tea. They said they were doing their washing when they heard
that we were visiting. Should we be concerned about that?"

“Nah,” Link called from over the rail, tossing his gear momentarily aside and unbuckling the much-too-tight straps holding his tattered tunic in place. “Hateno Village people are bored out of their minds and live for gossip. They probably just heard that a Zora was visiting and wanted to come sneak a peak at Finley. Don’t enable them either, if you can help it.”

“Got it,” Sasan said with a nod, quieting now that his concerns had been quelled.

In a rush, Link pulled the now ratty red garment over his head and tossed it aside, adorning himself in the familiar blue of his Champion tunic, instead. Just because his home seemed secure for now didn’t mean the threat was over, and he needed to be ready for the trouble to come, or, more accurately, the trouble which he was about to pay a little visit to.

With the addition of a shield and a bow to all that he was carrying, Link felt ready fight the entirety of the Yiga Clan; suffice to say, he was still on a mission to bring a war to their doorstep, despite finding Finley and Sasan safe.

Maybe he should have welcomed them to arm themselves with whatever they could find in the stash of weapons? Then again, the idea of either of them holding their own against a Yiga was laughable. He just hoped that Finley was still too young to know or care much about Mipha, because Link noticed the pieces of the Zora Champion’s broken trident had been gathered up and piled on a night stand just next to his bed. She didn’t say anything about it, but it was also possible that she just got Sasan to do all of the moving, in order to build those muscles of his.

Link would just have to put that out of his mind for now. His current task was to locate Bolson; it wasn’t difficult by any stretch, as the older man was busy working near the display homes, overseeing his team while checking over some sort of supply sheet. At the sound of Link’s approach, the older man turned to the shorter Hylian and immediately smiled as though he were a sight for sore eyes.

“Look at that,” Bolson purred in amusement, “the town stud has returned. And here I thought you planned to just leave your guests to entertain themselves.”

“They’re not really that kind of guests. They just needed to get away from some stuff going on in Zora’s Domain.” As he finished his sentence, Link bit his own tongue in rebuke for the words he’d uttered. He didn’t need to tell Bolson that. It was like being in Hateno Village for ten minutes already had him spreading gossip. “Forget I said that. I needed to ask you about the ‘Sheikah’ who moved into town.”

“Hmm. What about them?”

“Where do they live?” That probably seemed a bit too suspicious, so Link softened it with, “I never properly introduced myself.”

“Oh, I’ll just show you to the place. I’d been meaning to check in on them, anyway. Hateno hospitality and all that.”

“Great.”

Link fought to keep his pace relaxed while he trailed after Bolson, who chatted him up on the way. It was times like these that he was reminded how much he could relate to his Crazy Girl, especially considering he really wanted to charge off like a summer storm rolling across central Hyrule. Not
knowing the way was the only thing preventing him from doing exactly that.

It was easy enough to pick out the house, once they came near enough for Link to make an educated guess; it was a colorful square with an upstairs deck and window shutters that were closed tight. In short, the company’s work was unmistakable.

Bolson sped up to stay on Link’s heels when the shorter Hylian took off, giving a hiss of offense when Link found the door to be locked and then delivered a sharp kick, busting through. “Hey!” the man said, “that’s my hard work you’re ruining!”

Without much regard for Bolson’s complaints, the Champion pushed the partly splintered door aside and stamped across the threshold, setting a sharp glare immediately upon an elderly Sheikah woman; she was perched at her kitchen table with a wooden tub full of rice, which she was rolling into balls. The woman stared in Link’s direction, her weathered features difficult to read, though her eyes were wide with surprise.

Bolson rushed into the house after a moment of hesitation, apparently with the notion that he needed to get the wild and crazy younger man under control. “I’m so sorry for the intrusion,” he apologized, grasping for an explanation, despite the utter lack of any that he was aware of.

Indeed, the walls were adorned with the typical Sheikah decor, as though the inside of the house had swallowed up half of Kakariko Village. Nevertheless, Link wasn’t convinced. “Have you ever met this woman before?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Bolson, who was still fumbling for feasible words.

“Oh, well, no, I’ve always dealt with a younger woman,” he sputtered, looking to the frightened elder and fanning his hand with a nervous giggle. “I think our dear town Hero must have thought something nefarious was going on. He takes his work very seriously. This is all a misunderstanding, I’m sure. Right, Link?” He gave the shorter man’s shoulder a playful bump. Or maybe it was a very gentle nudge for him to go along with the established story.

“There’s nothing nefarious here,” the woman explained, her voice a soft, wavering sound. “I live here with my granddaughter and I was just in the middle of preparing lunch for when she comes home.”

“Yes and it smells fantastic,” Bolson said with a chuckle and a swat of his hand. “We’ll just leave you to that, darling, and I’ll make sure that someone looks at your door completely free of charge. Anyway, it was very nice to meet you, despite the uhh.. Odd circumstances.”

Link kept his stare pinned on the eyes of the old woman and for a single second, she looked right back at him, her own faded, crimson eyes seeming to measure him, gauging his reaction to all of this. Or maybe he was just imagining all of that, as he tended to. Or, the elder was actually startled and fearful, which was a perfectly normal reaction. Still, Link wasn’t willing to back down from his pursuit of vengeance and instead of turning on heel when Bolson did, he strode over to where the woman was seated, kicking the chair aside so that it clattered to the floor and he drew his blade with murderous intent.

It came as no surprise to him when the elder rolled away with sudden youthful vigor and the Champion chased, his opposition aggressive and tenacious. He wasn’t going to let these sneaky bastards play him this time. Before the elder could properly regain her balance, Link lashed out, slamming the butt of his sword into her head, all while the older Hylian screeched in perplexed horror.

When the woman toppled back, her tiny body rolled across the floor and crashed into the wall with a
hard thump. She laid still for a tense moment, a small trickle of blood tracing the furrows of her forehead. Bolson stood, absolutely speechless while a hundred horrible assumptions filtered through his mind and the words, ‘What have you done?’ rested just on the edge of his tongue, held back by a growing wariness in regards to the man he now assumed was crazed.

But before the older man could utter a single word, a flash of light burst from the toppled elder, the entirety of her frame fragmenting with a static buzz to reveal the truth behind the clever deception; a Yiga footsoldier. Not just any footsoldier, either, but the one from the tower, whose very hand had attempted to carve Link’s skin away from the muscle and bone underneath.

“Oh good,” Link growled, the skin of his nose wrinkling, his lips curling into a snarl. “I was hoping it would be you.” The tip of his blade was raised, pressed harshly against the thin fabric that concealed the twisted clansman’s throat. They were still disoriented from the previous blow, a thin crack crawling down from the top of their mask and branching across the inverted Sheikah symbol. “Though I can hardly believe that you were stupid enough to stick around. Where did your friends get off to?”

The footsoldier hovered in silence that grated on the angry Hylian’s impatient nature, though he couldn’t discern whether it was because the fallen clansman was stubborn or still reeling from the blow to their head. Link was mere moments from hitting them again, when their quiet, muffled voice spoke up from beneath the mask.

“It was only necessary for one of us to remain behind to monitor the comings and goings of this town. The others scattered when you escaped.” Link inwardly cringed at just hearing that familiar voice again, his fingers tightening on the handle of his sword until his hand shook with rage. Part of him just wanted to wildly slash at this sadistic bastard until nothing was left but an amorphous pile of blood and mincemeat while another part of him needed answers that he’d been in no place to demand before.

Yet, despite how the Hylian was restraining the urge to outright slaughter his enemy, and how he’d gone from victim to captor, the clansman still dared to utter threats. “But you’ll be seeing them again, soon enough,” they hissed, their tone patronizing and far too certain of the words they spoke, despite the nervous waver. “You’re not the only one who can zip around at will, Hylian Champion. We’re everywhere, around every corner, down every dusty road. There isn’t a single place you can hide where we won’t be watching and waiting...” They trailed off, chuckling for a moment over the words they held just a second longer in secrecy. “...not even in Zora’s Domain.”

“Bullshit,” Link spat, fury and fear both bubbling to the surface, his preservation instincts insisting on being his very first reaction before he pushed them away, seeking out some safety in plain denial. He shook his head, his mouth pulling into a tight line just before he continued. “That level of coordination isn’t even possible.”

“Typical Hylian,” the Yiga footsoldier almost laughed, a sneer easy enough to hear in their tone of voice. “Your ego is eclipsed only by your ignorance. Your people once condemned an entire race for their progress. They called the Sheikah creations evil and dangerous, yet they still managed to steal them for their own purposes... And here you are, assuming you’re the only one capable of using those very creations.”

A burst of anger overwhelmed all restraint and Link drew his sword back, just to swing the blunt side of the blade into the rambling clansman’s shrouded face, knocking them over onto their side, leaving them to gasp and tremble as they recovered from the blow. The point of Link’s weapon now pressed into the masked villain’s back, and the Hylian only barely kept himself from slicing into the skintight suit. “Cut the obscure babble and answer my question before I give you wounds to match
the ones you gave me.”

The cracked mask turned ever so slightly, the toppled footsoldier glancing back at the Hylian who was holding them captive. “The Sheikah Slate you possess is not the only piece of technology like itself. When you activated the towers across Hyrule, you restored warp capabilities to our own devices as well. Nicely done.”

“And just what did you mean by what you said last night?” Link asked, his voice a dangerous growl. “They’re the ones who really killed you?” What does that mean?”

“I don’t think you should hear those answers from me,” the clansman uttered rather blithely for the desperate situation they were in, “...but rather, from your Sheikah friend on the hill. As for me, well, I suspect we’ll meet again, Champion.”

“Wha-” An unfinished utterance of questioning escaped from the Hylian before his unasked inquiry was given an answer he did not like. The jumpsuit which covered the footsoldier’s body was bathed in brilliant blue light, their entire frame melting into a drifting cloud of energy, which held onto an identifiable form for only a few passing seconds. It took only those scarce seconds for Link to raise the blade above his head and bring it down in a last ditch effort to slay his enemy, but though the sword passed through the glowing form as it began to dissipate, the Yiga clansman was carried away, leaving little evidence of injury behind.

“Damn it,” Link cursed with a heavy sigh, his anger still burning and heavy in his chest. He sheathed the blade with care, determined not to break this precious sword as he tended to. His eyes went immediately to Bolson when he turned around, looking over the man with concern that was mild and mostly veiled behind a calm, pensive expression.

Bolson had disbelief carved into the details of his features, his normally cool, casual countenance drawn taut over the bones of his face. His eyes were wide and staring, his skin gone a sickly, pale tone. His adam’s apple moved in a thick, nervous swallow, his eyes venturing from the empty space that had been occupied by the person who’d donned a magical disguise, over to Link in worry yet curiosity.

“How did you know what they were?” The man forced his immediate question out, the voice which carried his words a soft, distant sound. He was surely questioning everything he’d ever known, now that he’d been made aware that people existed who could change form in order to deceive him. Hesitation held Link in silence, at first, because he had no answer to give. Or maybe it was that he just couldn’t tell the truth without making himself sound like a reckless soldier, swinging his sword in the dark and hoping to slay as many enemies as innocents. The truth was that he hadn’t actually known that the old woman was a Yiga clansman in disguise, but he decided to trust the awful feeling twisting in his gut, his instincts ablaze. Or maybe his rage had pushed him to find a victim, and he was just too proud to go home without spilling someone’s blood.

Glancing from the table where the ‘old woman’ had been working on lunch, to all that occupied her home, Link sought out some kind of indicator, some kind of excuse, something that he could present, like evidence, even if it involved some bullshitting. At last, his gaze beheld something he’d wished he’d seen before, because it actually was a dead giveaway; there, on the cutting counter, sat a fruit bowl that was piled comically high with mighty bananas. Link raised his hand to point out the incredibly obvious detail, which he’d been too blindly focused to notice beforehand.

“These Yiga Clan assholes are obsessed with mighty bananas,” he explained, though Bolson still offered a dubious expression in response. “That’s how I knew.”
“Ohh,” Bolson slowly pronounced, dragging his syllables in uncertainty, still looking around like he was processing the situation.

“You alright?” Link asked, taking a few steps toward the other man.

“U-uhh..” the older man fumbled for words, blinking and refocusing on the one who stood before him. Feigning a relaxed titter, his typical cool, sultry behavior returned to mask whatever shock he was still feeling and he offered Link a warm smile. “Oh, well, aren’t you sweet. Don’t worry about me, tough guy. I’ll be fine.”

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“Okay,” Link nodded. “I have some other business to attend to. Maybe don’t follow me this time?”

“Right.”

The door of the hilltop laboratory shot open with a violent slam, so that as soon as Link barged inside, the first image that greeted him was one of Purah standing nervously atop the chair she often occupied, her big eyes wide from the sudden startle.

The tiny Sheikah woman’s wary expression did not fade even slightly when Link approached without greeting, utter seriousness and perhaps anger visibly painting his own features.

“Time to talk,” he growled, his hand shooting out to grab the chair, yanking it away from the table and spinning it around so the woman holding on for dear life and indignantly glowering was turned to face him. She skittered in her seat, hurriedly adjusting to keep from toppling over the side from the violent ride she’d been taken on.

Link turned a sideways glance in Symin’s direction, catching him glued into the back corner of the room, his frame rigid in confused fear; the Sheikah man looked on but did nothing as of yet, understanding the momentary glare he received to be an unspoken warning.

The Hylian’s voice was calm and even when he began to speak, addressing the child-like Sheikah seated before him. “The last time I was here, I told you that I had died and come back to life multiple times and all you had to say, in short, was that I was crazy.”

In the absence of Link’s voice, nothing was given in return but silence. Purah no longer appeared so confused, the emotions on her face draining away, as silent and resistant as her voice. A bitter snicker came from Link, though he wasn’t surprised at all by this. She knew what he was talking about and she’d likely already gotten the notion that he now had reason to believe everything she’d said before had been a lie; however, she couldn’t speak up yet, because she didn’t know just how much the Hylian was aware of.

Purah didn’t flinch at all when Link’s hands drew upward, then fell upon his weapons, setting them aside and fussing with the straps that held his tunic in place. Once free from all of that, he carefully pulled the garment over his head, his wounds stinging with his movement. Lastly, he unwrapped the bandages that kept his injuries covered, finding them dotted with fresh blood from physical activity.

“And yet,” the Hylian began, the fury growing ever more apparent in his tone of voice. He turned around to give the tiny Sheikah an eyeful of his stitched flesh, blood crusted around the sutures, the surrounding skin a vibrant pink. “..just last night, a bunch of Yiga clansmen ambushed me in my home and did this to me in order to ‘remove my immortality.’ So how is it that the Yiga Clan knows about something that has apparently all been in my head? Can you explain that one?”

“Link,” the woman uttered, actually speaking his name correctly in her seriousness. She sounded just
like a strict, displeased mentor, but warier. “You need to calm down before we can discuss anything.”

“Calm down?” He spun back around to face the woman, imagining his own teeth gleaming like a snarling Zora’s as his lip curled in anger which was only increased when he was asked to place it aside. Had he no right to his feelings, his outrage? An accusing finger was shoved directly into Purah’s face when the Hylian continued. “You sat there and talked down to me the last time I was here. I needed help and you chose to make me feel like I was losing my mind, instead of giving me the answers. Now I have a group of warriors, who can apparently track my every move, that are out to take away the immortality that was ‘all in my head’, then kill me. So no, I don’t think I will calm down. Trying to make me feel crazy worked last time, but not this time.”

“What part of this being a war for the survival of your people did you not comprehend?”

Purah threw her hands up in exasperation, her normally silvery voice turning pitchy, white brows knitting together and wrinkling the skin between. “Did you think it was just going to be a fun little adventure, exploring the countryside and cooking over a campfire? The Yiga Clan have been trying to destroy the Hylian monarchy since before the Calamity, so yeah, with you being the one person who can save the Princess and destroy the Calamity beast, they want you dead. That shouldn’t be hard to grasp. You’re a soldier, not a tourist. Pull it together already and do your job.”

“My job?” Link nearly laughed outright, the sound belying his ever-present bitterness and contempt for his so-called fate. “And why is it my job? Why am I the ‘one person’ who can save everything? Why me?”

“You’re the Princess’s Knight, of course its your job!” the tiny woman spat, her crimson eyes narrowing into a sharp glare behind the glass circles of her spectacles, as fiery as the disaster that took away the world she once knew. “A hundred years ago, you signed up for it, you trained for it and you committed to it. You happened to be chosen by the sword that seals darkness, but it wasn’t like the sword picked a hapless stranger.”

“As far as I’m concerned, that wasn’t even me,” Link said with a guiltless shrug.

“What do you mean by that?” Purah asked, her anger fading away to reveal the sound of genuine curiosity in her tone.

“Well, I don’t remember anything of the life I used to have and even if I did, everything I knew is long gone. I might as well be a different person, altogether. A hapless stranger, as you say.” The Hylian crossed his arms over his chest momentarily, realizing that his skin was growing chilled, so instead he reached down to gather up his tunic and slide it back on. He would just have to have new bandages applied later, whenever he got back home, no, back to Zora’s Domain.

“If you don’t do your job now, everything else in our world will be long gone, soon enough.” Purah dragged herself up to stand in the chair where she was perched, taking a deep breath and pressing her tiny hands together just before her face, trying to maintain some semblance of calm. She could feel the immense gravity of this, a burden yet something which was of utmost importance, and still the belligerent boy before her failed to even acknowledge it. “Furthermore, Link, don’t you dare act like you’re some kind of lonely soldier, carrying a hopeless burden and struggling all alone. I was there when the Calamity struck and unlike you, I remember the sheer horror of it. I remember when the Guardians turned on us and stormed town after town, leaving ruins and corpses in their wake. I remember droves of people fleeing their homes in terror, just for those machines to find them on the roads and slaughter them all. So you keep this in mind, boy, of hundreds of Hylian and Sheikah soldiers who gave their lives in a war they knew they couldn’t win, the Champions included, you were the one that was spared. Your life was deemed more important than all those others and you got
to have a nice, peaceful nap, while we struggled to survive, while we rebuilt, while we buried the dead. Also, if you think these last hundred years of keeping your whereabouts secret have been a cakewalk, I want to assure you, it was a burden even bigger than that huge chip on your shoulder.”

Link just busied himself with getting his straps all affixed into place and picking up his various weapons while Purah attempted to lecture him like the preachy, old woman that she was underneath her youthful appearance. When she finished, the Hylian was still carrying out this task, offering not one word in response. In his silence, she continued.

“Nobody asked for any of this; they either died because of it or lived to deal with it,” the Sheikah spoke. “So you can deal with it now, and accomplish the purpose we kept you alive for.”

All Link could bother to think was this; all Sheikah were the damn same, whether they wore their symbol inverted or not. “You never answered my question,” Link piped up, a grin tugging at one corner of his mouth, his face all the more dangerous when it wore any hint of expression. “Am I immortal?”

The words hung right at the tip of Purah’s tongue, the fire in her eyes extinguished to dull embers, dying in resignation, her last moment of resistance a fleeting hesitation. “Yes, you’re immortal,” she spat the truth out like the bitter secret that it was. “Is that answer satisfying? Did it change anything?”

Maybe she wasn’t perturbed, but just that simple admission knocked the air from the Hylian’s lungs, a blood rush sending his head into a state of teetering lightness. He’d known this gruesome truth all along, but he’d held it inside like a dirty secret, knowing that nobody would ever believe him. He’d even begun to doubt himself, questioning if there was any feasible way for him to have made all of this up.

It made him sick and one hand unconsciously went to his middle, like everything inside him might spill out suddenly, his flesh liquid, rushing, crawling, escaping. He took a breath, his hand falling away. He steadied himself, at last speaking an impossible response to an impossible revelation, his voice holding all the tension of his tightened throat. “Why was it so hard to just tell me that? Rather than letting me question my own sanity?”

“Would you even believe that it’s for your protection that we don’t speak of it?” the Sheikah woman stated bluntly, all attempts at mystery seemingly cast aside now that she’d uttered aloud the long held secret. “It isn’t something you need to be spreading around and you certainly don’t need to rely solely on that.”

Purah let out a sigh, sliding back into a seated position, her face falling into her palms. “But I suppose it doesn’t matter any longer.. The Yigas who ransacked Robbie’s lab clearly found the information they were looking for, and yes, they probably can relieve you of the ability now. A hundred years ago, we deactivated the towers in order to slow the Yiga Clans’ progress. When you awakened and reactivated them, it became a race against time for you to destroy the Calamity beast before they learned your secret; a race that you’ve apparently lost.”

Link really wished that somebody could have informed him sooner about the Yiga Clans’ ability to teleport and track his movements. It was a sign of bad allies when you hear the truth from enemies first- which reminded him..

“I confronted one of the footsoldiers in town just earlier,” he began, his voice suddenly calm; unusually so. “They said something to me that has me very confused. ‘They’re the ones who really killed you.’ What did they mean by that?”

“.I’m afraid I don’t know,” Purah only shrugged her tiny shoulders at the enigmatic statement. She
didn’t hesitate, didn’t glance aside, she didn’t show any sign of nervousness at all, and something was telling Link that, in itself, was suspicious. Could he really blindly trust his bad feelings twice in one day? Could he really attack an elder for a second time?

“Bullshit,” he hissed. Purah already had a record of lying straight to his face, so he didn’t plan to let her off the hook so easily. This was her fault. “They told me to ask you, specifically,” he raised his voice, “What were they talking about!”

“I don’t know, Link!” the Sheikah woman shouted back, looking as confused and helpless as any given child; it must have been such a convenient facade to have.

A sharp kick sent the chair over onto its side and across the floor. Purah’s tiny frame rolled away just as helplessly, her own reflexes not nearly as trained as the Yiga who the Champion knocked aside earlier. Link needed only a few steps to close in on the scrambling woman and he bundled the fabric of her dress in one fisted hand, lifting her off the ground with ease, then depositing her rather unceremoniously atop her work table.

The shaken woman pulled herself up onto her elbows, not daring to come to a fully upright position. Her white hair was mussed, errant strands falling around her face and her glasses had been lost in the fall, but the look on her face was not one of fear, not yet. Link leaned himself into the table, his hands coming to gently rest at the very edge, almost threateningly. “You had no problem lying to me before and you’re lying to me now,” he stated, calm and sure. “Tell me what I want to know.”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” the woman spat like she was something small and venomous.

A smooth, disappointed sigh slid very softly from the Hylian and he turned aside for a tense moment, simmering in being denied the answer that he had demanded, then he drew back one hand from where it had been placed, swinging it so that his knuckles struck the woman’s face with a resounding smack. Her tiny body twisted to one side with a quiet peep, her own hand coming to cup the ache which was surely now spreading through her cheek, her jaw, her lip which was stained with the smallest dot of blood.

Only now did Symin decide to take another step closer with the intention of intervening, ridiculously brave yet utterly terrified at the very same time. Link would never know if it was the way he turned a cold, blue glare in the man’s direction that stopped him in his tracks, or the fact that Purah raised her open hand to him, to prevent his approach.

She must have felt sure of her own ability to handle the killer souffle she and her associates cooked up in that Sheikah oven, so Link took further steps to make it clear that she could not. With a quick, fluid motion, he reached up, drawing the sword from the sheath at his back and he pointed the blade at the unnaturally youthful woman, holding her captive under the threat of it, just as he had with the Yiga footsoldier.

“If your only purpose was to keep secrets, which you failed to conceal from everyone but me, then what reason do you have to live any longer?” The point of the sword dropped ever nearer while Link spoke. “More than a hundred years of life is probably enough, right?”

“No matter what you do, the result will be the same,” she said, her voice much too steady for Link’s comfort. “The Yiga Clan have been using deception and misinformation to counter their lack of sheer force for hundreds of years. They utter lies with such proficiency, there are even Hylians among their ranks; Hylians who now believe that their own race must be destroyed. More than likely, you backed this clever footsoldier into a corner, and they were forced to rely on lies to slow you down. If you’re confused and fighting with your own allies, you won’t be destroying the Calamity. It gives them time to get back on their feet and regroup.”
She shook her head, her eyes steely, yet imploring in a calm, sensible way. “I can’t give you an answer I don’t have and if you kill me, you still won’t be getting the answer you want.”

“How do I know you’re not the one lying to me?” the Hylian hissed, utterly tired of all the games and bullshit.

“Don’t you think I would tell you what I know,” she uttered, her crimson gaze moving slowly up the sword and finally meeting Link’s own cold stare, “...if it meant saving my own life?”

“If I find out that you lied to me again, I won’t be so merciful the next time around,” he gravely spoke his threat, at last bringing the point of the sword down with a quick jab, the blade piercing the wood just near the Sheikah’s head. “Snap.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, friends. I really hope you guys are following my tumblr, because there is some awesome stuff on there. Here’s a shoutout to Wellidonno on tumblr; thank you for the multiple, beautiful pieces of art. Also, thank you so much to Agape-rose; I really needed that awesome playlist. I'm gonna enjoy it for the rest of my days. :D

So, in short, the entire message of this chapter was to barge into people's houses, and kick old ladies out of chairs. How did you guys like it?
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Disaster tightened its hold upon all of Zora's Domain, but ever more on those who sought to carry its burdens. A helpless Prince was fretting from the safety of his tower, ashamed of his inability to save all of those who it was his duty to protect. A young Healer, in struggling to wrap his mind around his society's shortcomings, found himself entangled by those very injustices. And a fallen Knight who'd wanted nothing more than to disappear into the black growing inside of his broken heart was offered the grace of his beloved Prince, but at a steep price.

Chapter Notes

Gosh friends, I'm sorry for this late chapter. I was busy Friday moving boxes into storage and I've had a mad headache for the last three days. I'm fairly certain that this chapter will appropriately reflect my level of suffering, hahaha. I threw in a very rare Estuu-centric scene, because I think some of you are still pretty curious about him?

I really hope you enjoy it friends. I put plenty of love and effort into it. :)

The air always whispered a slight, salty breeze that rustled through the palm leaves and the wooded walls of the Lurelin Village hut. It rained every day for at least an hour or two, but even when the clouds shrouded out the sun, it was still impossibly hot and only just slightly less humid than the forests to the immediate North.

A rowdy group sat around the hut, dining on the area’s bounty of wild beef, fresh seafood and fruit. Each member of the group held a coconut in hand, sipping at the sweet, refreshing milk which went down with the bitter burn of alcohol; their latest conquest had been hard fought but it was a paradise of little pleasures.

“It’s a stalemate for now,” the leader groaned, tying up her mess of brown curls just to get it off of her neck, which was moist in the suffocating Southern heat. The massive, furry creature settled behind her likely wasn’t helping the situation, but she had no heart to ask him to move. No, she was much more comfortable with him as near as possible, so she leaned into her beloved companion, letting the deep rumble of his purr soothe her. When she continued to speak, the rest of the group immediately quieted to listen.

“We’re losing too many people fighting these Yiga Clan assholes,” she explained in a sharp, clear tone, her voice like a blizzard whistling over a mountain peak, but colder. “Their tactics are unfortunately very effective in the cover of the rainforest and a bunch of bugs and bananas aren’t worth fighting for any longer. We’ll withdraw for now, but we’ll maintain our presence here in Lurelin Village. Maybe we can’t run them out of the woods, but they won’t be able to spread any further South without being overpowered. It’s harder for the cowards to sneak around without all that cover, after all.”
Every member of the gathering let out a hum of tentative laughter, their amusement measured so not to be too bold or boisterous. Nobody ever laughed too hard at the boss, even when she was actively attempting to joke.

The group was also battered and worn, and this was probably the first time in a while that they had actually relaxed. They’d been fighting with the Yiga Clan for months in the sweaty misery that was Faron Woods, just for the sake of communication and supply routes. Each of them stung with bitterness toward those masked phantoms who often came like ghosts in the night and laid waste to their camps, appearing just long enough to pick them off one by one, only to disappear without a sound or trace.

More than half of them already slept uneasily at night, haunted by images of the faceless warriors.

“We can move supply through the mountain pass northeast of here,” the leader explained, producing a map from underneath the battered leather cuirass she wore, her hands unfolding the parchment as though one harsh movement would tear the item beyond repair. “With that out of the way, we’re free to move our forces to new areas and focus on increasing our resources. For all the people we lost fighting in Faron Woods, that many more joined us. Our Hylian siblings of the Faron region have had enough of the Yiga occupation; many of them stepped up to conquer it and we will, in time. But we need supply to keep our numbers fed and strong. So, our next target will be,” she pressed the unfolded map to the ground before her for all of her most trusted leaders to see, “Hateno Village.”

“Hm,” one of the others nodded, though he cupped his stubbled chin in thought. He was an older man, one who wore the scars of numerous battles he’d survived, which made his council one of the leader’s most valued and trusted. “They don’t have any armies in Hateno but as soon as we make our move, the Sheikah of Kakariko will march to protect them. It will be just the same as here; a hard fight.”

“The Sheikah are cut from the same cloth as the Yiga,” the leader sharply spoke up in distaste, “...but more cowardly. With the royal family of Hyrule gone, they don’t even remember how to fight.”

“The same blood courses through the veins of both the Yiga and the Sheikah,” another woman spoke up, her voice rich and gruff. “They may serve different deities, but when it comes down to it, they’ll cooperate to prevent our growth of power.”

“That’s exactly what’s wrong with the world we live in today.” The leader almost laughed, though her voice rose in anger that was passionate and dangerous. “People fighting the never-ending war of the deities. We fight for ourselves. We fight to restore power to the Hylian people. We fight to bring law back to Hyrule, and not the law of these deities who’ve brought destruction upon us countless times, but the law of the people. We are a relentless, unstoppable force, and if we must charge across this entire world, burning every inch of it in order to help it rise from the ashes, that’s what we’ll do. Who are we?”

“The Guardians of Hyrule!” the group screamed aloud, giving a vigorous, victorious howl while they cheered, raising their drinks and fists above their heads. Amidst the howls, a trio of young Lurelin women appeared in the doorway of the hut. Two of them meekly carried a huge platter which was occupied by an entire leg of raw beef, both trying not to make eye contact with any member of the group. One other stood before the two carrying the platter of meat, just quietly staring in bitter resentment, deep dark eyes smouldering with hatred that was unabashed.

The massive creature who’d been sleeping behind the group leader perked up at the new arrivals. His head rose, his shining, red eyes glaring at the Lurelin women as he sniffed the air, then pinned his ears back with a growl of warning.
The duo holding the platter shrank in terror at the beast’s snarl, one nearly at the brink of tears at just the sight of the great, silver beast. She had never seen a lynel in her life, but from the stories she’d heard from travelers, they weren’t something that could be tamed. Could it even tell the difference between them and the meat which was meant to be its dinner?

It was the single, bold Lurelin woman standing in front that did not flinch, who refused to show any fear. Her eyes moved across each member of the group, taking in every detail of their faces, then they came to rest upon the growling lynel, which was glaring directly at her. When nobody but the monster acknowledged them, she spoke up to say, “We brought the raw leg of beef you requested.”

At last, the group leader turned her attention to the trio standing in the doorway, setting her drink aside and idly patting the shoulder of the lynel seated behind her.

“My father doesn’t like you,” the leader said, pointing at the woman who was glaring back in defiance. “He has an instinct about people. He can see through deception almost immediately. I trusted him with my life, growing up, and I value his judgment more highly than anyone else’s.”

Climbing to her feet, the leader approached the group of Lurelin women, flicking her hand at the ones who held the platter and they hurriedly placed the plate of meat onto the floor before rushing down the stairs at such a pace that one stumbled, landing with her face in the wet sand. She crawled, rushing to her feet and ran out of sight. The one who stood without fear turned slowly, only for the leader to call out to her.

“Not you,” the leader commanded, her towering height as imposing as her steely voice. “You stay. I’m interested in getting to know you better.”

The Lurelin woman glared over her shoulder, her pointed ears twitching upward in alert at the sound of other members of the group coming to a quick stand, without even a direct order. She turned, looking here and there with dark eyes which were both confused and threatening, yet her demeanor was not enough to prevent the group from taking her.

The other Hylians grabbed the woman by her arms, dragging her ever closer to the lynel and she gave a pointless struggle for a few moments before she realized the futility of it. Surprisingly, the woman said nothing to object as the snarling beast leaned in to press its nose to her neck, his breath rustling her long, black hair. After a few moments of investigation, the silver lynel straightened and let out a low bellow, the bridge of its nose wrinkling, exposing a mouth full of sharp teeth.

“You know what he thinks?” the leader said with a smile, brandishing a knife from the holster at her hip. She transitioned from a relaxed stance to a rushing attack with much more control and ease than most could manage, nor follow with their eyes. Her movements were sharp and unpredictable, like shifting storm winds and her blade was plunged into the woman’s shoulder in the time needed to take a breath.

The taller Hylian bent low, leaning in so close that her face was pressed against that of the other woman; she watched, enraptured by the expression of the other, scrunched and gasping from the pain. One hand slithered up, taking hold of the smaller woman’s face, a thumb and forefinger mashing into her supple, rounded cheeks, then the group leader whispered her answer. “He thinks you’re not a Lurelin Villager.”

Within perfectly timed seconds of the leader’s quiet utterance, the prisoner’s disguise broke away, shattering with a buzz of light and static, leaving behind a masked Yiga clansman, impaled on her blade. The leader chuckled, amused that this lone footsoldier had managed to infiltrate their ranks and she tore the mask from his face, finding the countenance of a rather young man underneath; his normally rich brown skintone was already turning pale from the loss of blood and his eyes shined a
reflective red from the technology that was carried inside his body, the same as the lynel who was still glaring and licking his chops.

“Go ahead. Do whatever pleases you, Hylian scum,” the young Yiga clansman hissed through the pain, turning his head aside to avoid the maddened glare of the leader, not nearly so bold now that he was discovered and unveiled. “I already transferred the information I gathered about your plans, and even if you kill me, I’ll return to life upon the next Blood Moon. There’s nothing you can take from me. I’ve won.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the leader said with an amused titter. “I know all about the magic that brings creatures like my father and Yiga cowards back from the dead. I also know that it isn’t perfect, that it can, in fact, be destroyed. It just so happens that Father here is an expert at dismantling them. It turns out that the magic can’t survive a lynel’s stomach.”

“What?” the young clansman quietly uttered, his body even more rigid than it had been before, his shining red eyes wide in fearful realization just before the lynel’s maw opened and he lunged to clamp his jaws down on the Yiga footsoldier’s throat.

The entire group jeered and laughed and cheered in celebration when the beast slammed the captured Yiga down beneath his paws, tearing the flesh from the gurgling, screeching boy’s bones. The screams of pain and horror echoed across all of Lurelin Village, so that the villagers huddled inside their homes for safety from more than just the afternoon rain.

There was too much and no matter how he fought on and pushed himself, the mounting pressures never lessened, they only continued to pile up. He lost an entire evening, his healing powers taken to the limit, every inch of his skin crawling with pins and needles, his sunset scales feeling like they were being torn away, one by one. The light inside the Basilica was always that same dull blue and there were so many sounds, so many smells, so many eyes watching at every moment. All he could do was ball himself up and scream until somebody carried him somewhere quieter to recover.

Estuu only wanted to go back home, a distinct irritability becoming a permanent fixture as his schedule was interrupted. Maybe it was selfish for him to be concerned with the interruption to his life when others lives were coming to a miserable halt, but he wasn’t sure why it was his obligation to carry that burden. He just wanted somebody to tell him that he could leave, or else he was just going to run away, because he swore he hadn’t felt the sun in an eternity. He thought maybe he was at some awful tipping point, clinging helplessly to the ledge while everyone around just kept pushing and if he didn’t at least breathe fresh air some time soon, he was just going to let himself fall.

At least he was allowed to be alone once he reached the point of absolute meltdown. He’d been given his own chamber with extra luminous stone lamps and a soft mat to rest on, because the water was off-limits for now, thanks to this awful plague. It was incredibly unhelpful, considering he needed the calm, quiet, weightlessness of being submerged to recover from the overstimulation that came with having to use his magic so much. Part of him thought maybe it wasn’t such a big deal, because he could probably heal himself, should he pick up the Water Blight. Then again, the idea of the blackness twisting through his veins and insides as it did to so many others he’d seen, lying exposed and gruesome in their death throes; that idea was uncomfortable, disgusting, wretched. He tried not to think about it.

The only problem was that he couldn’t just not think about it. He was surrounded by the reality of this horrid plague and it had served to prod at old questions that had long been still in the back of the young Zora’s mind. His wandering thoughts distracted him from his reading, but he persisted nevertheless. ‘The Cursed Girl’ was spread open and propped up on the boy’s knees, his eyes
moving over the words in a comfortable pattern but the words did not filter through.

Instead, he was considering his own ideas, his understanding of the world in which he lived. Every concept that had ever bloomed in his young mind had been planted by the words and actions of others. He saw himself, a living interpretation of their society and culture, despite how they shunned him. For a very long time, he perceived and understood one plain and clear fact: some lives didn’t matter.

It was the harsh reality of nature. Zoras could consume plant-based foods from time to time without much harm to their health, but at the end of every day, they were carnivores. To live, they killed. Their survival hinged on the death of their prey items, and in that way, their own lives must have mattered more.

Among their own kind, it was clear to see that this same idea prevailed. Some were important, whereas others were not. His own brother often protected the life of the Prince at the risk of his own. Maybe most people didn’t put it in such simple terms, because to do so would be too grim for most to digest, but the truth was plain and simple. Every person who existed had an inherent value that was measured, and could be clearly weighed against the importance of others.

The people from the Undercity were the clearest example of all. They didn’t possess the blood of the Goddess, therefore they were less civilized, and less intelligent. They were more aggressive, more prone to unreasonable violence, they fell prey to destructive habits and self-destructive addictions at a much higher rate than those who lived above them. All of this was why they lived out of sight, crammed together into the pit underneath the grandeur of the Uppercity. That was apparently all they deserved and everyone knew and accepted this fact, whether or not they stated it aloud.

It wasn’t like anyone needed to make that statement. The Undercity Zora were made to exist literally beneath everyone else, and if that wasn’t clear enough, then nothing at all was clear in the world.

Everywhere Estuu went, this idea was reinforced again and again, even in his own home. He watched his older brother strive to prove himself worthy of the upperclass, struggling like his life depended on that acceptance, because it did. If Brivere couldn’t prove his worth, then his life didn’t matter. Brivere constantly pressured Estuu; study, work, improve.

‘You were born with a rare magical talent,’ Brivere would say. ‘Don’t take it for granted. Train it, nurture it, use it and it will be easy for you to prove to everybody else that you’re not cursed, you’re not a mistake.’

Apparently, their mother did something terrible when she created him; that’s what people said about him. Because of his mother’s mistakes, his life didn’t matter. He deserved the ridicule, he deserved to be an outcast, because he was cursed, a mistake, a monster.

But he didn’t believe that. No matter what others said, he never saw himself as lesser, he never believed that he deserved to be treated as he was. Unlike his brother, however, he didn’t see why he needed to prove his worth. He saw no reason to prove that he was not a monster like they said and if Brivere’s struggles had taught Estuu anything, it was that people’s minds never changed, even after they were shown otherwise.

The lives of select Zoras were inherently valued, from the moment that very life was given to them. Why was that? How were these things decided? Who decided them?

Estuu believed in his own value. It wasn’t something he needed to prove. It wasn’t something he needed to go beyond his means to communicate to those around him. The only flaw in this understanding, however, was that he often failed to apply it to others, beyond himself. He knew that
his people were wrong about him, but the people from the Undercity? They didn’t matter. Their lives weren’t of value.

Right?

It was an old dilemma, but here he was facing it yet again.

The fact that he’d been asked to save the lives of as many Undercity people as he could manage- that must have meant that they mattered, at least somewhat. They did have a purpose, after all; they supplied most of the food, raw materials and general labor that the Uppercity people relied on to maintain a certain standard of living.

So yes, they mattered in the same way prey mattered. Their lives were valuable for what the more important members of society got out of them. It seemed to be the same state of existence Estuu was trapped in; an apparent monster, but useful thanks to the magical talents he possessed.

Estuu took a deep breath and released it in a frustrated sigh, reading over the same page he’d been on for the last hour, yet again. He didn’t need to read it, because he’d read this book hundreds of times and knew the story by memory. Still, whenever circumstances in his life changed, much to his displeasure, he reflected on new ideas with the guidance of his idol- The Red Herring.

The Red Herring, who wrote ‘The Cursed Girl’ series was Estuu’s favorite author, by far. He always found so many words of wisdom and ideas to be considered hidden away in the texts. They had written several books, apart from ‘The Cursed Girl’ series, but this one remained Estuu’s favorite. Every time he reread it, his ever changing understanding of the world unveiled a new way for him to understand the concepts within the story.

‘Lorelei stood watching while her people dragged their hapless prisoner to the alter of punishment. Even beneath the shroud which covered the prisoner’s head and her mud spattered scales, Lorelei still recognized the enemy general. Her chest clenched as she paid witness, a vivid recollection of the other Zora replaying in her mind. The general, like Lorelei, had once stood against the darkness, only to be permeated by its corruption; after that fateful incident, she left her people without a word and marched for the forces of evil.’

‘Yet, after Lorelei used her curse to tear the tortured souls from the bodies of the general’s armies, she laid weak and powerless at the general’s feet, only for the apparently evil Zora to spare her life. Was it curiosity that was driving her now? A want for answers? Or was it that she understood the helplessness of the captured general, who was pressed harshly against the stone of the alter, with spears raised over her, ready to deal the killing blows.’

‘When Lorelei could spectate no longer, she rushed in, standing over the kneeled general with her hands held out, bidding the executioners to cease the pointless slaughter. “Stop this,” spoke the cursed Zora, her voice weak, her own flesh like autumn leaves, barely clinging to her bones. Maybe she didn’t have much longer to live, but the woman at her feet had allowed her to keep what little time she had left, even knowing that Lorelei could turn the tide of this war.’

“Of course the monster would stand up for one whose done monstrous things,” one of the Zoras who’d presided over the sentencing snidely commented, glaring up at the woman who’d saved him and everyone else present, only days prior to this moment.’

“You’re always so quick to call people monsters when you need to convince yourself that they aren’t people, Council Member,” Lorelei said, her voice wispy, the sound of it thin yet her words remained powerful. She bent lower to unfasten the bindings that held the general in place, removing the veil, only to catch a glimpse of the other Zora’s stern, calm features. Even facing her death, she
was so dignified and serious.’

‘Lorelei focused, turning her stare back to the council member as she straightened. “And you put yourself on a pedestal, to convince yourself that you’re more important than others. There’s no justice in this, so what do you truly gain from sentencing the general to death?”’

“Pardon me, young one,” came a quiet voice to interrupt Estuu’s reading. He peered up, spying a young but tired-looking Apostle in the doorway, waiting for his attention with her hands folded. When she noticed that his gaze had ventured upward, though not quite meeting her own eyes, she continued, “Have you recovered enough strength to use your magic? A matter of some import requires your attention.”

Gently, Estuu shut the book upon his knees and set it aside before clambering to his feet. The Apostle took his standing to mean that he had, indeed, recovered and began down one of the winding hallways. The younger Zora followed, though he was unsure if he had recovered enough to continue healing at the rate he had been before. Just the idea of being set back to that awful work had his tail twitching and flapping audibly against his back, but the Apostle didn’t appear to be paying him much heed.

Oddly, she did not lead him in the direction of the grand hall where the numerous sick had been lain across every inch of floor space and as soon as Estuu noticed that he was being taken somewhere else, he stilled his tail, yellow eyes gazing here and there in curiosity. He didn’t like not knowing what to expect, either, but something different could have possibly been better.

The room he was eventually led to appeared to have been a classroom at some point, probably one where the children of the merchant class went to be educated by a single Apostle, as opposed to the one on one sessions that children of Aristocracy received.

Now it had been repurposed to house other sick and injured Zoras, which Estuu immediately recognized as Knights of both the Goddess Order and Royal Order. Some wore the same armor as his older brother, which had the boy quickly scouring the crowd and thankfully not finding his sibling among these warriors. The majority, however, wore the elegant armor of the Goddess Knights, along with Basilica shawls and the crest of Farosh.

The boy’s quiet, observant gaze moved across the soldiers who’d been given their own space, separate from the innumerable masses from the Undercity who were stacked on top of one another. He couldn’t help but wonder what reason there was for this; it didn’t seem to be a matter of preventing the Water Blight’s spread, because from what Estuu could see, the majority of these soldiers were suffering from just that. There was also a comparatively small group who bore physical injuries, rather than the Water Blight.

A dusty pink Zora was already tending to those who were injured. She was bent over a young woman who appeared to be a Royal Knight; the young woman was being restrained while she screamed and cried, her legs a battered mess. She would probably never walk or swim ever again.

“Young healer,” somebody called out, apparently unable to use Estuu’s name. Most of these Apostles failed to and it often made him wonder if they actually didn’t know it, or if they were intentionally refusing, aware that he couldn’t utter a word of complaint.

The Apostle who’d called out to the boy approached him, while the one who’d fetched him went back to her own duties. This one was older, a man of a deep, dark brown coloration, and he placed his hand on Estuu’s shoulder in order to guide him over to where the unresponsive Knights laid. Estuu followed easily enough but he quickly sidestepped to escape the other Zora’s reach, his own hand reaching up to brush away the sensation of the man’s touch. He hated that; even a slight touch
always left him feeling like his scales were being rubbed backwards and peeled right off of his skin.

“Please,” the older Apostle bid, gesturing to the Knights who laid still, their scales pallid and lackluster, their breath shallow. “If you’ve recovered, please heal these brave soldiers.”

A pause; it was a mix of confusion and hesitation. Estuu’s golden eyes traced across each armored Knight, measuring their appearance against the numerous others he’d already seen and healed. These Zoras might have been unresponsive, but they surely had the better part of a day left before the symptoms became fatal. Others, back in the grand chamber, were likely right on the edge of death. Estuu had seen enough to know now the signs of a sure, oncoming demise. He’d watched the last moments of life drain from plenty of Undercity people, paying witness to the gruesome sight which marked the final stages of this terrible affliction.

Estuu would never be able to wipe it from his memory; the infected always awakened from their stupor moments before their death, as if the blight itself wanted them to be aware of all the pain and suffering to come. They always sat upright, confused and disoriented just before their pallor suddenly deepened into a dark blue, then black, the blood vessels just beneath their skin turning soft and spilling tainted blood into every inch of them. They coughed and heaved viscous, black fluid, weeping fearful tears that dried on their hollowed faces like charcoal dust, their bodies destroyed from the inside, yet fighting to survive and always failing.

It was easier to heal Zoras whose symptoms hadn’t progressed so far, true, but what concerned the young healer was this; why were they asking him to dedicate himself to these Knights now, when there were others who had been here longer, desperate and suffering, while waiting for him to recover and clinging to whatever wretched life remained in their blighted bodies. He gestured, because that was all he could do, pointing toward the door he’d come from, trying to show his confusion on his face, probably looking angry or afraid, or something else.

“What’s that?” the older Apostle asked, his eyes a vibrant, shining gold that contrasted against the stark brown of his scales. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

The Zora who’d led Estuu to this chamber glanced up from her work, her eyes moving across the smaller Zora in questioning and observation, before she spoke up in clarification. “He’s saying that he wasn’t finished healing the others, the ones from the Undercity.” Clearly, she was some sort of telepath; thank Hylia for that.

“Please, young one,” the brown Zora said, gesturing to the Knights again, as if to reiterate what he wanted. “Your healing powers are the only thing, so far, that can reverse the Water Blight. Your powers come from the grace of Hylia, who these Knights live in service to. They deserve her mercy now and only you can give it.”

Again, Estuu gestured to the door, then put his hands up in questioning. His face turned blank. He wasn’t going to bother trying to express something these people couldn’t understand anyway.

“Those people can wait,” the brown Zora answered bluntly. “These Knights need immediate assistance.”

Estuu did nothing in response, choosing to blankly occupy the space where he stood, not even gesturing any further. It was a show of frustration, repulsion, confusion, so many things that he needed to process. He gave no indication of his thoughts, nor his needs, choosing instead to turn away, to walk out, to leave the room and situation entirely, rather than blindly doing as he was told.

He could just pretend to be tired for a bit longer, if it came down to that; it wasn’t entirely untrue. What he really needed, however, was time to think.
Laflat arrived at Sidon’s chamber a second time each day at the ringing of the noon bell. Her timing was perfect as ever, her organization skills so utterly strict that she could even manage every little second with precision.

However, on this day, the Prince she served managed to put off her perfect timing. She found herself standing in his doorway while the noon bell rang, and she counted each sharp ping, waiting for him to acknowledge her so that she could enter. She could see him sitting at his desk, as he usually was at this time; he normally expected her at the sound of the bell and looked up immediately to greet her, however, today that was not the case.

She said nothing, at first, one toe claw tapping while she stared right at the bright red expanse of Sidon’s back and his magnificent tail draped down the middle. He was oddly still, and come to think of it, he didn’t seem to be writing anything, because his arms weren’t moving, and.. Wait, was he asleep?

Laflat cleared her throat, her own tail giving a flick of annoyance. “Highness?” she called out when the bell fell into silence, her own voice maybe a bit louder than she’d intended, though it had the desired result. Sidon straightened at the sound, his tail going rigid and he immediately glanced back to see Laflat, looking at her like he expected someone else, or he otherwise wasn’t sure who to expect.

“Oh, Laflat,” he said in relief, trying to coat his words in the usual exuberance, though it fell flat. Before he could say anything further, his sharp teeth gleamed in an unexpected yawn, and he batted his hand at the young woman to usher her inside.

“I brought your lunch, Sire,” the young secretary explained, carrying a tray of food as she did each day and she set it down upon the Prince’s desk. Glancing in the direction of Sidon’s unkept water mattress, Laflat quickly noticed the absence of the one responsible for the Prince’s current state of exhaustion. “Oh, where has the Hylian Champion gotten off to?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” the other Zora intoned, his voice devoid of expression. “Something apparently urgent came up and he has set off to see to.. a very important, mysterious matter.”

“In the condition he was in?” Laflat questioned, her voice shrill with outrage. She had already seen the Hylian Champion wrapped up in bandages earlier that morning, as well as the sleepless Prince, his face set in permanent worry, fretting over the other. “Preposterous.”

“Yes, preposterous indeed,” Sidon uttered, the sound of his tone still dull enough to be concerning. Laflat knew him well enough to recognize that, on the rare occasions when the Prince ceased any attempts at expression, it meant that he was emotionally overwhelmed.

Sidon set the papers before him aside, giving up at pretending to read over them in order to dolefully gaze out his window, across the shining valley of his homeland. “I hope he’s alright,” the red Zora breathed his words so softly, it was as if he hadn’t even intended to be heard. He gave his head a soft shake, his gaze quickly trailing back down to the surface of his desk and his hands bundled uselessly atop. “I wish there was something more I could do to aid him, rather than waiting and worrying while he faces the world, all alone. One day, he may simply disappear and I’ll never know what happened, or what became of him.”

“Well, Highness, he is a Knight of Hyrule.” The other Zora spoke up in an attempt to reassure, though she sounded uncertain of her own words. “I’m sure that.. If this urgent business was beyond his means, he surely would have reconsidered.”
“He is incredibly strong, that much is true,” the Prince stated, a momentary twinkle of admiration shining in the golden depths of his eyes before the weight of reality extinguished it. “Still, forethought doesn’t seem to be in his repertoire. It would be so much simpler, if he merely trusted me the way I do him. I know that there’s more going on that what he’ll admit and I want to give him space, but..” Sighing, Sidon trailed off, glancing up to catch sight of a rather helpless-looking Laflat. It was plainly obvious that she had little advice to truly help with his dilemma, so he dropped it, looking instead at the plate of food meant to be his lunch. “Laflat, is this.. Porgy?”

“Uh, yes, I’m so sorry, Highness,” she apologized. “I know you’ve mentioned disliking ocean fish.”

“Fish from salt water have.. An odd flavor,” he commented, staring at the meal as though it were something much more repulsive.

“I realize, however,” the young woman cleared her throat, attempting to quiet the nervous tone that had overcome her. “There are concerns that the Water Blight might have tainted our local resources, so you’re encouraged to dine on imported goods, for now.” As Laflat spoke, she attempted to remain cheerful, though it sounded odd and insincere. “I’ll just make sure they prepare some kind of bass for you next time.”

A deep sigh of guilt whispered from the Zora man, his broad shoulders softly slumping at the casual reminder that his people were dying, and here he was, being a spoiled prince, just as his dearest Knight had dared to point out, previous to now. “No, Laflat,” he uttered, “this is quite alright.”

Laflat had actively tried not to sour Sidon’s mood any further and for a single instant, her face fell into one palm in disappointment; she was doing a pretty pitiful job. Letting her hand slide away, she peered down once more at the sullen Zora who had pulled the tray before himself and began to pick at the fluffy, white flesh of the marinated fish served to him.

The young woman had known Sidon for quite some time and in all that time, she hadn’t seen him so very downhearted, at least not since Lady Mipha passed. She could recall the slow healing process which morphed a stubborn, angry youth into the jovial, charming young man he was now. Even amidst the trouble with the Divine Beast, Sidon had remained hopeful and determined, yet now he seemed to be regressing and what could Laflat do?

Tentative and gentle, she reached out to him, placing her hand upon his tail, carefully stroking the length of it in the hopes of comforting and reassuring. Sidon’s immediate reaction was calm and vague; he sat still, allowing the touch for an extended moment, as though he were helpless to resist it. However, he eventually recoiled, though it was gradual and hesitant, his tail curling to one side to escape the petting hand.

“Laflat, please,” he spoke up, “I’m not a child, you don’t need to comfort me like one.”

Straightening, Sidon set his utensil aside, the tiny item almost too small for the size of his hand and he handled it with appropriate gentleness so that it made barely a clink. “Can you just.. update me on the toll that this Water Blight is taking?”

“Are you sure, Sire?” the secretary asked, her hesitance plain to hear, though the very sound of it set Sidon’s mouth into a disapproving grimace. He had no time for this coddling and let out soft sigh of frustration.

“Laflat,” the Prince uttered sharply, trying not to be too terribly harsh, all too aware that his sleeplessness was probably exacerbating this mood he was in.

“As you wish,” the other Zora breathed in quiet resignation. “Last I checked, the losses are heaviest in the Undercity. The numbers haven’t quite reached the hundreds as of yet, but were it not for the
young healer, it would be much worse. There have also been several cases in the Uppercity, though the Basilica scholars have yet to discern whether the water was tainted from the beginning, or if it was transferred between the members of the middle class who share the communal cistern, then carried to the Undercity from there.”

“Hmm,” Sidon hummed, his usual hope turning bleak and dismal; he felt so helpless. “So then I suppose visiting the Basilica is still off-limits?”

“Yes, your Highness,” Laflat did her best to soften her answer, though she was quite sure gentle tones couldn’t lighten the burden of her words. “.you absolutely can’t risk going down there until we have a better idea of how this Water Blight is transmitted, and where it came from.”

“I can feel it, you know..” the Prince murmured, his head drooping low. He should have known that something was wrong when he began to sense the anguish of the sick and dying radiating up from the depths so far beneath him. Perhaps if he hadn’t closed himself off from it, he could have done something to assist before it became an epidemic. “. I knew it wasn’t merely the Champion Festival that was creating so much suffering, but I turned a blind eye to it, not wanting to allow myself to feel it.”

“Nobody ever thought the Water Blight could spread to Goddess-blooded Zoras,” Laflat stated grimly, her own fear unveiled. Because of her close contact with the Royal Family, she, too, had been restricted from entering the Basilica and the likelihood of her contracting the illness was low, yet still the fear remained. She pored herself into her work, as fine a distraction as any. “.we thought that Hylia would protect us.”

“Right,” the young man uttered in response, doing his best not to sound bitter, but rather dubious. His people were often devout in their faith, yet at times like these he found himself pondering notions that were perhaps dangerous. But could he fault their patron deities? Or was this the fault of his own people? Had they strayed from their virtues? Had they not done enough? His own magically enhanced senses were considered a gift from the Goddess, and he hadn’t heeded the warnings.

In the end, he decided it was better to take personal responsibility, rather than blaming a presence which seemed too absent to take any blame. “ Of course, it only became an emergency once it spread to the Uppercity,” Sidon almost scoffed, flicking his tail in annoyance. Images of his Undercity friends drifted to the forefront of his mind; the last time he’d joined their spear fishing party felt like an eternity ago. For all he knew now, they could all be dead. He was supposed to be a Prince of the people, yet for all his efforts, he felt to be falling ever shorter and shorter. “I should be down there. Offering comfort when my people are suffering is my job, my responsibility.”

“I understand that you feel responsible, Highness, but you can’t put yourself at risk,” Laflat cooed, her tone somber, and she placed her hand upon the Prince’s shoulder, hoping that he would accept her reassurances this time. “The people understand.”

The troubled Prince let out another sigh, sliding his meal aside for now. Maybe he would summon the strength to consume the unpalatable food later. For now, he was too frustrated to bother, his stomach in a hundred worried knots. Instead he fingered through the reports he’d received earlier.

“Laflat, some of the documents must have gotten misplaced,” he intoned. “I didn’t see Brivere’s report in the stack that you delivered this morning.”

“Oh no, Highness,” Laflat immediately shook her head; she was far too much of a perfectionist to have lost anything. “As busy as the First Knight and the Guard Captain were this morning, they had their reports well prepared and ready.”

“Are you certain that you didn’t drop some of it?” Sidon asked, turning a confused glance to the
young woman by his side.

“I am quite sure.”

“That’s very odd,” the Prince murmured, searching through the stack of papers again, taking each sheet out one at a time and looking over them in search of his Knight’s work. “Brivere always completes his reports ahead of schedule. I suppose I’ll have to check with him.”

“I can look into it, if you wish,” Laflat offered.

“That’s alright,” Sidon attempted to remain polite as he brushed off the offer. He’d been feeling too useless to allow the overworked secretary to check on his friends for him. “This is at least one thing I can accomplish on my own, but thank you. You may go, Laflat.”

Concentrated electroreceptive searches were often an effective means for Sidon to search the entirety of his homeland from the comfort of his personal quarters. More than once he’d located his wayward Hylian, even at times when Link randomly ended up on top of mountains that surrounded the Domain. So, when Sidon found himself struggling to pinpoint his Knight, he considered it reason enough to physically search.

The fact that Brivere hadn’t visited the training halls of the barracks beneath the castle was unusual enough, on top of his late reports. As much as the Prince wished to deny it, with everything that happened over the previous evening, something wasn’t right.

He considered that Brivere may have possibly remained behind at Fort Boko to assist with the cleanup efforts, but that seemed unlikely, knowing that Estuu was hard at work within the Basilica halls. Brivere was far too protective to be away from his younger sibling for very long.

Sidon had visited his Knight’s home on only two occasions. The first time he showed up uninvited, leaving the golden Zora in a panicked fluster, or as close as Brivere got to such a state, anyway. It was soon after Brivere won the tourney and the position as Sidon’s personal Knight, and the Prince simply wished to know him better, his friendliness perhaps a bit forceful. The Knight put a great, big effort into preparing dinner for the surprise guest, which Sidon only picked at, of course. Sidon remembered, even Estuu seemed perplexed by his unexpected presence, because the quiet boy kept staring when he thought the Prince wasn’t paying attention.

The second time was much more natural, at least. Brivere always managed to be far more humble than necessary, thanking Sidon over and over, despite how pretentious the Prince was at the time, decidedly having his own food delivered to the golden Zora’s residence for the visit. He swore up and down that it wasn’t because his tastes were too particular. Rather, he simply wanted to treat his new friends to a show of hospitality; it wasn’t lying if his excuses were as true as the facts he was attempting to cover up.

The oddest part of the friendship was that Estuu became comfortable with the Prince much more quickly than his uptight sibling. By the end of that second evening, the young healer had at least ten books laid out before the Prince, his small hands moving hastily between each of them in attempts to show Sidon all of his favorite parts. Brivere was utterly perplexed just to see his reserved and anti-social sibling have a rare moment of warmth and acceptance, but Sidon demystified it all by explaining that his magical talents made it much easier for him to understand and relate to Estuu. Actually, Estuu even somewhat reminded the Prince of his own, younger self.

Apparently, winning over Estuu was also the key to befriending Brivere, because the golden Knight
began to open up to Sidon soon after that evening.

Suffice to say, the Prince remembered precisely where Brivere lived and how to get there, his steps only quickening when he at last felt the weak trace of Brivere’s energy signal. Sidon walked through the entryway without even announcing himself, finding the small home to be darkened, the window coverings drawn and the luminous stone lamps covered.

It was fairly strange, though it was possible that Brivere was just sleeping, as the events of the previous evening would have set his sleeping schedule askew; Sidon dearly hoped that turned out to be the explanation. Within three tiny clicks of his webbed toes against the stone, a voice called out to him, dashing his previous assumptions.

“Stop,” came Brivere’s stern, impassive tone, almost as normal as could be, apart from the fact that his voice sounded much weaker than usual. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Yet, despite the warning, Sidon edged ever nearer, his pupils widening until they were almost completely round, searching the dimly lit abode for his friend and Knight. The other Zora was nowhere immediately in sight and Sidon peered from the soft glow of the tiny cistern the brothers typically shared, across the humble living space, taking a few more measured steps to eventually locate the golden Zora huddled in one corner, looking more like a Rito in a nest of water cushions and blankets.

As Sidon suspected, Brivere was indeed attempting to sleep, though the reason for his dwindling energy signature was readily apparent, upon one look at him. The Prince took another wary step closer while he gazed at his friend in sudden horror, attempting to conceal the intensity of his concern, though he was doubtful of his success.

“Brivere..” He breathed his friend’s name as delicately as he could manage, like it was some terrible secret he was forbidden to utter. More accurately, words suddenly failed the Prince, his tongue an awful weight, his throat tied shut with both fear and worry that laced together there in impossible knots.

Sidon knew that Brivere had spoken true; indeed, he shouldn’t have been here and the reason for that was plain to see, yet even so, he continued to approach, one cautious step at a time, his heart too heavy for him to walk away now.

“Stop!” the Knight hissed, the effort of his voice’s volume causing his chest to rise and fall in breathless desperation, expending energy that he did not have. “Are you mad?”

With shining, fearful eyes, Sidon took in the sight of Brivere; his scales were a pale, dingy yellow, touched with smoke and ash, his features shadowed with the blue-black of more than just combat bruises, no, that’s not what this was.

“You have it,” Sidon muttered, each word a soft tremble, “the Water Blight.”

Brivere’s head moved so very slightly, the bones of his neck like something fused and creaking, yet still his confirmation was clear enough. He closed his eyes, resting his head against the wall at his back so that the dark hue at the corners of his eyes became only more prominent. “I know,” he said, weak and aching but somehow resigned. “I suspected as much when I began to feel ill the previous evening, but I did everything I could to deny it. If I’m talented at anything, it’s the act of living in denial.”

The Prince’s toeclaws clicked against the floor when he took another step nearer, wanting only to comfort his dear friend, all while knowing that he could do nothing to help, as usual. The guilt and
helplessness was mounting, thickening into something impossible to stomach or digest. This was his constant reality, the sheer incapability to prevent the suffering of those around him, not for his friend, his lover, his people, his sister...

“Stay away!” Brivere reiterated, opening his eyes and kicking one foot out from underneath his blankets, frustrated and pleading, regardless of the toll the effort took on him. “I didn’t spend all these years protecting you, just to be the one who puts you in your funeral pyre. Just leave now.”

“I’ll bring Estuu,” Sidon said, remembering Laflat mention that his healing capabilities had been effective against the Water Blight. Brivere had been away since the previous afternoon, and likely hadn’t heard of his sibling’s success. “His powers are strong enough to cure the illness. He’s saved many lives. You’re going to be so proud of him, Brivere..”

The deathly Zora just scoffed, his darkened eyes glazed and distant. “He’d probably be happier with me gone.”

“What?” the Prince uttered in confusion. “My friend, that is simply not so.”

“People always said that Estuu was my mother’s greatest mistake, a cursed child, but that has never been true,” the Knight rambled, each word a terrible effort, yet if ever he needed to give these awful thoughts a voice, now was the time. “It was me. I was her mistake.”

“What ever are you talking about?” Unable to approach, Sidon kneeled down, lowering himself to his knees in order to be eye-level with his ailing friend. He peered across the small gap that remained between them, offering a warm, compassionate gaze in place of the physical comfort he was unable to give. And despite years of learning how to keep his inner emotions untainted, he let down all of his defenses, allowing every ounce of the golden Zora’s shame and contempt to wriggle into his heart and tighten around it.

“I was my mother’s mistake, not Estuu,” Brivere said, every word a weight he’d been carrying for as long as he could remember. He shook his head, the movement stiff and incomplete. “She married my father on the battlefield, knowing that either or both of them could die. She didn’t think it through. She didn’t consider the future at all. She could have had a life beyond that battle, if they hadn’t become bound and created me in their rush of infatuation..”

The golden Zora glared at the empty air before himself, his face wrinkling in bitterness. “..and what’s worse, my father knew what would happen. He knew that being soul bound to my mother and creating me would ruin her life and ultimately lead to her death, but he chose to do it anyway. He knew that he was going to die within hours of that marriage and he did it anyway. He was nothing but a selfish bastard and all I’ve ever been is the result of his selfishness and my mother’s lovesick foolishness..”

Leaning back once more and releasing whatever painful tension he was carrying in his tightened shoulders, the Knight let out a defeated sigh. Nothing he’d ever done, in all of his time had mattered. Regardless of how he tried and despite his numbered successes, he failed too many times to change anyone’s mind. “It’s fitting that I should be erased from the world in this way, because I never belonged. I never should have existed. It’s only that much more clear when you consider not one, single person in all the world wants me around. Not one person truly cares about me.”

“Don’t you dare say such a thing,” Sidon snapped, his sharp teeth glimmering when they were exposed, even in the low light. His dark lids narrowed, the yellow gleam of his eyes intensifying at the point that he refused to listen any further. “I won’t hear such nonsense from you. For you to utter such a thing would mean that you believe our friendship to be nothing but a lie.”
“Wasn’t it?” Brivere responded without any hesitation, though the blunt simplicity of his statement left Sidon gasping and wide-eyed.

“You don’t mean that,” the Prince muttered, his eyes shining and glassy, his friend’s words like a blow to the chest that bent him inward and left him momentarily breathless. He glanced aside, trying to hide the hurt that was surely written on his face. “You don’t mean any of this. You’re only saying these awful things because you’re suffering. I’ll locate Estuu and I’ll bring him back to take care of you. Then we can talk.”

Despite everything, Brivere let out a bitter chuckle, his body trembling in pain and woeful frustration. “Why not just tell the truth, Sidon? I don’t need any more of your sweet, gentle lies to give me comfort. Not now.” The ailing Zora trailed off, taking a deep breath. “I should have realized sooner what was really going on between us. But it’s been so long since somebody sincerely cared about me, I didn’t remember it well enough to recognize somebody faking it. I was desperate, so that much was my fault, but why not just tell the truth now? Please.”

“The truth is,” Sidon began, climbing slowly to his feet and straightening. His voice was devoid of feeling or expression, though the sound resonated from somewhere deep in his chest, the effort to respond a heavy, burdensome thing. “The truth is that you believe that you’re going to die, that you have nothing left to lose, and you have so much anger bottled up from years of pretending that you feel nothing, so you’re just... letting it all out now. But what you believe and what is true are not one and the same. The truth is that I do, sincerely, care about you, that we were, indeed, friends, and that I’m... very sorry that you feel the way you do.”

When Sidon finished speaking, a tense silence fell between the two Zoras and despite the weight of the Prince’s words, Brivere could only clench his teeth in utter disbelief. He and the Prince both wore a liar’s mask; Sidon pretended to feel every wonderful thing, while feeling little on his own. Brivere pretended to feel nothing, while feeling too many, awful things. He thought, maybe, just once. They could take off those masks.

He must have been wrong to assume so much.

“The two of you deserve each other, I suppose,” he uttered at last, having not wanted to say such things, nor make it so plain where all this pain and insult was coming from, but he couldn’t hide it any longer. Sidon had already read his mind to form his last rebuttal, so what difference did it make?

“What?” Sidon questioned, hollow and breaking, an empty vessel for all the spite being spilled into him.

“You’re just like they were,” Brivere bleakly spoke. “He’s too selfish to keep himself from ruining your life and you’re too foolish to know better. You were willing to wait for him, to give him every possible chance, no matter how he made you suffer along the way. But you just kept me on your shelf, your spare, your backup. You placed me aside, you left me waiting while you chased him, your first choice. Do you know how that feels?”

“I suppose I do now,” Sidon breathed in dismay. He did know; he’d taken it into himself and allowed it to permeate him. It was sharp, and angry, indignant and heart-broken and hopeless. It was like tiny shards of glass cutting him slowly from the inside and bleeding him, bit by bit. “At least it’s clear that my weakness for self-loathing men is to be... my eternal curse.”

Turning away, the Zora Prince walked slowly back to the door he’d come from, pausing on the threshold just long enough to say, “I’ll send for Estuu,” before he walked away.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

For some, the possibility of healing could be offered only by the use of miraculous magic. For others, it would come in the form of comforting affection, and gentle understanding. For yet others, healing was a distant hope, and the only solace that could be afforded to them was found within a bottle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They tried to turn away the one carrying the message; it wasn’t the first time. This time, however, Estuu actually was aware enough to intervene. Being given an excuse to leave the Basilica was something he might have been thankful for, if not for the fact that there was apparently an emergency involving his brother.

Where Estuu was concerned, feeling something like fear was the same as acknowledging any given thing which existed in the background of the big picture. There was not much that truly frightened him, or maybe it was better to say that instances which might frighten others tended to produce a different set of emotional responses in the young Zora. His brother often referred to this as a simple failure to recognize that poorly thought out actions held consequences, but Brivere was the type to always be so tied up with the past and future, he rarely lived in the present.

Estuu only lived in the present, typically. And presently, he was actually somewhat afraid. Maybe nervous was a better word? In this case, events in the past actually did offer concern for what the future could hold, which was perhaps why he often tried to prevent himself from reflection. Having to remember the image of his own mother, pale and motionless, bobbing just at the surface of the cistern water; that was too much. Fearing that the same thing could happen again; far too much.

The boy’s expression was placid and plain, despite how his heart thumped in an effort to escape through the front of his chest. It felt to be the only part of him capable of movement when he reached his home and laid eyes on his sibling, huddled helplessly in one corner, blighted and unmoving. He hesitated, genuinely afraid, only outwardly calm.

He hadn’t hesitated for a moment when he found his mother, her life like some worthless item, surrendered by her own hand. Estuu lunged to capture it, naive enough to believe it was something he could preserve. He leapt into the water alongside his lifeless mother, with Brivere only moments behind him, to pull him back to safety. Thanks to the young Zora’s clinging, his older brother was forced to pull both of their bodies from the poisoned water, his actions vacant and automatic, despite being absolutely desperate.

This time, the past held Estuu still, if only for a few tense moments. Once he’d taken the first step to close the distance between himself and his ailing sibling, the others came with ease. The boy kneeled before his older brother, reaching out to place one hand upon Brivere’s shoulder and giving him a gentle shake.

Estuu assumed that Brivere had perhaps passed into the phase of unconsciousness which would not lift until death was imminent, yet to his relief, it was not so. The golden Zora stirred easily enough
when Estuu disturbed him, evidently exhausted on top of the fatigue brought on by the illness. That was fine, because at least it meant that the Water Blight hadn’t progressed too far as of yet, and maybe Estuu wouldn’t have much difficulty healing his brother.

The boy rubbed his hands together, trying to chase away the strange aching numbness that still lingered in his palms from the overuse of his magic. The more he overused the skill, the harder it became to use it normally afterward. Still, he had little choice now and for once, he would be the one forcing himself. He brought his hands out, hovering them near his elder sibling’s chest until they burst with bright, blue light. Estuu’s tail flicked and curled from side to side while he attempted to heal the other Zora, the sensation produced by the magic a terrible thing to endure, though difficult to explain. It never hurt at first, but the feeling was similar to being tickled, which most considered impossible to tolerate and squirmed away from instinctively. As Estuu pushed, the annoyance turned uncomfortable, a prickling spreading across his palms, into his wrists, up his arms. It was comparable to when one’s limbs were asleep, yet the young Zora was constantly forced to endure this ‘gift’ because it was important and special and it gave him visible worth among his people. He hated it.

He hated it, but not now. What he hated now was his people’s constant pressure for him to use it, so that his senses couldn’t endure anymore of the torment and his energy reserves were drained at a time when he needed to use it, he wanted to use it. The light began to flicker and dim, and he tried to push himself, his tail flapping violently against his back, his lower lip clenched between the sharp edges of his teeth.

“Stop,” came the weak sound of Brivere’s voice, a careful hand drawing upward to touch Estuu’s ever so delicately while pushing him away, rejecting the younger Zora’s attempts to heal him.

But why? Estuu could only internally question his brother’s motivations, a small wrinkle of confusion finding its way to his face, something so subtle that anybody else would fail to see it. The young Zora’s yellow eyes drifted higher, his gaze tracing the tight line of his brother’s mouth, the soft skin at the base of his pointed brow, the dark shades barely veiled beneath the pallor of his scales, but not his eyes. He could do this. He could restore Brivere to health, he could chase the darkness of this awful plague away, as though it never existed. Maybe his energy was low, but if he pushed, he could do it; he had to.

Yet Brivere seemingly didn’t wish for Estuu to try. Why? The only answer that Estuu could guess at was not something the boy wanted to consider, but the notion was forcefully pushed to the front of his unconsenting mind, regardless. Brivere’s life had always been something he fought to prove had value and Estuu would have thought by those actions, Brivere considered it to be something worth living. Had those around him somehow forced him to believe otherwise? Was he, like their mother, taking his life in hand like a stone and casting it to the depths, watching it sink into the void? Even worse.. If Estuu thought about it hard enough, he saw himself to be the clear and defined cause of his own mother’s suffering, the very cause behind her lost will to survive; it was his fault that she was gone, and for that, yes.. He was a monster.

In his desperation, all focus began to crumble, everything in him quaking, his nerves drawn taut and ready to snap back. It was too much.

“Would you even shed a single tear for me?” Brivere asked, his voice dark and low, the sound drawing Estuu out of his own internal static, back to some kind of focus.

Why did Brivere want to know that? Was it because he remembered his younger sibling’s demeanor, when they lost their mother? Estuu refused to leave their mother’s side and he awakened a power he hadn’t known he possessed, but he did not cry. He felt all the pain on the inside, unable to communicate it, not with words or expression. But he felt it.
The waterfall that poured down into their cistern was trickling, a steady echo; it was hard to think. Was Brivere really just trying to ask if Estuu cared? How could the boy even answer that? He didn’t know. He thought his attempts to heal his older brother would have been clear enough. He tried again, splaying his fingers before his brother’s pale form, the light of his magic dull and rosy violet under the skin of his palms, unable to reach any further, nor vibrantly shine with bright blue light as it should have. Was Estuu really so tired? Or were his nerves impeding him now? That never happened. How could it happen now that using this power was important?

Brivere just brushed the younger Zora’s hands away again, a relenting sigh coming from him. “You don’t have the strength to heal at the moment,” the golden Zora uttered, his scales shining with cold sweat, his darkened gums apparent when he spoke. Even his gills were unconsciously pumping in his desperation, but the normally pink flesh underneath had turned dark as well.

“Just sleep for now,” the older Zora whispered, unable to spare breath enough to speak very much. “I’ll survive a while longer.”

Maybe he still had time, but he would be suffering every moment. Even worse, did he really have time enough for Estuu to recover from this exhaustion? Wouldn’t Brivere’s worsening condition only make it that much more difficult for the younger Zora to restore? Could he be lying? Was this Brivere’s way of asking Estuu to turn aside while he faded away?

Estuu wasn’t that naive any longer. Regardless, he could not heal his sibling at this very moment and he knew as much. Instead, he tugged his waterproof rucksack from his back, tiny droplets of water falling free from the leather when the boy opened the flap and drew forth the book that he so often turned to. His hands were steady, even if he was sick and trembling somewhere on the inside and he turned to tuck himself next to his brother, close but not quite touching. Opening the thick novel somewhere near the end, the young Zora flipped through the pages with care, just hoping his elder was aware enough to read the words when he held the book up to him.

‘Lorelei reached out, taking the stern general’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I don’t care about the past. I don’t care what anyone else says,” the sickly, pale Zora spoke, perhaps unable to stand for very much longer, unless the other woman remained by her side. “You matter to me, so none of that matters at all.”’

Despite everything, a soft titter was elicited from the older Zora, though the emotions of his response were otherwise pensive and inward. “Lorelei and General Kita have a romantic relationship, so the quote isn’t the most appropriate,” Brivere pointed out, certain that his brother never quite understood why the two Zoras from the story had such a strong ‘friendship’, “...but thank you.”

Brivere reached out, his hand searching for the younger boy’s but stopping just before making contact. Estuu hated to be touched and he’d always recoiled, no matter the situation. This time, however, the boy made the final effort to close the space between them, tucking his hand into the older Zora’s, a gesture of reassurance.

The golden Zora gave a nod, like unspoken acceptance, then he offered his own words of comfort to his doubtful sibling. “I promise, I’ll still be right here... So rest.”

In the end, being able to come home was all that Estuu had really wanted, and Brivere was undoubtedly a part of that. Not moving from his place at his older brother’s side, Estuu lowered himself down upon the water cushions that Brivere was hoarding, finding a soft place lay his head and sleep.
Apart from the threats he’d received from the Yiga Clan, the possibility that they could follow him wherever he went and learning that the bizarre immortality he possessed was something others knew about but apparently couldn’t speak of, Link felt that he’d had a pretty successful day.

It was good to know that the same merciless brutality which he turned on his enemies could be used on his so-called allies to even greater effect. Once he was done being proud of himself for one-upping Purah, he would allow himself to feel more concerned about the Yiga clansmen and their knowledge of the fact that he was holed up in Zora’s Domain. Even if they did know he was here, they probably didn’t know about his relationship with heavily guarded royalty.

Actually, he needed to ask Sidon to increase his security, just to be safe. Link would just need to keep that in mind.

It was evening by the time he returned, the days seeming to grow shorter and shorter as summer steadily began to wane. The air was still warm and fresh with the scent of water hanging heavily. The water levels had actually gone down significantly over the period of time that passed between Link ceasing the neverending rain and now.

The Hylian was casually greeted by the guards who stood before the entryway to Sidon’s tower and while he granted them a tiny wave on his way past, he became even more doubtless of the need for additional security. He supposed if he wanted to know that the Zora Prince was safe, he’d would have to endure a bit more scrutiny, after all, they had no way of knowing if he was who he appeared to be. Then again, maybe he was over-thinking it..

Link strut his way into the Prince’s chambers to find the luminous stone lamps already covered, but enough of the pale, blue light remained that Link immediately noticed Sidon perched at the edge of his water mattress. “I brought your sword back,” he spoke up, hoping to gain the Zora’s attention. He saw Sidon’s head turn slightly at the sound of his voice, a soft but sharp inhale coming from him in reaction.

It wasn’t quite the welcome he was expecting, but he assumed that Sidon was tired, now that he was aware that such a thing was possible, that is. Link carefully returned the sword, which belonged to his Zora lover, to the same surface where his various adornments had been cast aside and neatly arranged.

“I’m glad to see that you’ve returned so soon,” Sidon at last spoke, his voice suddenly something fragile. “I didn’t expect it, but I’m glad, nonetheless.”

“I’m sorry I went off in such a hurry,” Link breathed, turning back in the direction of where Sidon was resting with his back to the Hylian, his head held much lower than what felt characteristic of him. He must have been fraught with worry over Link, after the Hylian showed up last night on death’s doorstep. When Link attempted to explain, each word held the weight of his regret. “..I thought lives were at stake, so I didn’t have time to explain”

Sidon didn’t move at all when the Champion uttered his excuse, so Link ventured nearer, until he was poised at the edge of the bed, just across from the Zora. His shoulders moved in an unconscious shrug, his eyes trailing downward and blindly tracing across the fine details of the blankets and numerous pillows. Link swept a hand through his messy hair, not at all used to the way it felt, now short in the back. “You’ll be glad to hear that the situation wasn’t quite as bad as I’d assumed,” he tried to reassure. “Actually, it was a pretty successful day. I found one of the people responsible for my injuries just hiding in plain sight, then I got some answers that I really needed from someone who previously wouldn’t tell me what I needed to know.”
His respawning power wasn’t the kind of thing that ever left his mind, however, the idea of sharing it with Sidon had somewhat drifted out of consideration. The more Link actually cared about the Prince and his opinions, the harder it became to even consider uttering such unbelievable information.

“About the answers I received,” Link began, his chest aching, uncertain whether to feel trepidation or relief. He’d wanted to confide in the Zora for such a long time, his words were begging to be spoken. “Maybe that’s something we should talk about, actually.. There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you, but.. I wasn’t sure how to explain. I just thought you would assume I was crazy. Now that I have confirmation that I’m not, in fact, crazy, I feel a bit more confident talking about it.. I think.”

In Sidon’s lingering silence, Link began to hesitate. The Zora was likely just remaining quiet in attentiveness, but it was difficult to feel that way when he wasn’t even looking up. Link raised his head, blue eyes staring across the space between them in questioning, a rush of doubt passing through him. Even if Sidon believed him, in the end, what if the information was just.. Too much for him? What if the knowledge that Link had died and been resurrected numerous times suddenly made him seem a bit too damaged for a Prince, of all people, to desire?

No- with all they’d been through, that simply wasn’t possible. Sidon trusted him, Link knew that much. He needed to believe in that, in the fact that their friendship wasn’t something that could be so easily broken.

“Go on, my dear friend,” the Prince quietly spoke when Link hesitated, something about his tone less than genuine. Link’s ears twitched at the sound of it, feeling as though it was reminiscent of the night they met and the forced friendliness the Zora used as a means of manipulation. Was he masking something now, as well?

Something was very wrong and Link remained silent when he noticed it, inwardly questioning; was it his doing? Had he put Sidon into this state of melancholy by hurrying off as he did? The Hylian remembered the Prince mentioning his own tendency to conceal his problems and negative emotions, so Link felt sure that further prying and attention was now completely necessary.

“It can wait,” Link replied, crawling up onto the water mattress and it wobbled softly underneath his weight. He kicked off his shoes and dropped the rest of his gear and belongings haphazardly to the floor before he approached the Zora, moving across the bed on his knees. “Something’s bothering you, Sidon. If it’s my fault, I’m sorry. I’m sorry about last night and this morning.”

“I told you that you had nothing to apologize for,” the Prince replied easily enough, glancing back now that the Hylian waited just within reach. “You aren’t at fault for the unexpected occurrences of this dangerous world we live in. I understand and I don’t mean to be so lackluster about your return. I am truly grateful that you’ve returned safely, but I’m very tired as well.”

“No, I’ve seen you tired. I know that you’re still capable of maintaining your showy behavior, even so,” Link said with a shake of his head.

“You don’t think that I am simply close enough to you, now, that I feel no need to behave in such a way?” asked the Prince, a weak attempt to maintain the concealment of his emotional weakness.

“I think something is wrong,” the Hylian bluntly stated, though his voice held concern. “And you’re trying to keep it to yourself. You don’t need to.” Link reached out, straightening himself in order to better reach the lofty height which was Sidon’s shoulder with a comforting touch. “You don’t need to feel nothing in order to be strong- remember?”
A soft grunt of discomfort and resistance came from the Zora, his hands tightening into fists, his sharp fingerscales pin-pricking the soft, white flesh of his palms. He fought an inner struggle, one that he was all too aware of, one that he knew had clear and obvious answers, yet it wasn’t so easy to simply ignore years and years of being conditioned to think and act only one way. He had confessed his own difficulties with being seen as weak and he’d admitted that he wished for a friend, or lover, to console his emotional woes on equal terms.

But the young, angry child inside of him still remembered screaming and crying while Mipha’s funeral pyre was lit, burning for the sake of show, knowing that her body was still locked inside the very place where she met her end. He could recall the inconsolable show he made of that day, believing that Mipha would never find peace until her ashes were returned to the water, accosting anyone he had to in order to denounce the service, to demand that his sister’s body be retrieved.

And he remembered, too, that it was Muzu who lost all patience with him that day. He took the boy aside, with Sidon struggling all the while; the young Prince even bit the elder in his indignation, but Muzu persisted. The older man somehow succeeded in stilling Sidon’s resistance, holding the boy’s tear-stained face in one hand and forcing eye contact. He peered down at the foolish Prince with a hard, stern glare, his words just as sharp and lined with the pain of Mipha’s loss as he lectured.

“You will cease this unbecoming behavior immediately,” Muzu hissed. “The time for this childishness has come to an end. There isn’t one Zora in the entire Sovereign who isn’t grief stricken and bitter over the loss of Lady Mipha, but you of all people must bear these emotions now and do so gracefully.” The older man’s hand fell away in Sidon’s silence, his voice trembling and mournful. “You are now the one and only heir to the throne, destined to lead our people and it is for those very people that you must be strong now and always. You are to be King and a King cannot show weakness before his people. Understand?”

“Sidon?” Link spoke the Prince’s name in questioning, when he said nothing at all. The Hylian supposed that it wasn’t his place to push, but nothing had changed and he was still dreadful at offering comfort. He didn’t know what was best or what Sidon truly needed. “We don’t have to talk, if you don’t want to. I’m here, for whatever you need.”

The still that had fallen over the Zora was cast away like a concealing layer, leaving his skin exposed and cold, but he turned to his dear lover anyway, crawling up onto the mattress and slowly shifting nearer, so that he could very gently take the Hylian into his arms. Link’s body was something small to hold, but he felt warm and strong despite how tiny he was and he did not flinch nor make one move to reject the touch, instead nestling himself into it, welcoming it, returning it.

“My people are suffering, dying from a terrible plague,” the Prince spoke softly, the words themselves feeling untrue, like a bad dream he was waiting to wake up from. “Even without these dreadful powers, being responsible for all of their lives and failing them; it’s profoundly disheartening. Being able to feel their suffering and fear and anguish just makes it all the worse, but I can’t will myself to block it out any longer. I’m already helpless to aid or comfort them. I can’t turn a blind eye to their plight. Acknowledging it is the least and most I can do right now.”

“I heard something about this,” Link nodded in confirmation, perched upon the Zora’s thighs while entwined in his careful grasp. He couldn’t say a single thing to lighten the burden of what Sidon was facing, so he merely tried to confirm his understanding of the situation. “A friend of mine has fallen ill as well. His wife, another friend of mine, mentioned that people were dying. She was very upset and afraid. But other than what she told me, I don’t know much else.”

“In truth, neither do I,” Sidon said, the usual purr of his voice now a pained thing, tight in his throat. “We don’t fully understand this plague as of yet, though our scholars are doing what they can. Just
working out the cause or the source of it would be helpful, but as far as I know, we’ve yet to do so. All I truly know or can think about is the toll it’s taking; even Brivere has been infected and I’m.. desperately worried for him. I’ve even begun to question if it’s possible that this ailment can alter the way people behave.”

“What do you mean?” Link peered upward in concern, his eyes reflective and shining in the low light. “Did something happen between the two of you?”

An obvious and immediate problem was presented to Sidon while his mouth opened to speak a reply, then slowly shut when he reconsidered. He’d confided in Brivere once in regards to Link; after his first intimate experience with the Hylian and the awkward ending, he’d sought validation for his emotional distress, though he was careful not to mention who his partner had been. Still, Brivere was an observant and over-thinking sort and had probably filled in the blanks. No, Sidon was sure that he had and the extremely protective Zora’s automatic dislike toward Link was proof enough.

It only further confirmed that Sidon had no business speaking his emotional burdens and allowing them to become the concerns of others, but.. He needed to get it off of his chest, he needed to put his own thoughts and feelings in order, and he needed help to do so.

“I doubt you are aware, but Brivere has always been a bit of an outcast. The position he now holds is not one he obtained with ease. Actually, it was outside of our typical procedures, but at the time a warrior was to be selected to become my personal Knight and Captain of the Knights who serve me. It was by my request, no, my demand, that the position would be available to any warrior of Zora’s Domain, regardless of their station or bloodline. To test their skill, a tournay was held and the winner would be granted the position. Brivere was..” Sidon paused, a pang of guilt echoing down from his chest and knotting in his middle. “I really shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“It’s alright. I have something of an idea already,” Link spoke up, clarifying his uncertainty. “I thought Estuu was the social outcast of the two of them and that Brivere was just another noble.”

“He’s not a noble at all,” Sidon corrected. “His brother has also suffered from social stigma, however, Estuu is considered a noble, whereas Brivere is not. Anything further than that, I’m afraid it’s not my place to explain.”

“That’s fine,” the Hylian said, not even bothering to be bitter, despite the fact that he simply did not like the golden Zora. “..but keep talking. If it lets you feel even a bit better to talk about what happened, then I want to listen.”

Sidon’s chest expanded softly while he inhaled, then let the breath go, in resignation. “All I mean to say is that he’s led a difficult life,” he began. “He learned to hide away all of his emotions and vulnerabilities as a result of the ridicule that often followed him. It was his way of defending himself. I thought I understood the necessity to do so, so I never asked him to break the habit. I allowed him to stifle himself, because honestly, who was I to criticize?” The Zora paused, his pupils forming wide, glassy circles that were gazing and distant. “So then.. Is it my fault? I knew and understood that he was harming himself by living like this, but I did nothing..”

“It’s not your fault.” Link still wasn’t even sure what happened, but he didn’t need to know any more in order answer this question; he had his own experience to go on. “You always think that it’s your job to fix the problems of others, but it’s not. You shouldn’t feel guilty for not shouldering the burdens of everyone around you.”

“But with this magic that I possess, I should be doing more.” Sidon shook his head, his forefins softly swaying with his movement. “I should be making better use of it.”
“I respect the fact that you don’t overly insert yourself into the private matters of others, just because you have the ability to do so.” The Hylian offered the most truthful reassurance he had. As far as he knew, Sidon always made patient attempts to understand and console him, without guiltlessly invading his mind. Also, despite that the Zora could often sense Link’s emotional turmoil, he never pushed the Hylian for answers or explanations. The distance Sidon allowed was what made their relationship so comfortable, at first. “You freely offered friendship and support, without any pressure. You allowed me to come around, at my own pace.. I’m guessing that Brivere must have opened up, too, just not in a good way.”

“Yes well, he apparently believes that our friendship was a farce and that I never cared for him at all,” Sidon snapped, almost without thought. It appeared as though speaking these words physically hurt him, yet they also couldn’t be held inside any longer without equal or worse suffering. His head turned aside before he could utter anything further, one hand splaying across his features, to hide them. “…and with how much I do care, being accused of such just.. Hurts.”

The Zora was trembling and tense, his frame taut with emotional distress wanting to burst free from beneath every one of his pretty scales. “..I’m so sorry, Link. You don’t have to listen to my ramblings, I’m sure my complaints seem petty and weak with everything that’s going on.”

“They don’t,” Link said without hesitation. Maybe Sidon’s problems were small, compared to the myriad of problems that framed and filled the world in which they existed, but goddamn it, if these little problems hurt the Prince, they were big problems. “And that doesn’t matter. Just because bigger problems exist, it doesn’t mean that your own aren’t valid, or that your suffering is insignificant.”

When Sidon did not react to Link’s attempts at reassurance, the Hylian outstretched his hand to gently pull Sidon’s own away from his face, wanting to see the beautiful honesty of his expression, no matter how troubled or sad. He spoke up, again, to address the actual problem troubling the Zora; it was difficult, given that he personally detested Brivere, but he was trying very hard to recognize that his own distaste was out of jealousy and unlikely to be helpful. It certainly would have been easier to just tell Sidon not to have anything more to do with the golden Zora, but that would have also been selfish and self-serving and he was trying to be better.

“You do come across as fake sometimes,” Link explained, trying with all of his might to be helpful and gesturing vaguely with one hand while he spoke. “But even in the time I’ve known you, I’ve learned to tell the difference. I know when your feelings are real and when you’re just putting on a show.”

Link only needed to look into the shallowest depths within himself for an example that made perfectly logical sense, in regards to Brivere’s claims. Despite the clear difference in how Link was regarded, versus how Brivere was, he still understood what it was like to doubt his own worth. Most people didn’t despise or look down on the Hylian Champion, but they did only value him for the purpose he served. He was not a person, but a tool of his reigning deity and a shield to everyone expecting him to just.. Save the world.

It was difficult to believe that people could care about you, when you expect them not to.

“Maybe Brivere just doesn’t believe that he’s worthy of friendship, or that anybody could possibly care about him. In that way, your friendship must seem too good to be true,” Link said, shrugging. “And the problem is with him, not you.”

As Link spoke, his words thoughtful and honest, Sidon allowed his gaze to drift back to meet the Hylian’s. The Zora idly nodded, agreeing and knowing his dearest one’s conclusion to be true. He only wished that knowing this truth alleviated the pain, even slightly, but it didn’t. “I suspected as much,” Sidon confessed. “..and I dearly want to alleviate his doubts, because I do care so very much,
but.. can I really? Should I offer him comfort in return for vitriol?"

“..no,” came the Hylian’s hesitant answer. It was plain hypocrisy for him to say so, because Sidon had been endlessly forgiving and ultimately understanding through all of Link’s own turbulent emotional disarray. It wasn’t right for him to have expected that, either, and he knew it, but he refused to mention it, because he didn’t wish to make this about himself.

“If I withdraw now, he’ll believe that our friendship wasn’t genuine, or he’ll consider it confirmation of his worthlessness, because I didn’t see his companionship as something worth holding onto.” the Zora explained, troubled and puzzling over this impossible, painful choice. “..and if I try to reconcile, I’ll be enabling the way he hurt me. What’s worse, I’ve apparently wronged him emotionally, not even meaning to.. If I continue the friendship, wouldn’t I be simply hurting him further?”

“How did you wrong him emotionally?” Link posed this question, falling short of accusation, though his words held a curiosity that bordered defensive.

“Oh.. well, I..” The Prince fumbled, his eyelids clenching shut when he realized his blunder much too late. No, it was fine- he wanted to be forthright with his dearest one. He just hoped it didn’t increase the friction between two people who deeply mattered to him. He took a deep breath to steady himself, then he spoke the truth. “I’ve begun to question the way I carry out my friendships. With you, I asked for friendship but I used it as a means to express myself in a way that you understood to be romantic. Yet, even now that things have escalated, it still feels as though nothing between us has truly changed; this is still the same deep friendship as before, but without any limitations on how we physically and emotionally express ourselves.” The Zora gave a confused and frustrated huff, the very end of his tail flicking in his confoundment. “..maybe it’s the fault of my empathic skills, or my seeming desperation for affection.. but regardless, I fear that I may tend to gravitate toward friendships that offer levels of affection which borderline romance, or else my own personal line between friendship and romance is an obscure thing that I only acknowledge because of societal expectations.. And those I care about suffer for it.”

Link wasn’t personally sure if he fully grasped what Sidon was attempting to get at and maybe Sidon wasn’t even entirely sure himself, judging from his frustration with the matter. The Hylian was trying to understand and offer comfort but he was also preoccupied with finding an answer to his own question somewhere in this verbose confession. Some other wild, sardonic part of him was beginning to believe that maybe peeing on things to mark them as his own wasn’t such a bad idea? A better and larger part of him only cared that Sidon was hurting and wanted to amend that.

Normally, the Hylian was not incredibly observant, nor did he like to waste time and energy puzzling things out. Maybe he was just too impatient, or too dependent on instincts for his answers, but this time there were clues to help him come to his conclusion and while Sidon spoke, the memory of that faint, lingering bite mark sprang to the forefront of Link’s mind.

Now everything seemed utterly clear and Link had little doubt left as to who had marred Sidon’s skin; something in his heart began to sink, flailing at the surface of the void and gasping for breath. “He’s in love with you, isn’t he?” the Hylian questioned, his words blunt and bleak.

“..he is, yes,” the Prince admitted, his voice soft and somehow guilty, his feelings aching and broken. “..but I thought our friendship could still thrive, despite that I rejected his advances. I suppose I’ve been naive, as usual. I didn’t want things to change. I still don’t.” What he dared not say, however, was that he had no wish to reject his other friend’s expressions of affections. It felt painful and limiting to lay down these pointless lines which could not be crossed. It stung to look upon somebody offering the full extent of their heart’s dedication and to say, ‘this is too much.’

But in this world, it was not acceptable to receive the full affections of any more than one person.
The utter taboo behind breaking a ‘soul bond’ in Zora society was enough to clarify that painful reality.

It hurt more that Sidon had to admit to himself that Brivere had been right; it had come down to a decision, and Brivere was Sidon’s ‘second choice’ when measured against the one the Prince openly called his ‘dearest one’. Sidon had allowed his friend’s feelings of insult and insufficiency to strike his heart, and he could only blame himself for being the cause of that pain.

“I must just be.. terribly selfish,” Sidon uttered in the silence that had come over his beloved Hylian. He searched Link’s face for answers, finding his blue eyes blameless and understanding, so the Prince continued. “..I’ve only ever heard Brivere utter my name without honorifics or titles twice in my life.. The first time was with such reverence. This time, he spoke it in utter contempt.. It felt so wretched, to be the cause of such a change.”

Sidon’s gaze faltered, his eyes dark, mournful pools that he hid away, his body shaking with tears he was not allowed to shed. Even now he refused, unable to express his sadness and feeling he had no business weeping for himself when he’d caused more harm than good.

The Hylian was hesitant, if only because he still tended to believe that he lacked the capacity to truly comfort anyone. Maybe he’d outwitted that Sheikah scientist, but not before she reaffirmed his one and only purpose; a killer. Could he trust himself to console somebody that he truly cared for? His own body ached with the want to do so and he would not deny the instincts when they felt so pure and clear. The movements were natural and easy, surprisingly so. His palms gently cupped Sidon’s pale cheeks, his calloused fingertips tucking just slightly underneath the Prince’s forefins while he leaned in, softly bumping the top of his head against the pointed crest of Sidon’s brow. It was an expression of tender affection between Zoras; Link remembered.

The Prince must have been surprised or overwhelmed as he did not move at first but Link did not cease in his nuzzling, instead tucking himself ever nearer, until the tip of his nose touched the tiny patch of soft, pink skin on Sidon’s face and he tilted his own head to press a kiss to his lips.

As their lips touched, the Zora at last moved himself into the affection, pushing back against the Hylian while pulling him nearer at the very same time. He held onto Link with care, handling him like he was indeed the most precious thing, pressing him to his chest, one hand gingerly laying upon Link’s back, ever careful and aware of the wounds which lurked there.

Cautious, trembling hands reached, one arm stretching over the Zora’s shoulder to touch the long tail which draped down his back. Link felt it twitch and flick at the unexpected touch, though a soft, content sound escaped on the Prince’s quiet breath and the Hylian moved his hand down the length of the Zora’s tail, his palms warm against Sidon’s scales.

Sidon fell remarkably still and calm at this comforting touch, the tension of his emotional turmoil relaxing away, soothed for this single moment and for as long as Link remained to console him. The Hylian decidedly persisted, idly stroking his Prince’s beautiful scales for a long, quiet and contented period; Link was a poor judge of time, but he found that his usual impatience was nonexistent, knowing that Sidon would soon lull and doze under his affectionate touch. He liked to think that, even though he could not fix his Zora lover’s problems, for now they mattered just a bit less and Sidon could feel some semblance of peace; it was all he wanted.

Eventually, they laid down together, silent and calm. Sidon reclined on a pile of pillows, as usual, and Link curled against his chest, letting the Zora hold onto him all the while.
Everything in the Undercity was a hole in the wall—no, literally.

The trench which dropped to the vast depths was like a hive, lined with tiny holes that curved upward and opened to the small caverns that Undercity people called home. These caverns were around the same size as houses constructed in the Uppercity, but they were often shared by four or more Zoras and that was in the most generous of circumstances.

There was one exception to the typical size of these watery caves, and that was Zambezi’s Cantina. Zambezi’s was an Undercity cave, like any other, but with floor space to rival the palace. It was arguably considered to be the palace of the Undercity, a warm and welcoming kingdom of depravity and existential stagnation.

In the evenings and well into the mornings, the Cantina was tightly lined with people, most of which were seeking some kind of escape from their daily life, whether that came in the form of drinks, hookups, gambling, or some other, more questionable means. That was precisely how Guardsman Gaddison knew that she would be able to find Bazz here.

“What a night, right?” she called out to the black Zora as she approached, weaving her way through the crowd of smaller Zoras, catching a few sharp glares while she went. Undercity Zora typically regarded Uppercity Zora with distaste, especially members of the Zorana Guard, but Gaddison wasn’t the type to acknowledge that.

Bazz didn’t even look up from his drink at the sound of the familiar voice, his body still, his head leaned into one hand. The lavender Zora bumped right against his side to slide onto the stool next to him, at last disturbing his attempts at remaining unresponsive. “Last night, I mean,” she clarified. “I hope the Blood Moon doesn’t always cause us that much trouble or I might have to retire early.”

The Zora woman laughed, her voice rich and smooth, the sound of her amusement always pure and genuine, even when it wasn’t. “I’m kidding. I live for our world’s failed attempts to descend into chaos. It gives me purpose.”

“What do you want, Gaddison?” The off-duty Captain sighed, already a bit beyond buzzed, but sure enough that his annoyance was having a sobering effect.

“A drink, the same as you.” She casually elbowed the sleek, black Zora, ignoring his grumbling. He was always such a depressive drunk so it was nothing new, though Gaddison could not deny that Rivan’s death had probably sent him even deeper into the abyss. For that reason, she felt obligated to be concerned and decided that tonight was the night that she would forcefully break his spree of refusing to talk to her in any nonprofessional setting.

Once the lavender Zora coaxed the bartender into bringing her a drink, she revisited the question Bazz had posed. “...if we’re getting into things that I want, though, there are a few answers I could use. Like, are you ready to tell me why you really put me on duty at the northernmost entryway?”

“Because you’re vigilant and focused and I know that I can trust you to do a good job, if monsters happen to come.” Bazz was deadpan as he spoke, a sure sign that his answer was the purest load of bullshit and Gaddison laughed in bitter cynicism.

She wasn’t very confident in her ability to actually get along with Bazz long enough to get to the point of why she really tracked him down, but if she was anything, she was determined. “Monsters never come to that gate. There has never been one incident and we both know it,” she hissed, though she did so in her own smooth, slow-talking way. “Why don’t you just tell the truth. You’re just trying to avoid me.. Either that or you’re punishing me with utter boredom.”
“I don’t know what to tell you.” The Captain was calm and distant, pausing to take a sip from his mug. “You and I both decided that we wanted to focus on our work. You can’t decide that you want to dedicate yourself to your job and then complain about having to do the job.”

“I see that you’re impossible, as always,” Gaddison purred, a smile on her face, though her words were impossibly sharp. She and Bazz had two very distinct and opposing ways of showing their displeasure and this probably only furthered their descent from inseparability to complete and utter bitterness. “That’s a real shame. I was hoping you’d had enough to drink to lighten the hell up. But no, you’ll probably start in on that same old ‘life is meaningless’ shtick any minute now.”

Gaddison knew Bazz far too well, which meant she also knew exactly how to push all of his buttons. She knew by the way his tail curled and tensed that her verbal blow had met its mark and he had no choice but to reply exactly in the manner she knew he would. “You said yourself that our world is actively attempting to descend into chaos,” he snapped, losing only a fraction of his previous calm, even so. “You have this naive idea that it will be some kind of exciting adventure, but I see it for what it really is—Disaster. We are a people living on the brink of annihilation, plainly aware that we can’t do anything to challenge it, so we just continue living on and ignoring everything, dimly aware of an ache inside us, telling us that there’s no real hope for progress. All there is for us is the dull, hopeless, stagnant continuation to our current existence, never changing, never improving, just.. Being. And then our pointless lives come to pointless endings.”

Throughout the entirety of Bazz’s spiel, Gaddison just quietly chuckled in amusement. The real irony was that, as much as the black Zora complained about stagnation, he never fucking changed. Maybe he believed that this world was preventing him from doing so, robbing him of any and all control, leaving him desperately grasping for something he was incapable of taking hold of, because he was too busy holding himself back and blaming everything but himself. “I swear you only became Guard Captain for the sake of having an illusion of control.”

“No, I believed in hope, once,” Bazz bleakly confessed, his voice turning quiet just before he drowned it out with a long swig of his drink. “I thought I could change things, through leadership and dedication. It seems like the harder you try, the more life evades your attempts at control.”

Groaning, Gaddison dropped her face into her palm, feeling the one and only hopeless pursuit in this world was getting through to the Zora at her side. She had to wonder, how the hell did the metaphorical apple fall so very, very far from the tree, in regards to Bazz and his father? The ‘Demon Sergeant’ was still actively trying to live his days of youthful, glorious warriorhood, somehow believing that even an elder who was way past his prime could make some kind of difference with his service. Then again, maybe it was Seggin’s fault that Bazz could be so bitter over things that ‘never changed’.

“Hey.. You know,” Gaddison began again, decidedly cautious as she started down a path which held potential to end this conversation altogether. “I know Rivan ate this stuff up and all, but.. I never really bought it.”

The pastel-scaled Zora paused, gauging Bazz’s reaction at just the mention of his now deceased best friend. She saw the quiet clenches of his jaw, his dark eyelids narrowing his intense, yellow gaze, but he said nothing in rebuke, so she went on. “I think the chaos and disaster of our time offers a challenge, to keep us from becoming complacent. Even with everything we’ve been dealt over the last century, we are still here and if you look closely enough, we really have changed for the better. We’ve gotten stronger, despite everything.”

“And speaking of Rivan,” the Zora woman continued, her words more gentle and careful than before. Somehow she had to move past the way Bazz was utterly monopolizing the mournful angst
over Rivan’s death, because she missed him, too. With him gone, it was only too clear how badly they needed him. He was the only easy-going, level-headed one that ever stood between Gaddison’s challenging abrasiveness and Bazz’s high-strung need to control everything.

“How about we don’t?” Bazz cut in, the sound of his voice sharp and piercing, his tail swishing in discomfort, his fingers clenched around his mug. Gaddison, of course, ignored him.

“Do you remember when the two of you were both just recruits and you ended up here, to celebrate getting into the Guard?” she asked, casual enough that the tension slowly eased away from the black Zora’s frame. He was still resistant, not responding immediately, his eyes flicking idly from side to side as he slipped into a moment of reflection; it was painful, but like the sting of Rivan’s pyre flame, it only hurt at first.

“You were there, too,” Bazz finally responded, resigned and perhaps even distantly wanting to allow himself to remember for once, rather than pushing all thoughts of his fallen friend from his mind.

“..and Kodah and Kayden.”

“Oh right, it was before they were even together! It feels like forever ago,” Gaddison went on, somehow still speaking about it like it all happened yesterday. “Anyway, so that was the night that Rivan met that bossy, older woman and the poor kid had pretty much never been in a relationship yet, so he was a complete idiot.”

“Yeah. That woman almost cost him his career,” the black Zora idly commented, his voice still holding a certain contempt, to this day. He took a few deep gulps from his mug, finishing the drink off and gesturing to the bartender for more; he had a feeling that he was going to need it. “..before he met her, he always tried his best, even when his best wasn’t THE best. I swear he only got into his habit of drifting by after everything with her..”

“It was awful, yeah. No disagreement,” Gaddison chuckled, taking a sip from her own drink and wrinkling the skin beneath her rounded brow. “I remember, we both warned him and told him not to get involved with her and he ignored both of us, because, I don’t know, the heart wants what it wants.”

“I didn’t talk to him for months.”

“That’s all you seem to know how to do when people don’t do what you want,” the lavender Zora snidely commented, getting digs in wherever she could and moving past them before Bazz had a chance at rebuttal. “..but, your control issues aside, you were just trying to help him.”

“Yeah..” the Guard Captain muttered, turning his head aside, unsure what the point of this conversation was. Maybe the other Zora just thought forcing him to talk about Rivan would make things better- it didn’t. He shrugged, uncomfortable with the topic, but even more uncomfortable with the silence. “We got Dunma out of it, so it wasn’t all bad.”

“Aha, that’s exactly right,” the woman momentarily placed her hand against Bazz’s arm, almost proud that he’d taken the initiative to carry on with the conversation. “..and that’s why I’m bringing this up now. I’m worried about her. She just lost her father, she’s distancing herself from all of us, she’s mourning and impressionable.. I’m concerned and afraid that she might end up making her father’s same mistakes..” Gaddison trailed off, moving her hands back to her own mug, taking a sip before getting to the ultimate purpose behind at least half of this emotionally heavy yet ultimately stifled meeting. “..I was hoping that you might consider transferring me to the fort. You know, to look after her.”

“What?” Bazz growled, the volume of his voice only now sharply raising as his composure melted
away. “Seriously, Gaddison? I can’t believe you.”

“What?” the Zora woman raised both hands in a guiltless, questioning gesture.

“You’re just using Dunma as an excuse to pursue some fantasy life of excitement,” the black Zora accused, pointing one finger at the Zora by his side, his head shaking in disappointment and abhorrence.

“No, Bazz, I swear I’m not.” Gaddison shook her head, her voice soft and sincere; the only trouble was that she’d proven herself skilled at snidely faking such things.

“I should have known better than to put you on the communication team. You got one look at that fort and now you want to go there to stay.” The off-duty Captain turned back to his drink, golden eyes glaring into the merciful depths of the one and only comfort he had left in this world. “How did you think I’d react to this, Gaddison? Rivan died there. It’s bad enough that Dunma is putting herself through the torment of having to live in the place that her father died, without you going down there and acting like the fort is some great, exciting place. Absolutely not.”

“That’s not what this is about, Bazz,” the lavender Zora denied, her voice dropping even lower while she challenged the accusations of the other. “You might want to drown out the world around you, but I can’t live like that. I still have the capacity to care, despite everything.”

Gaddison paused, expecting a response but receiving none; it seemed Bazz had doubled down in his efforts to ignore what he couldn’t control, but the pastel woman had never and would never let that stand in her way. She moved her stool nearer, leaning into the darker Zora so that her chin rested just near his shoulder, her voice a honeyed yet dangerous purr. “Bazz, if you’re so determined to lead this life of hopelessness, then it’s time to give up on the hope that my will is ever going to bend to yours.”

The woman’s knuckles gently brushed the other Zora’s arm as she continued. “Maybe measuring our willpower against one another was a flirtatious challenge, once upon a time and maybe it used to hold some kind of appeal, but I’m afraid some things do change, my love. Stop assuming things and stop punishing me for the fact that I couldn’t be the person you wanted me to be.”

Another pause led only to silence, with Bazz determinedly saying nothing in reply, only turning his head and clenching his jaw at Gaddison’s words. She waited, giving him the chance to relent, yet when he did not, she slid from her stool, lingering just long enough to state her final demand. “I’m going to submit a formal request for the transfer. When it shows up at your desk, you had best find yourself approving it.”

The sun had yet to rise above the mountains surrounding the valley, the air was still crisp and moist with dew, and only the very earliest of birds had begun to chitter a lonely, morning soliloquy.

Sidon was an early riser, but not earlier than the sun. As such, he was still curled up and warm underneath his blankets, with his Hylian lover snuggled at his side. Link’s head was laid upon the Prince’s arm, the weight hardly something that Sidon noticed.

Even the morning bell had yet to chime and rouse the masses, so it came as quite a surprise when Laflat’s delicate padding echoed across the stone floor of Sidon’s chambers. The slumbering Zora stirred at the quiet patters, raising his head in questioning to find the tired secretary standing arms length from his bed.

“I’m so sorry for the intrusion, Highness,” she said, her voice as soft as the light fading into the sky.
Very gently, the Prince slid Link aside, laying his head upon one of the numerous pillows that had gotten scattered throughout the course of the night, then he sat upright to address Laflat, who was standing with her hands folded. “What is it?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“The King has called for an emergency council meeting, in regards to the Water Blight,” she carefully explained, her words coming slowly, just to be sure the newly awakened Prince was aware enough to fully receive the message. “He did request for the full council to convene at the second morning bell.”

“Youngster,” Sidon nodded solemnly, folding back the blankets with care not to uncover his sleeping companion. Laflat bowed and retreated, leaving the Prince in peace when he shuffled to prepare himself, slowly making his way over to his desk, his joints cracking with every movement.

He would have just enough time to dress and eat before he had to make his way down from the tower and he took only one extra moment to stretch, the reach of his arms much higher than his head, his tail curling right then left before falling against his back. After, he very quietly began the process of putting on his various adornments, yet each item still softly jingled in his grasp.

Just by this emergency council meeting, alone, it was an unusual morning. It was made that much more odd when the Hylian slowly dragged himself upright, his head hanging low, the back of his hand rubbing at his eyes for a quiet, groggy minute before he at last spoke his reason for rising. “I want to go with you.”

Sidon glanced in Link’s direction, his golden eyes wide with confused disbelief just before he bent low to fasten his anklets in place. Once he straightened again, he gave a gentle response. “You know I can certainly inform you of whatever matters of import are discussed, yes?”

“I know,” Link stated, unable to do much more than blankly stare, his mind hardly comprehending the hour. “But if it’s no trouble and your people will allow it, I’d still like to be there.”

“Well,” Sidon calmly uttered, considering this notion. Normally, no, it wouldn’t be something that any Hylian or Zora civilian could just join on a whim. However, the Prince was certain that it would be permitted, given that Link would be there by the Prince’s own invitation, and as the one and only representative of the Kingdom of Hyrule. “While it is possible, I should warn you that Zora court can be notoriously pretentious, overly concerned with appearances and at times.. ‘cold-blooded,’ as you Hylians say. I wouldn’t expect you to have much patience for those things.”

A soft exhale came from Link and the corners of his mouth faintly upturned; Sidon knew him well. “The problems of the Zora people are my problems as well. I can tolerate the aggravation.”

“Very well,” Sidon breathed, nodding his head. “I noticed that you returned in your Champion colors; it was a convenient choice.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends. Please tell me what you thought of it. :)
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

In Kakariko Village, a matter of dangerous deliberation unfolded. Two iron leaders measured their wills against one another, acting upon a difficult truce, all because of the threat posed by the Guardians of Hyrule. Meanwhile, in Zora's Domain, the King's Council assembled to address a much different threat: the plague steadily sucking the life out of their Sovereign. Despite his usual silence, the Hylian Champion opted now to speak up, offering his own knowledge to assist a people he'd learned to treasure. However, not every soul in the Domain was worth sparing, and a difficult choice was suddenly dropped onto the the young shoulders of Estuu.

Chapter Notes

Woo, hey there friends. Please enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The signal came in the night, as it always did; the guards who stood before Impa’s castle in Kakariko delivered it to their leader before the sun had risen over the mountains. The elder held the item between her weathered hands, not even looking upon the delicately folded white cloth, marked with the Sheikah eye, but she felt the satin soft of it when she concealed it in her clenched fist, ordering Paya to add wood to the stove, so she could cast it away.

It was hours later when the foretold visitors arrived, a cluster of white-haired people, all dressed in the traditional Sheikah garb, and looking no different than any of the other Kakariko residents. In fact, most people of Kakariko Village hardly turned their heads when these others marched into town, escorted by highly trained Sheikah warriors, who served under Lady Impa. It wasn’t that any of them were unaware or completely unconcerned by these happenings, but every single person knew that for the good of their village, it was best not to make a show of it.

Only after the now doubly guarded castle was shut tight, with the visitors hidden behind closed doors, did they reveal the truth behind their careful deceptions. A flash of blue light unveiled a handful of masked soldiers, their bodies clad in fitted red and gray, each of them holding protective formation around the man at the center; their leader, Master Kohga.

One might have expected this revelation to be much more tense, but nobody on either side drew weapons while the Yiga leader made his way to the table, where he was to meet with the Sheikah elder. It was as though, despite their opposed allegiances, they suddenly recognized one another as the kin that they truly were, under the flag of truce.

“Impa, Impa, Impa,” said the Yiga leader, his masked countenance turned downward to face the Sheikah woman who was regarding him with the sternest of expressions. The man let out a chuckle of amusement and slowly lowered himself to the cushion on his side of the table. “You’re too young to be so serious. Just look what all that scowling has done to your face.”
Paya was kneeled at her lady’s side, doing what she could to rein in her nervous fluster when she reached for the teapot, attempting to fill the cups, yet her shaking hands had her almost immediately spilling the steaming, hot beverage. The footsoldier to Kohga’s side hurriedly outstretched her own hand to steady the pot, lacing her fingers near Paya’s on the wooden handle so that the Sheikah girl simply removed her own hand in embarrassment, placing both, instead, over her face.

When the cup of tea was slid before the Yiga leader, he began to unfasten the concealing mask from his face, setting it aside and pulling back the hood that covered his head. Very few existed who had so casually laid eyes on the man behind the mask, but the truth was perhaps nothing too surprising. He could’ve been mistaken for any other Sheikah man; his white hair was neatly tied, his eyes an intense, deep red, so dark that they seemed black in low light. His complexion was a warm, golden brown, his fine cheekbones dotted with freckles, his skin smooth and untouched by age.

Impa, however, turned her own gaze to the footsoldier at Kohga’s side, watching intently as the young woman poured the Sheikah elder’s tea and politely slid the cup within reach. The old woman’s wrinkles deepened when she frowned, her rough but wise voice speaking a soft demand. “Take off that mask, Nana.”

At the sound of her name, the young woman at Kohga’s side looked up, processing Impa’s words before she turned to her own leader in silence, for permission.

“You might as well,” Kohga decidedly allowed, shrugging before placing one elbow onto the table and gesturing at Paya with the other hand. “I mean, your mirror image is sitting right across from you.”

While the young Yiga footsoldier was carefully removing her mask, Kohga drew a folded list from one of the compartments of his uniform, flinging the paper across the table with a gentle flick of his wrist. “Here is the new roster.”

Paya had become distracted and distraught as she watched the footsoldier across from her unveil a face exactly like her own. Her mouth was set in a line, an attempt not to outright frown, but her fists were tightly bunched against her knees. The fact that the young woman across from her was absolutely calm made it all the worse. Eventually, her nervous and outraged lapse was broken when Impa quietly cleared her throat in order to regain Paya’s attention. The Sheikah girl looked up to see her elder’s tiny hands laid upon a folded sheet of paper and that was enough for her to realize what was being silently asked of her.

“S-sorry,” Paya muttered, producing a different piece of paper from the hidden folds of her clothes and she carefully slid it across the table so that her twin took hold of it and passed it to the Yiga leader.

A single moment of quiet passed between the gathered group while the two leaders looked upon the messages that were held in such secrecy, despite that nearly every Sheikah and Yiga clansman knew what they were.

“Yours is short by one person,” Kohga’s voice sharply shifted to utter seriousness, his gaze lifting from the written words, to stare at the old woman before him in suspicion.

“Dorian has decided that he wishes to stay,” Impa bluntly stated, not even attempting to deceive. “...to raise his family.”

The Yiga leader’s hand raised almost delicately to his lips as he let out a giggle, the sound building into full laughter, which a handful of masked clansmen joined in with, until the entire group was cackling in dangerous derision. Yet all went silent when Kohga’s hand slammed against the surface
before him shaking the teacups with a violent clatter and he leaned into the table. “You know the rules of our pact, Impa,” the man uttered, the timbre of his voice pitched low. “Breaking the pact will have consequences and it doesn’t benefit either of us to fight until our people are wiped out. The Sheikah people need not spill Sheikah blood; history has already seen that tragedy play out too many times.”

Straightening, Kohga took a deep breath, releasing a calm, quiet sigh, then he continued in a much more pleasant tone. “Somebody has to take his place.”

“Don’t speak to me of breaking the rules of the pact,” the old woman spoke plainly, her own glare equally intense, though without breaking her outward calm for an instant. “Your people stole information from our scientists not that long ago. We agreed that interfering with them was unacceptable.”

“Nonsense!” the Yiga leader hissed, though a smile traced his lips and he waggled a single finger at the Sheikah elder. “Stealing something back isn’t stealing. But speaking of stolen information, my scouts did intercept a message that had been intended for you, from your elder sister.”

A careful hand dipped into yet another compartment of his suit, apparently not finding what he was looking for, and he began to sift through another pocket then another, before finally laying hands on the mysterious item. He cleared his throat and unfolded what was obviously a letter, then proceeded to read it aloud. “Purah writes, ‘finding out about the rune has left the Hylian Champion aggressive and mistrusting to the point of threats-’”

“Enough,” Impa spat as though she were chastising a child speaking vulgar words. This effect was obviously amusing enough for the Yiga leader, as he lost all ability to read aloud for the giggles bubbling from him and he passed the letter to Impa, like delivering it had been his purpose all along.

“After everything the Hylians have done to us, why should one of them be surprised when we keep secrets? And why should any of us be surprised when Hylians live up to their nature?” Kohga commented, his voice turning serious again, however calmer than before. He patted one hand against the table top, rather casually regarding a very aggravated Impa. “I’m feeling generous, and where Dorian is concerned, honestly, creating the next generation of Sheikah is a noble cause, no matter which side it’s done on. Well, that and.. Let’s just say you’ll need the numbers, soon enough.”

“And what ever do you mean by that?”

“I have some intel that I think will interest you, my lady. A group of Hylian raiders are planning to make a move on Hateno Village. Apparently they don’t kneel to their own patron deity, which I thought was respectable at first..” The man gestured, indistinctly wobbling one hand while leaning one elbow into the table again. “..but now it’s clear that they’re still just the same, old Hylian ilk, grasping for power over everyone else, stamping down anyone who gets in their way.”

“We’ve dealt with raiders in the past,” Impa calmly dismissed the apparent warning. She was inclined to believe that Kohga had ulterior motives for ‘informing’ them about this group. Nothing he ever did was forthcoming, after all, not even his behavior. “The Age of Burning Fields was as much a war as the Calamity, itself.”

“Not raiders like these,” the Yiga leader reiterated more sternly than before. “People then became violent in utter desperation. Their group is large and constantly growing. They have access to an incredible amount of resources and they have quite a handful of the stables across Hyrule under their thumb.”

“If they seek to undermine the true rule of law, then they will be dealt with,” stated the elder, blunt
and downright merciless, though she sipped her tea in a calm, unworried manner.

“I’ll be waiting and watching, as always.” Kohga spoke, placing his hood and mask back over his face before disappearing without a trace.

The morning sun was vividly golden and harsh against tired eyes. Link was trying his best to cease with his nonstop yawning; he’d done it throughout the quick breakfast he’d shared with his Zora lover, with Sidon assuring him all the while that he could go back to bed. For some reason, he was quite sure that the sun was responsible.

Link only got it under control long enough for Sidon to draw the entire council’s attention to him, introducing him to them all as, ‘Hylian Champion Link, representative of the Kingdom of Hyrule.’ He wasn’t personally sure what he was meant to do while the council regarded him, so he casually raised his hand to greet them. He was probably suppose to bow or something, and was forced to inwardly chastise himself. In his imagination, this was like some kind of game where he lost points every time he caused people’s opinions of him to drop. He should have asked Sidon for the secrets to fake charm, but he didn’t actually care that much.

Appearances really shouldn’t have mattered. Sure, this wasn’t even close to the fancy, elegant political soiree that Link had been imagining, but the Prince’s behavior had shifted the very moment they climbed the stairs to the palace. He carried himself with perfect posture, his every movement graceful and with the occasional flourish. Sidon’s demeanor gave away nothing of his emotional state; he was serene in expression, polite in manner, with charm that was dialed back just enough to remain appropriate to the seriousness of this council meeting. If Link even attempted to emulate the Prince’s behavior, he’d likely come across like a very drunk nobleman, or else he’d seem like he was mocking.

The pair took seats just near a Zora that Link recognized with ease; Muzu. The elderly Zora didn’t fail to regard the Hylian, either, giving him this obscure look of, ‘what are you doing here?’ Clearly, the old man was attempting to remain neutral, however. Others did much less to hide their disdain. Not that Link was particularly self-conscious, but his eyes did wander across the faces of others present.

Most of this council appeared to be made up of elder Zoras and Link couldn’t help but wonder if there was some kind of minimum age to even be allowed onto the council. Or perhaps it was more of a ‘head of the family’ situation, where in most cases, that person would be of considerable age? Some of the council members were wearing shawls that Link now understood marked one as an Apostle of the Basilica, whereas others were draped in the adornments of nobility.

Despite how much time Link had spent in Zora’s Domain, he still only had a vague clue what articles held meaning and what that meaning was; he supposed he had to give himself some credit, considering he was starting to work it out.

“I’m surprised you actually showed up on time,” Muzu quietly commented, his words directed at Sidon. It might have been the hour, but something about his tone sounded even more grouchy than usual. Or maybe Link had just forgotten how perfectly that old man embodied the grumpy elder stereotype.

“I’m anxious to hear what this meeting is about,” the Prince responded. His tone was utterly serious, as much so as his behavior all morning. Where the suffering of his people were concerned, Sidon’s focus was an immutable thing, despite his helpless feelings. “..and I’m hoping for good news.”
The sound of the bell which marked the commencement of the meeting saw King Dorephan to his throne and a small group of Apostles wearing the crest of Naydra come before the council. All was gravely silent, apart from the ever present trickle, a gentle echo that resounded through the massive chamber.

The most senior among the Apostles cleared her throat, stepping forward to speak. “We’ve come before you this morning to present the findings of our dutiful research regarding this awful tragedy that has befallen the people of Zora’s Domain. It is our hope that, with what knowledge we’ve obtained, solutions can be found and lives can be saved,” she began, her voice clear but lined heavily with concern. “We’ve ascertained the nature of this Water Blight; whereas we had been regarding it as a plague, we’ve found that it is more accurate to describe it as a toxin, which our people have been exposed to through polluted water and tainted food. We suspect that our food has been the highest vector for the spread of the toxin, as the fish which our people consume are in constant contact with the polluted water, essentially gathering high concentrations of the corruption.”

While the scholar explained this information, her associates strode directly before where the council members were seated, presenting dissected fish, which many people recoiled at the sight of. Link leaned forward when the Apostles came near, straining a bit to see thanks to his relative shortness compared to those around him. He still managed to clearly see, however, that one of the fish looked clean and healthy, whereas the other had darkened eyes and gills, its organs having melted together into a puddle of black, viscous goo.

“Both of these fish are tainted with the Water Blight,” the Apostle explained. “However, the signs of the blight don’t appear in freshly killed fish, making it impossible for us to tell if our food has been polluted. As you can see here, in the fish that has been dead for over 48 hours, the signs of the Blight are very clear.”

“Is there some means of purification?” one of the council members asked. “Such as with heat or salt curing?”

“These methods unfortunately can’t destroy the toxin in the same way they can prevent putrefaction,” the Apostle answered grimly, shaking her downcast head. “Regardless of preparation, the toxin will still be present. Even more disturbing, in dehydrated samples of the toxin, we’ve observed that it takes on a structure that precisely mimics concentrated Goddess Bloodstone. With how rich our waters are in this mineral, it seems most likely that the mineral itself has been tainted, taking on this toxic form.”

If not for the fact that nearly the entire council descended into chaotic, panicked chatter among themselves, Link wouldn’t have thought to say anything to interrupt. Leaning in closer to the Prince, who was also peering here and there sudden in concern, Link quietly whispered the question, “What is Goddess Bloodstone?”

Sidon hesitated while he processed the question, as though somebody not knowing this information wasn’t in his range of comprehension. His golden eyes glanced down at the Hylian by his side, his gaze measuring Link’s seriousness for all of a second before he was forced to remind himself—right, the Hylian Champion lost his memory.

The Prince bent down, something he typically didn’t do when addressing his Hylian lover, as he felt it to be disrespectful at any other time. For the sake of keeping his voice low, however, he deemed it acceptable. “Goddess Bloodstone is a mineral that is rich throughout Zora’s Domain. The luminous stone that we depend on contains traces of Goddess Bloodstone; it’s what gives the stone its color, flexibility and characteristic glow. When separated into its pure form, it takes on a deep, almost violet color and it’s very powerful. Exposure to traces of it has beneficial effects and it has even been said
that the longevity of our people is a result of living in water that is rich in Goddess Bloodstone. Deliberate consumption of the purified mineral has even more profound physical and magical effects.”

“What will we do if our water has been completely corrupted?” another council member asked, their voice tight with mounting anxiety.

After the first question was uttered, it wasn’t long before seemingly every voice on the council arose with a question of their own, a hundred words and phrases all garbled together in fearful hysteria. Link’s ears twitched back, then forward, one cocking in a totally different direction then the other in his attempts to catch even one full sentence. He must have looked like a frightened grassland fox trying to listen for approaching hunters.

“Can this be reversed?” someone cried out.

“Is the Basilica safe?” a different Zora piped up, their voice sounding almost tearful.

“Will the Hallowed Caverns be corrupted as well?” a deeper voice called over many of the others. “Will the Goddess Bloodstone there be tainted by this Water Blight?”

The lead scholar in the group of Apostles had her hands raised in a desperate attempt to quiet the growing roar. Despite the early hour, the noise had even begun to attract onlookers. Zoras from the Uppercity lined the arches of the palace entryways, so that the voices of the city guardsmen were added to the fray. “Stand clear,” they said in commanding, authoritative tones. “Entry is not permitted at this time.”

“Silence!” The resounding voice of Dorephan successfully drowned out all others, his deep tone a boom that filled the entire chamber so thoroughly, for a passing second, the sound was almost physical, solid enough to feel and touch. The echo of it slowly dulled, leaving silence behind that the King filled with the words, “Please, we must remain calm if we are to have these questions answered and solutions to our problems presented. Allow the Apostles to speak.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.” The eldest Apostle dipped her head in gratitude, taking a breath to calm herself before she attempted to answer what inquiries she caught during the chaos. “At this time, we don’t believe that it’s possible for the Hallowed Caverns to be corrupted. From what we’ve seen of this Water Blight and the previous one, the corruption begins to peak in correlation with the occurrence of the Blood Moon. It’s at its most potent at those times and should begin to weaken until the lunar phase cycles around again. As of this moment, the toxin should start to become less pervasive. Still, the corruption that has already occurred cannot be undone. As far as we know, the majority of our food and water resources have already been corrupted to very dangerous levels and the Water Blight toxin likely won’t be properly dispersed until the winter rains.”

“None of this answers where this Water Blight came from in the first place,” a frightened council member called out, his anxiety translating itself into frustration and anger. “We’ve weathered the Blood Moon monthly, for a hundred years, without this devastation. If we don’t know what caused it, then we can’t solve this, nor prevent it.”

“I might have an answer to that,” Link spoke up, almost unthinking. At the sound of his voice, the entire council turned to him in astounded silence, some looking surprised that he even could speak, others more offended that a single Hylian presumed to know how to remedy a problem that the entire Zora council had yet to. Nevertheless, his track record at solving Zora problems thus far was decent, so he slowly stood in the allowed silence, assuming that it meant they wanted to hear his suggestion, regardless of their opinions of him.
“I’ve seen similar corruption in my travels, or at least I believe so. I understood it to be called, ‘malice’. I’ve seen it spread and pollute water sources, so I’m fairly sure that it’s the same thing,” he explained, hoping he actually had understood the Zora’s descriptions of this Water Blight correctly, or else he really was going to look like a foolish Hylian.

Link glanced aside at Sidon while he paused, noticing that the Prince, too, was listening carefully. He even gave Link a small nod of encouragement and the Hylian returned it gratefully. “When I entered Vah Ruta, the internal mechanisms of the Divine Beast were coated with toxic malice, which was put there by a creature that seemed to be the carrier of the toxin.”

“If this is true,” the scholar responded, looking intrigued and glad to have received this information, despite how grim their situation was presently, “...and the corruption originally was carried by a creature lurking inside the Divine Beast, then the toxin perhaps escaped into the reservoir. It would explain why even the Uppercity water has been shown to carry the toxin. Our entire water source has been polluted.”

“Then this is all the fault of that Divine Beast, spilling tainted water into our reservoir,” one of the council members hissed, a deep mistrust of the mechanical beast still glaringly obvious. Probably Hylians, too, by extension, or that’s how Link tended to take it.

“Hmm,” Sidon hummed, ever the skeptic of these expressions of blind mistrust. “I believe that if this were the fault of Vah Ruta, we would have seen this Water Blight rear its ugly head around the time that we began having problems with the Divine Beast. Actually, considering the new information presented, it seems more clear now why Vah Ruta was behaving the way it was; it was attempting to purify and redistribute the water. That better explains why this Water Blight has only become a problem now- because Ruta is no longer purifying the water.”

“Then the Divine Beast truly was acting in order to protect us?” a council member uttered, their tone about half disbelieving and half astounded at this previously unconsidered possibility. The Zora people had despised and blamed Hylians and the Divine Beast which the Hylian people unearthed for so long, allowing themselves to think anything otherwise was an uncomfortable process.

“Or it was Mipha,” Link piped up, his voice again coming in an odd, instinctual way. The reaction to his words was just as intense as before, the expressions of the council members hopeful; this suggestion was obviously much easier for them to stomach. “There’s no guarantee that it was by her will, rather than by some automatic defense of the Divine Beast, but.. her spirit was present there, alongside the Blight creature. I had believed that she was trapped, but I’m beginning to see now that, most likely, her spirit remained behind in order to continue combating the beast, or restraining it. She was trapped, but by a duty to protect her people and the world. Princess Zelda is doing the very same thing to restrain the Calamity- I can’t see Mipha doing any less, even in death.”

When Link finished, all remained quiet for an extended length of time. It was honestly uncomfortable, at first, because his immediate consideration was that these Zoras were about to publicly execute him. That thought melted away when he caught sight of a handful of elderly council members offering solemn nods, their expressions melancholy but peaceful and even glad to have heard such an explanation. Some began to murmur their agreement, until it appeared that Link’s words were unanimously accepted.

Sidon, too, was smiling softly, his eyes shining and proud. Delicately, he placed a hand against Link’s back, ever careful of the wounds that remained there. He kept his hand where it was as he spoke, renewing the questions on the subject matter. “Is there anything we can do to speed up the purification process in the reservoir? Also, as we all know, the creature was destroyed- so how is the water still being tainted?”
A silence of consideration followed the Prince’s inquiry and not even the scholarly Apostles were able to answer immediately. They had already made it clear that the actual source of this Water Blight was still a mystery to them.

Again, it was Link who offered suggestions, leaning on the personal experience he already had from his adventures to this point. “If this is being caused by malice, as I know it, then it’s possible that some escaped from inside the Divine Beast and is lurking somewhere in the reservoir. This malice is very like a creature, though, and it can be destroyed. If you were to locate it and destroy it, that should prevent any further pollution of the water and food supply.”

“I think Master Link’s suggestion is an excellent one,” another voice called out, a voice that didn’t actually belong to the council members. It was easy to see the heads of the council turn in the direction of the palace archways to catch sight of the Guard Captain standing a bit separate from the rest of his force on duty. With a gesture from Dorephan, Bazz took a few steps closer, bowing low to his King before straightening and speaking up once more. “Even if Master Link is completely wrong, taking action at the risk of it being pointless is better than waiting around for things to get worse. If there is any possibility that he may be right, the Zorana Guard is ready to answer the call and willing to begin the search for this malice creature.”

“I second that!” Seggin called out, proudly jumping to his feet from within the council gathering. “Action certainly is better than inaction. Our people are dying, so we must act now!”

“How can the guardsmen search the reservoir without contracting the Water Blight themselves?” one of the council members sitting near the Demon Sergeant asked in concern, only for the scholars to provide that answer.

“There would be risk, of course. But it would be greatly minimized if the guardsmen searched while dry diving. It would slow the process, but it would increase safety.”

“Dry diving?” Link quietly repeated.

“Oh,” the Prince uttered, “they mean diving without breathing through their gills.”

“Got it,” the Hylian nodded and quieted to listen again.

“No matter the risk, we are willing to take it,” Bazz called out, tapping the butt of his spear against the stone beneath his feet. “We knowingly put our lives on the line, because it is our duty to do so. We won’t allow innocent civilians to continue to die out of fear for our own safety.”

“This still doesn’t solve the most obvious problem of all,” yet another council member spoke up, standing to better present his concerns. “Finding the source of the corruption will take time. Dispersing the polluted water will take time. Our food resources are unsafe right now and we can’t even sleep submerged without risk. This not only displaces a large percent of our population, considering that many of the Zora people do not actually have private living spaces, and instead share a communal sleeping cistern. But our entire population is at the immediate risk of dehydration and starvation, unless we can quickly replenish food and drinking water supplies from safe sources.”

“Even replenishing the supplies will take time,” a different Zora commented grimly. “We’ll never be able to do it quickly enough to avoid multiple fatalities in the meanwhile. Forced hibernation would normally be a solution, but without the ability to sleep underwater, it’s not possible.”

“What about the fort downstream and the Lanayru wetlands?” Sidon suggested, as hard pressed as ever and wracking his brain for any means to aid his people. He wouldn’t even bother gloating about having been right to consider the fort useful; that didn’t matter to him at the moment. “Our reservoir
is the source of water for the wetlands downstream, but will the toxin have traveled that far?"

“It likely has,” one of the scholars answered. “However, there is a chance that it will have also been
dispersed to less dangerous levels downstream. We would only need to run tests on the fish from that
location to get a better idea.”

“There haven’t been any reports of Water Blight from the guardsmen stationed at the fort,” Bazz
piped up, giving an idle shrug. “So that’s a good sign.”

“We can send gathering parties downstream in mass,” the Prince suggested. “The fort can house
them as well, which solves some of the displacement issues and will hopefully replenish the food and
water supply quickly enough that any grave suffering can be avoided.”

“Even with careful rationing, with our supplies at absolute zero, and the time it will take to test and
gather the food and water from downstream, there will still be some who perish,” one of the less
hopeful elders said. “There’s simply no way we can provide enough relief that quickly, no matter
how carefully we plan.”

“For now,” the King began to speak, silencing any others who were chattering with the sound of his
voice, “I will submit an executive order before you all, which I believe you will agree with. We shall
temporarily seize and control any viable supplies within Zora’s Domain, in order to carefully ration
them to our people and prevent suffering to the very best of our abilities. This will be effective
immediately and is to be carried out by the Zorana Guard. Is that understood, Captain?”

“Perfectly, your Majesty,” Bazz agreed, though it was difficult to say whether his voice was held
steady by dire seriousness or fretful disappointment.

“If I may, your Majesty?” one of the council members spoke. From what Link could tell, it sounded
like the same dismal elder who’d been talking before. “There is another difficult but obvious
solution. We have hundreds of Undercity Zora already ill with this Water Blight and one young
healer who is apparently capable of nullifying the toxin. The healer is already overwhelmed by the
sheer multitude of people who require aid and simply can’t heal them all,” the man began, somewhat
dancing around whatever point he was attempting to get at. “It seems that it would be a better use of
this resource to ask the healer to use his powers to purify at least a supply of drinking water to benefit
everybody. As for those who are already ill, well, as I’ve stated, he can’t heal them all anyway.
Maybe it would be kinder to grant them all a quick and merciful end, so we can concentrate on
saving those among us who are still healthy.”

“There are a multitude of problems with that suggestion, Council Member, aside from the very
obvious moral ones,” Sidon spoke up with passion that was immediate and fiery, but controlled just
enough that he still sounded perfectly calm. Link peered upward while the Prince leapt to his feet, an
imposing presence at his full height. “For one, the healer is not an Apostle in service to our people,
but a child who is already overextending himself, despite there being absolutely no requirement for
him to do so. As such, we have no legal means of controlling the use of his powers and what he
chooses to use them for. Furthermore, I considered this statement null and void at the point that a
person was referred to as a ‘resource’, but for the sake of clarity, I’ll point out the other very obvious
flaw in your line of thinking. By allowing those currently ill with the Water Blight to die, we would
be disproportionately condemning people from the Undercity. Again, the most major issue here is a
moral one, but allow me to remind you all that it is the people of the Undercity who provide the vast
majority of our food supplies. If we fail to do everything in our power to save them, we’ll be
crippling any hope we have to recover from this crisis.. That is, unless you plan to do the physical
labor yourself, Council Member.”

This situation was serious in every possible shape and form; even somebody as emotionally blunt as
Link could acknowledge that much, and admit that he was greatly concerned about the fate of a people he’d learned to love, despite how slowly they had warmed up to him. But all that aside, he had never, ever seen Sidon so sharply commanding, or angry. His blue eyes were wide and shining as he stared up at the Zora Prince, who had always seemed utterly soft and perhaps even a bit prissy to him.

Link scarcely believed that Sidon had the kind of backbone it took to be a true ruler, even though, well, he technically had two spines. The Hylian was in sudden awe, dumbfounded and gobsmacked to witness this, a side of the Prince he hadn’t even known existed. His heart was even pounding so fiercely, it was like the lovestruck organ was attempting to actively rival the powerful passion that Sidon had just put on display.

“I might... have a suggestion,” Link mumbled, still a bit taken with the ferocious compassion of his Zora lover. He cleared his throat and stood a bit taller at the Prince’s side. It was miraculous that he still possessed enough mental clarity for any kind of idea to occur to him at all, but he’d been idly considering this one for a little while now.

“Yes, Hylian Champion?” King Dorephan himself offered his regard to Link, encouraging his guest representative to speak.

“I’ve actually... already opened my home in Hateno Village to a couple of friends who wanted to flee from this Water Blight,” he explained. “Perhaps other Zoras may wish to take refuge there? It would lessen the demand for scarce resources here in Zora’s Domain, and there are plenty of water sources around Hateno that I don’t think the villagers there rely very heavily on. There are also a handful of empty homes that could be used to temporarily shelter Zora refugees.”

“As a means of assistance, it’s a viable suggestion, Champion,” the King nodded. Normally he would address Link by name, yet now was apparently not the time to be so informal. “Hateno Village is quite the pilgrimage, but as a means of emergency relief, it’s manageable. There is the question of safety, security and the overall management of what could be perceived by Hateno residents as an invasion, however.”

“I’m willing to assign a small guard detail to the refugee post in order to maintain peace and make sure that our people establish the best possible relations.” Bazz once again offered support to back Link up.

“Be careful, Captain,” the King warned, genuinely concerned. “With all we’re asking of the Zorana Guard, you’re sure to be overworked.”

“In a time of such necessity, I assure you, there’s no such thing,” Bazz answered.

“Very well.” King Dorephan accepted this proposal with ease, glad enough for any solution offered. “I believe our action plan is as complete as it can be, for now. We have difficult times ahead of us, my friends, but we will fight back and survive, despite the odds. We always have in the past and we have our very existence as proof of our success.”

A strange voice broke the early morning silence that had befallen the brothers and neither of them recognized it. Brivere took a deep breath, feeling the air rush unhindered and painless through his chest, the aching thrum absent both there and in his head.

Estuu had healed his sibling in the lightless hours, unwilling to wait any longer and having recovered just enough to wring the magic out of himself, his overworked body like a thin and tattered cloth
under tight twists of stress. Nevertheless, he pushed and prevailed, looking on his brother’s golden scales with admiration, the boy’s hands having effectively painted the pale canvas of Brivere in renewed hues.

But in the restful silence they stirred, finding a young woman standing in the doorway of their private chambers. Estuu noticed her first, immediately hearing the soft patter of her feet as she approached, then while she stood calling out, saying, “Young healer? Estuu?” the boy nudged Brivere, unwilling to answer this bizarre summoning himself.

His frame was trembling and weak, but Brivere was able to pull himself to his feet, the Water Blight cleansed from him, but the effects unable to be so easily removed. He walked to the door to greet the messenger, standing before her with an impassive expression but a questioning tone. “Can I help you?”

“I’ve come to speak with Estuu,” she explained. Brivere looked her over, trying to identify what or who her loyalty was to. She wasn’t wearing the shawl of the Basilica, nor anything that identified her class, nor insignias of any kind. Something about that struck the golden Zora as.. odd.

“I’ve been sent to very sincerely implore his aid,” she spoke further, her eyes low and not meeting Brivere’s own.

“By whom?” the golden Zora cut to the chase, bluntly asking for the very detail which almost appeared to have been explicitly concealed.

“Pardon me, sir,” the young woman begun. She wasn’t from the upperclass, clearly, but she must have believed that Brivere was. Either that, or she had been instructed to be careful and respectful, whatever it took to convince them to go with her. It would have been even more suspicious, if not for the fact that there was a very clear and highly likely motive for this summon. “I’m told that I’ll be paid to deliver this message and to escort the young healer to another private residence, but I wasn’t told who my employer was.”

“Hm,” Brivere let out a quiet scoff, his voice still weak from his very recent recovery. “So then some member of the aristocracy has fallen ill and they want my brother to come to their aid, without making us aware of who we’re meant to be helping.”

“I can’t answer for certain,” she uttered, almost confused, maybe even intimidated. “But that does seem likely, yes.”

Brivere didn’t have the answers to this; he’d asked the questions and that was the most he could do. This choice was, of course, up to Estuu and he slowly turned to glance back at where the smaller Zora was still lingering. “What do you want to do?”

The boy blinked, his eyes moving across the floor in silent consideration. His hands came together, his fingers fiddling, his tail twitching in concentration; he obviously had some other concern, that much Brivere knew him well enough to see. Eventually, the younger Zora reached for his own discarded rucksack, drawing forth a rupee pouch and he held it up, pointing at the young woman with his other hand.

It took the elder Zora a moment to decipher his sibling’s meaning. At first he thought his brother meant to pay the messenger to go away, because that felt the most characteristic of the boy, if not for the fact that they didn’t need to pay her to refuse. After mentally scrapping that consideration, Brivere thought over the conversation again, replaying the dialogue in his head.

Turning back to the woman, Brivere asked, “Did you say, ‘I’ll BE paid to deliver this message and
escort Estuu to another residence?”

“Um,” the woman’s eyes trailed up ever so slightly, unsure why these questions were necessary. “Yes, that’s what I said. I was told that I’ll be paid when I arrive at the destination, with the healer.”

“So you won’t be paid if you can’t convince him to go,” Brivere nodded, astounded that he had missed that little detail and even more astounded that Estuu had caught it. The woman muttered a quiet word of affirmation, not that the Knight had been asking her for a yes or no. Again, he glanced back at his brother, waiting for his answer, now that this detail had been ascertained.

Estuu breathed a heavy sigh, clearly tired and much more fed up with nonsense than someone of his age should have been, but regardless he nodded his head in a defeated way. Brivere had to wonder, had he made their own financial instability so apparent to his brother that Estuu actively worried about the financial means of others? There was a tiny tremor of guilt that wracked him, aching in his chest to the point that he was momentarily concerned that the Water Blight may have still been lurking under his scales.

The subtle feeling of pride at seeing Estuu make an effort to be compassionate chased it away, however.

Brivere was still suspicious enough that he refused to allow his younger brother to follow the messenger unaccompanied. He fastened his sword straps around his chest and somehow heaved the massive weapon onto his back, despite his own weakness. Estuu had hesitantly gathered up his notepad, in the case that he was forced to write out a response, much as he loathed to do so.

He was glad, in the end, because when they arrived at their destination and were shown inside, Brivere was given an immediate reason to gnash his teeth, seeing all too clearly why all the deception had been necessary. “Zambezi,” he growled, his yellow eyes narrowed in a shining, feral glare, his tail swishing slowly from side to side in building rage.

His state of emotion was already in tatters from what had happened between himself and his only friend in this wretched world, and he was pushing that as far back in his mind as possible, just to maintain his state of impassive cool in this situation.

How dare this pathetic, heartless, putrid excuse of a Zora summon Estuu here. How fucking dare he. Brivere peered down at the man, a normally broad and strong-looking sort, now pale and weak with Water Blight. He was laid upon a small water mattress, only barely conscious, the skin of his pumping gills an awful black. Even having suffered this exact fate, Brivere had no sympathy and only wanted with every ounce of his being to tell the other Zora that he deserved every, excruciating moment.

He couldn’t however, because this was not his choice to make.

Zambezi didn’t regard Brivere at all. He might not have realized that the other Zora was even here, or maybe underneath the blighted weakness, he was still just a damn snob.

“Estuu,” the other man uttered, his voice gravelled and barely audible. One shaking hand reached for a drinking glass that rested just within reach, upon a bedside table. He took a desperate gulp and Brivere felt very certain that this beverage was quite likely an alcoholic one, especially considering Zambezi’s business. When the man placed the glass aside, he attempted to speak again, batting his hand at the young Zora, imploring that Estuu come closer.

Hesitantly, Estuu indeed took a few more steps closer to the blighted noble, absolutely nothing of his feelings to be found on his face, though Brivere was still concerned. He knew that his younger
sibling experienced the world and emotion a bit differently than others, but it was impossible for him to feel nothing in a situation like this.

“I’m here, Estuu,” Brivere breathed, standing just in his sibling’s flank, like some kind of overprotective bodyguard.

“Estuu,” Zambezi repeated, drawing the young Zora’s attention back to himself. “Just look at me. I require your aid, your skills. You must heal me, my boy.”

The young, scarlet Zora recoiled at the words, his movement soft and slight. It was no wonder; Zambezi reeked of booze and Brivere was already nauseous, just at the knowledge that his mother had.. No, that was too much. He didn’t want to think of that.

Estuu offered no other reaction, his eyes wandering, his head turning aside. He must have seemed unfeeling to this man who did not know him at all. He must have seemed utterly cold, and Zambezi’s yellow eyes widened, searching the boy’s expressionless face. Brivere knew better; Estuu was considering, waiting for more information and better reasoning than, ‘you have to.’ This was Estuu’s way of saying, ‘why should I really?’ but Brivere didn’t bother to explain. He preferred to watch the blighted Zora struggle.

“I never said so, but I am sorry.. about your mother,” Zambezi slurred, though his words were clear enough for Estuu to turn back to him in attention. Brivere clenched his jaw tightly at these words, having thought that his outrage couldn’t be pressed any further; he’d been absolutely incorrect.

“.everything that happened with her was meant to be just for fun,” the sickly Zora continued, wheezing for breath with every pause. “She knew that. Even if marrying somebody for love were an option for me, she was already married. I felt bad for her, sure, but I just thought that she was the kind of person who always made poor decisions. Can you blame me? She married a man hours before they went into battle. She kept your egg, knowing the social stigma that would befall not only her, but the child who came from that egg and the son she already had with a dead man. It was selfish. But it wasn’t my fault.”

“Maybe not,” Brivere harshly hissed, unable to still his tongue any longer and unsure how long he could keep his blade stilled, either. In quiet, bitter moments, he’d already imagined spilling this man’s blood and accepting whatever consequences came of it. “But refusing to take any responsibility for Estuu? Ignoring him for his entire life, up until the moment that you’re desperate for his abilities? Those things are on you, and if this were up to me, I’d make sure you didn’t live long to regret them.”

“I’ll do better!” the blighted man’s voice raised as much as he could manage, pitchy and pleading. “I promise, I’ll do better!”

Brivere said nothing, not believing a single word and sure enough that, despite his age, Estuu was not naive enough to believe such lies, either.

The young healer could not speak a single word in reply, but his yellow eyes did trace across the frail frame of the sick Zora before him, in thought. Zambezi would never care for him, he would never even try and honestly, Estuu was beyond caring about that any longer. He preferred to be left alone.

But was allowing this man to live knowing that the child he abandoned came through to save his life worth the effort to do so? Perhaps bitterness and spite was a harsh tool on which to weight his options, but the past was not so far behind Estuu that he could overlook it. He could never forget the image of his dead mother, the guilt of knowing that it was his fault that she was dead.. But it was also this man’s fault as well, no matter how he denied it. He thought the life of a sad widow didn’t matter
and he took advantage of her sorrow, using her for what fun he could get from her.

It was his fault, too, and Estuu had the ultimate power to let Zambezi pay for that wrong with his life. In this world, Estuu acknowledged that some lives seemed to matter more than others, some lives were held in higher esteem than others.

But by Hylia, in times such as these, he was the only one who could decide what life mattered enough to be spared.

And as far as he was concerned, Zambezi’s life didn’t matter.

Just like that day on the stairs of the palace, when Zambezi looked upon the boy, his son, and walked away, Estuu turned his back. Before he could walk away, however, the bedridden man lunged, his much larger hand locking around Estuu’s arm like a vice, holding onto him in desperation.

“You can’t leave me like this!” the ailing man hissed, his tongue hardly able to enunciate the words. “I gave you your Goddess Blood. I gave you those powers!”

Without any thought or hesitation, Estuu pulled back, unable to wriggle free from the man’s grasp, so he did the only thing he knew to do; he screamed. His voice was a strange, alien thing to his ears and it hurt to hear the sound of it, but the touch hurt worse and he was as desperate to escape as Zambezi was to receive healing.

Brivere was just as quick to react. One would have thought that Zambezi wouldn’t be foolish enough to give the other golden Zora an excuse to hit him, but maybe death was more frightening than a punch in the face. Nevertheless, Zambezi was going to be receiving both. One just came sooner than the other.

Brivere’s bundled fist slammed into the other Zora with enough force to send him rolling across the mattress, and off the opposite side. He might have knocked the blighted Zora completely unconscious, judging from the silence that followed the thump of impact, but neither of the brothers cared to inspect.

They exited the man’s home, getting a short distance away before the older Zora spoke up to stop his sibling. “Estuu,” his calm, clear voice spoke in question and the scarlet boy upturned his gaze in acknowledgment, not meeting his brother’s eyes.

Something was obviously troubling Brivere, and Estuu could see it from the way he held his shoulders tense, despite how weak he must have been, still. The golden Zora showed it further by taking a deep breath and letting it out in a contemplative sigh.

“This is your choice, and either way you choose, I won’t criticize you,” Brivere began. “I hate that man with a burning passion and if he left this world, I wouldn’t feel an ounce of sadness. But I do want you to think carefully, because this is a choice that you have to live with.”

The end of Estuu’s tail flicked; a sign of confusion. This was a decision he’d already made, Brivere had just seen him make it, so why was he questioning it? He waited, knowing the golden Zora was sure to elaborate.

“If you walk away, you’ll be letting your own father die,” Brivere stated bluntly, putting the cruel reality of the situation on clearer display, as though Estuu could have possibly forgotten who that terrible man was. “...is that something you can live with?”

Times like these haunted the boy, because so much more was needed than a yes or no. There were so many words inside of him, constantly begging to be set free, answers he wished he could give yet
he was unable to do so. He breathed a sigh of resignation, drawing out his notepad for the purpose of communication; he hadn’t thought he would need it to communicate with Brivere, in the end.

With slow, careful strokes that were always shaky and difficult to make out, no matter what he tried, Estuu placed his pencil to the paper of the notepad, scrawling out a message that he knew was too short to take him so long to produce. Still, his hands only ever seemed to cooperate when they held a bow.

When he finished, he passed the note to his brother and Brivere read the words in silence, his own expression only vaguely softening while he took in the message.

‘I don’t have a father. I have a brother.’

The softest, most bittersweet quirk of the golden Zora’s lips was visible, and Estuu even raised his eyes high enough to see it; he smiled on the inside, in return.

What Estuu could not see, however, was the deep regret that was heavy and buried underneath Brivere’s withheld appearance; he wished that the reality of their lives hadn’t been such a lonely, difficult endeavor. Neither of them had been dealt a fair hand, but perhaps fate meant to offer them some kind of retribution, if they continued.

And they would continue together, there was no other way.

“You really are very talented,” the golden Zora idly spoke, delicately folding the note and tucking it safely away, in one of the leather pouches of his weapon strap. “I do feel much better.. Perhaps well enough to go bow hunting?”

Estuu was taken aback by this suggestion, emotionally and physically. He took a careful step back from his sibling, almost expecting this proposal to be a trick of some sort. Surely not, right? His tail flapped softly against his back in nervous excitement, his golden eyes widened ever so slightly in questioning.

He and his brother hadn’t done something together just for fun in years. He also had been disallowed to use a bow ever since.. That day. That day, when a most miraculous life proved its worth, refusing to die by the boy’s skilled hand. Either he could only take a Zora’s life by refusing to heal them, or her life had indeed mattered more than he had initially judged.

Regardless of the shame of the past, Estuu could not help but agree. To his relief, this had not been a trick at all.

Chapter End Notes

So, how was it friendos? I know that I am beyond behind in comment responses, but I do still appreciate every single one and I plan to eventually get caught up on those responses. You all ask such good questions! Gosh! And I love them!

But I wanted to ask a question of my own. How many of you know about NanoWrimo? How many of you participate? I hope some of you do, because it would be so cool. Um, so for those of you who don’t know what it is. Nanowrimo stands for National Novel Writing Month, which takes place in November. The goal of the month is to type a 50K word novel before the month is over. I would like to work on this story for
NaNoWriMo and it would be super cool to have you all cheer me on, haha.. or also write novels of your own, so I can cheer you all on, too. :) Seriously, check it out if you're a writer and have never heard of it.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

The Sergeant of Fort Boko had certainly been taken with young Dunma's skill and persistent nature, and she had a surprise of sorts ready to be presented to the other Zora woman, at last. Prince Sidon, as well, after receiving much-needed advice from his father, was quite confident in a surprise that he had prepared for his Hylian lover.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Things were always busy at the fort - no exceptions. It was only going to get busier and while that knowledge came as a welcome challenge for Betaal, there was also a degree of careful measuring that had to be done in preparation. Being ready to take on more work than one person could feasibly see to was just the same as readying oneself for an impossible battle.

Her own personal trick to success, on top of a heaping helping of gutsiness, was recognizing the value of careful, trusting teamwork. As much as she was a fighting dynamo, she also understood that a single soldier couldn’t win the day, even if she was willing to attempt it. To combat this unmanageable surge of work, she would need her team up to snuff, and more than anything, she needed someone that she could count on to help her dole out commands and keep everything moving smoothly.

On the night of the Blood Moon, when the Sergeant returned from her personal quest to help another hapless team defeat a hinox, she expected to find her fort under siege, and to rush in and save them all just in time. However, it turned out that she just had a very active imagination when it came to potential heroics.

What she actually found were piles of expertly slain enemies; the armies of evil had already been so soundly defeated that when the Sergeant returned with what seemed like reinforcements, it turned into complete overkill.. or like she had returned to claim glory that certainly was not rightfully her own.

No, it wasn’t hers; it was Dunma’s. Betaal had tried to verbally express how impressed she was with the younger Zora’s natural leadership, but nothing she said to Dunna ever came out right or properly praised the other woman’s excellence. She needed something much more meaningful to show her appreciation and her admiration of someone so talented.

And more than anything, she needed a second-in-command to help her keep this place in shape. It didn’t take very much consideration when she already had somebody in mind.

“Sir, the preparations for the official naming ceremony are complete,” came the voice of the very violet Zora who was so often on Betaal’s mind. The Sergeant looked up from her work to see Dunma’s tall form in the entryway to her tent, one arm raised to hold the flap aside.

“Uhh, come in,” Betaal stammered, biting her tongue a second later in rebuke for her own
awkwardness. As requested, the younger woman stepped forward, letting the flap swish softly shut behind her, while her warm, golden eyes moved curiously across the Sergeant’s private tent.

To her, it was odd how rarely Betaal actually slept underwater. In fact, she couldn’t recall ever seeing her superior asleep at all, and had begun to wonder if the blue Zora just lulled into a state of half-awareness, idly resting yet ready for action. Even more curious was how the other woman’s tent was lined with haphazardly stacked towers of.. books? Some appeared to be for the purpose of reading, for entertainment, while others were sloppily bound, just barely together. Maybe it wouldn’t have been so odd, if not for the fact that there were just so many. Betaal was like a small, blue dragon, constantly guarding her paper hoard and ceaselessly working on... something.

The sides of the older woman’s hands- both of them- were consistently stained with ink or graphite, so clearly this was something she dedicated plenty of her time to, despite being so covert and mysterious about it. As per her mysterious behavior, when Dunma came just near enough to make out the words written on the pages laid out before her superior, Betaal began to gather them up, flipping them upside-down so nothing was left visible but the blank sides.

“Dunma, you were meant to be off-duty hours ago,” the older woman chastised, her single eye peering up at the other, her voice not holding nearly enough disappointment to sound convincingly critical.

“You know me, sir,” the violet Zora stated, her own wandering eyes focusing on the woman before her and she straightened, folding her arms behind her back. “I prefer working to being idle.”

“I do know that, yes,” Betaal nodded, her red fins flattening while she debated on the right words to say. It always felt as though when Dunma was around, all comprehension of language left her. Still, she was concerned and she needed to give voice to that. “The work you do is always pristine, so I can’t complain about it, as long as you are still doing okay. You are doing okay, aren’t you?”

“Do you mean in regards to my loss..?” The young guardsman appeared almost surprised that anyone would bring this up again. Not that she knew many of the Zoras on duty at the fort, but those who knew her always made these awkward attempts at dodging that subject, their words far too cautious and gentle for Dunma’s comfort, regardless. Again, her eyes began to wander, though this time it was in thought. She was contemplating her own response and how truthful she could stand to be. Actually, she hadn’t even considered whether or not she was ‘okay’, so it took a moment for her to take stock of her own emotional state, just to have anything to say in response.

But Dunma was comfortable enough talking about this with Betaal, since the other Zora was one of the rare few who actually made an effort to be concerned. It wasn’t like she had forgotten the other woman’s silent support on the day of the funeral and Betaal’s roughened hand tight upon her own.

Still, every single day, Dunma had to look at the charred, black stone where her father’s body had been burned; nothing made that easy.

“No, I’m not doing okay,” the violet Zora confessed, her voice soft but strong enough. “It’s not even possible to be okay while dealing with this.. But I’m doing my best and hopefully that will eventually be okay.”

“Alright,” the Sergeant accepted this answer with a solemn nod. “Just.. If you need anything, or somebody to talk to, be sure you let me know. I don’t want you to feel isolated and alone here. Also, it’s fairly clear that you’re using all this work as a means of coping and if that’s what you feel you need, you already know that I won’t try to dissuade you. I also don’t want to overwhelm you, though..” The blue Zora’s hands drew together, her fingers tapping in mounting frustration. She really was terrible at explaining herself, so she took a deep breath before starting again. “..but given
how eager you are to work and how excellent your work is, I submitted a request to have you promoted in rank, to Corporal.”

“..Sir?” Dunma’s words were choked in her utter perplexity. Her family back home and family friends had done their best to convince her that she needed to take time off. Was this offer a show of pity? Surely it was undeserved and she couldn’t help but softly shake her head in disbelief, especially with how she nearly fell apart on the night of the Blood Moon.

“Of course, it’s up to you to accept or decline the position, if Captain Bazz approves the request,” Betaal explained in Dunma’s questioning silence, her words suddenly coming out with thoughtless haste, a fumbling attempt at reassurance. “I’m not going to pressure you, if it’s more than you wanted.. But I would personally really like to have you by my side.”

It took a few moments of awkward silence and a quick observation of the violet Zora’s surprised expression for Betaal’s words to catch up to her and for her to better understand exactly how her statement sounded. Her mouth fell open, her voice vacating her throat for seemingly her own good, while Dunma quietly blinked, probably grossly offended by her superior’s blatant social failure.

“Oh, that came out kind of wrong,” Betaal muttered, her face falling into her palms. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright, Sir,” Dunma answered, likely trying to have mercy on the very flustered blue Zora. “So.. all of these books.. are they all from your writer friend, you know, for you to check over?”

“Oh, umm..” the Sergeant stammered, raising her head from her hands just in time to get a glimpse of the expression which rested comfortably upon the younger Zora’s face. She seemed a bit more at ease, the corners of her mouth attempting a smile, her eyes narrowed in what almost resembled.. suspicion? Nah, Betaal was probably just overthinking that. Even with two eyes, she’d been terrible at reading people’s faces. “Well, some are yes. Others are just work related and.. journals. Boring stuff.”

The blue Zora glanced to one side, taking stock of her surroundings. It looked like she had attempted to build a miniature version of the fort with stacked books and papers.

“I’m sorry if this question is.. inappropriate,” Dunma began, her tail flicking awkwardly while she trailed off in hesitation. “..maybe I shouldn’t.”

“What is it?” The older woman bid the other to go on, oddly comforted by the fact that Dunma was suddenly less confident.

“I just.. It’s unusual,” the violet-scaled woman attempted to explain, the black slits of her pupils tightening in apprehension. She knew that she didn’t need to continue, that she needed to drop this point before she utterly destroyed her superior’s good opinion of her. Curiosity would be the end of her.

“How did you learn.. You know, to read?”

“Oh..” Betaal trailed off, nodding knowingly. “You mean because I’m Undercity.”

“I’m sorry if I’m assuming too much, Sir.” The younger Zora’s gaze faltered, her golden stare gluing itself to the ground before her webbed toes. “I just didn’t think Undercity Zora considered reading an important life skill.”

“No, we know that it’s important,” Betaal spoke plainly, her roughened voice regaining the sound of a commanding officer and she leaned back in her seat. She felt suddenly foolish that she had assumed, maybe, somebody wouldn’t blatantly stereotype her; being wrong about that absolutely stung at her pride. “The Uppercity Zora don’t see it as important for us to know, because to them, we
only exist to keep them fed and do all of the physical labor that they deem to be beneath them. Educating us would empower us to question or even escape that position, which is why they don’t do it. But to answer your question- my father was a weapon smith, which is another profession that most Undercity Zora aren’t considered for. During the Calamity, however, every hand that could provide weaponry was encouraged to keep working. The quality of his work earned him some topside friends, one of which provided my education. Father wanted me to become a scholar, but.. I just wanted to live up to the Undercity brawler stereotype, of course.”

Despite that Betaal ended on a vain attempt at humor, she was still met with obvious discomfort. Uppercity Zoras never liked to hear about the disadvantaged Undercity people, and they especially couldn’t face the difficult facts when it was pointed out that their standard of living was maintained by the suffering of those beneath them. They always went into this state of apologetic quiet, or even outright anger, at which point, their hurt feelings always seemed to become the priority.

“That last part was a joke,” Betaal spoke up, just to interrupt the uncomfortable static of the silence between them.

“I didn’t think it would be appropriate to laugh at a joke made at your own expense, Sir,” Dunma responded, tense and looking very fearful that she may jeopardize her position here with one wrong word.

“That’s fair.” Betaal ultimately forgave the younger Zora. Dunma probably had never had the chance to understand anything outside of the Uppercity assumptions about the world. It was definitely a conversation for another day, however. Clearing her throat, the blue Zora made a sincere attempt to start again. “So then.. are you a big reader, too?”

“Of course. Well, I used to be, when I was younger,” the violet guardsman answered quietly, her shoulders delicately shrugging while the tension in her frame cautiously waned. “I was a huge fan of ‘The Cursed Girl’ series when it first came out. Have you read those?”

“Oh. Um..” And just like that, Betaal returned to her own state of unnerved brainlessness. “Well.. of course I’ve read them. Decent works of fiction by actual Zora authors are so rare, those are like required reading. Everything else we have was either written by long dead Hylians or Zora nobles that hardly have enough perspective to come up with anything more interesting than upperclass drama that they discussed over tea.”

“How do you know The Red Herring isn’t a noble?” Dunma asked with a quiet titter. The author was dreadfully mysterious and she had always been personally convinced that nobody actually knew the Red Herring. But, as it was, she assumed that the author was, in fact, a red Zora, and red Zoras were much more common among the upperclass.

“I suppose I don’t.. actually know that for sure,” Betaal uttered, her tone turning quiet and unsure, her single eye squeezing shut in response to her oddly consistent verbal blunders. “I guess.. I was just assuming. The tone of the stories.. It’s like the author has a really deep, personal understanding of how it feels to be.. stigmatized.. Or marginalized? I didn’t think that kind of emotional depth could come out of somebody that didn’t already understand it.” The older woman sighed, shaking her head and batting a single hand in the air to dismiss her own rambling. “I don’t know. I’m obviously just biased by my own personal feelings.”

Thankfully, Betaal’s terrible lack of social grace didn’t appear to be a problem, since the other Zora wore a rare smile, though it quickly faded into something more melancholy and contemplative. “I used to be friends with this other girl when I was younger- Tula. We were both really huge fans of the Cursed Girl series and we would go on little adventures, pretending to be Lorelei and General Kita. I would always be General Kita- even back then, I really related to her super serious nature.
Anyway, when the third book came out and those two characters became romantically involved, I related to them even more, because in my mind, Tula was my Lorelei. Then Prince Sidon took that trip to Hateno Bay to slay the giant octorock and suddenly he wasn’t this weird, prissy little Prince anymore, but ‘heroic’ and ‘hunky’. Tula became obsessed with him, like a lot of the girls in my age group and that made it pretty clear that she would never feel the same about me as I did about her.”

Dunma sighed, flicking her tail and looking up at Betaal with an embarrassed expression, like she only just realized how much she’d said and hadn’t intended to ramble to such an extent. “Oh, I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this... I think what I wanted to say was that, because the author kind of vanished without finishing the final book in the series, it feels like.. I can’t move on from my stupid, adolescent, unrequited love. I can’t have a new beginning, if Lorelei and Kita don’t get their ending.”

“You really do love the series, don’t you?” Betaal placed her elbows on her desk, leaning forward, her voice light and charmed. Then, with a tiny chuckle she said, “I always found General Kita pretty relatable, too. That must be why we get along so well. Though, if you don’t mind me saying so, you seem more like a Lorelei to me.”

“What? No way!” the younger Zora hissed, setting free a quiet, dubious laugh at the claim. The way she saw it, Lorelei was utter perfection, so Betaal’s words managed to translate into a compliment that was beyond what was believable. “Lorelei’s introspections are so deep and whimsical and she’s always thinking of others.”

“You think you’re not whimsical?” the blue Zora questioned, her own tone turning equally doubtful and her bright red fins flared at what she was hearing. “You, who can’t move on from your unrequited, adolescent romance, until two fictional characters have their own ending? That’s as whimsical as it gets.” Placing one hand against the rounded crest of her forehead, Betaal slumped as though she had to continue to mentally process Dunna’s own inability to see this likeness. As she contemplated the subject, she spoke up to add, “Also, Lorelei, herself, never recognized how deeply altruistic she could be, so it’s fitting that you can’t see it in yourself.”

“It feels like such a long time since I discussed this series,” the violet Zora spoke, her voice holding this strange tune of relief, like she really had been waiting a lifetime for this very opportunity. Idly, she searched for some place to seat herself, so that she could get comfortable; she asked before doing so, however. “Do you mind if I stay a bit longer, to talk about it?”

Betaal let out an amused titter, her one eye shining with genuine glee at how lovely that notion sounded. “Not at all.”

The throne room of the palace was a grand, resounding chamber when at last it emptied, the smallest sounds subject to vast echoes; drops of water were entire rainstorms, far off voices melded together until they were like waves crashing upon a seashore. It was as though the ancient Zora architects carved the artful interior with the sound from inside a conch shell in mind.

As such, the patters of Sidon’s feet were likened to a rushing crowd of Zoras, not nearly as hesitant as he was, himself. Every little jingle of his jeweled adornments sang like the castle bells, until he fell still before the throne, standing alone before his father, a troubled expression marring his handsome features, though he concealed this with ease by dipping his head low, his eyes downcast.

It had only taken a word from the Prince to usher his Hylian companion elsewhere. He made it clear enough that he wished to have a word with his father and Link left him to it.
“Father,” Sidon began, his voice sounding uncannily like that of a child when he addressed the man before him, the King before him. “I apologize, I know that you are undoubtedly very busy."

The tone of the young Prince’s voice had all who remained turning on heal, polite enough to recognize that this was the beginning of a father-son conversation, one which included nobody else. Muzu had been lingering, but he ventured off at his own slow, stiff pace. Another, older secretary went quietly scurrying off at the gentle swish of Dorephan’s hand and a small group of Royal Order Knights ducked into darker corners of the palace, out of sight and out of mind.

“I expect that you are as well, my son,” the King began, though he made no reference to all the work needing to be done for their people. Instead, it was something of an implication that the Prince always seemed to be making what most elder Zoras would regard as mischief. “Don’t think that I haven’t heard about the speech you gave during the Champion Festival. And that Knight of yours even threatened to remove a council member from the event for speaking out.”

The massive Zora shook his head, though the quiet rumble of a laugh was still easy enough to hear from him. “You certainly are coming into your own, in regards to who you wish to be, as a ruler.”

“You don’t disapprove of my actions, I hope,” Sidon spoke in uncertainty, not raising his head. In the time he spent thinking over that speech and in the tense moments of its delivery, he felt justified, he felt like he was doing the right thing, like it wasn’t something that could be questioned. Yet, hearing his father make such casual mention of it, as though it were the mere rebelliousness of youth, Sidon couldn’t help but feel maybe it had been foolish, or petty, or childish.

And maybe he was being childish now, too. No- surely his father did not believe it to be so, and neither should he.

“It’s odd that you should mention Brivere, however,” the Zora Prince began again. “I wished to speak with you about him, actually.” At last, Sidon inclined his neck, raising his head enough to peer upward, at the towering height of the King. “It’s become very.. difficult for me to ignore that the circumstances of his life have had a profoundly negative effect on his personality and the way he views himself. Surely, all the cruelty he has faced was not necessary. As the son of your former First Knight, a dear friend of yours, could you not have done more to protect him?”

“My son, you are a compassionate boy and I cannot fault you for that.” Shaking his head and heaving a sigh, the King leaned into one arm of his throne, a sudden, distinct heaviness coming over him, his expression vague and distant while he contemplated the past and its effects on the present.

“It’s a difficult matter, I’m afraid,” Dorephan at last offered this response, the words like those of defeat. “Even I was among those questioning the true parentage of this Knight of yours. Difficulties in life are never a necessity and suffering is not something that is deserved by anybody, so I do regret to hear that he has suffered. But I knew the former First Knight well; he was withheld, constantly thinking, overthinking, and he did not trust others easily. Prion’s friendship was something that took incredible work to gain..”

Dorephan’s fins slowly flattened, his normally reserved expression deepening into something more solemn, perhaps even regretful. “..His marriage came to me as news at the same time as his death. And this woman; I had never met her, nor even heard of her. To me, the claim that they had fallen in love on the battlefield seemed outrageous, unbelievable.. perhaps my reaction came from a mixture of grief and jealousy, because.. Prion was as dear to my heart as your mother. For a complete stranger to return from a war that took the life of a man I loved, and for her to claim that she was his one, true love.. I’m sorry, Sidon. As you can see, it was impossible for me to accept. I don’t blame the boy, certainly not, but.. I never trusted the mother.”
When the King’s deep, booming voice fell into silence, Sidon did not immediately raise his own to say anything in reply. His lack of condemnation came in respect to his father’s feelings and losses, but with a much deeper uncertainty. To him, this still felt to be utterly trivial and he could not work out whether or not he had only come to that conclusion because of where his own heart had wandered. Because he cared deeply for Brivere, he could never accept any justifications for his unfair treatment.

“Though, while I may not have said anything before,” the blue Zora began once more, “...when you first became friends with the young Knight, I remember listening to everything you would tell me about him, and thinking that- indeed- it reminded me of Prion.”

These recollections were a turbulent matter for the much older King, the loss still fresh enough in his mind to be painful, the questions of what might have been an ache that never left; yet, at the same time, to reflect on people that he adored gave his heart some joy, some peace, if bittersweetly. “He was known to use his prophetic abilities to measure every possible outcome with endless, careful, obsessive precision. And with how Brivere went on to serve as your Knight, it is very ironic. Maybe Prion brought this child into the world, knowing that he would go on to protect you, and indirectly, me. This could have been my dear friend’s way of continuing to protect me, from beyond his grave, and if so, then perhaps this Knight yet has some divine purpose intended by his father.”

“Forgive me, but...” The pink skin at the base of the Prince’s crest wrinkled in uncertainty, his dark eyelids narrowing in doubt that he could not hide. “That seems very cruel- to create a child, without any regard for the life they would lead, and for the purpose of serving another..” Sidon tried to bite his tongue, momentarily lowering his head, fighting off the spirited cry for justice that existed in his heart, bidding him to turn these passionate feelings into passionate words. In the end, he was helpless to restrain himself, flinging his hands out to his sides in a physical expression of his outrage. “Was that really the mindset of this friend of yours?”

“His gift was also a burden, Sidon,” Dorephan’s answer was immediate, though his words were not harsh. No, he was ever careful, his son’s feelings as important to him as his own. “Knowing every cruel twist and turn of fate and having to constantly decide which path will create the least amount of pain, or else deciding that some must suffer or die for the survival of others.. it was never something he took lightly. Sometimes it made him seem callous or cold, but he wasn’t. I knew the truth, and the truth was that he put himself through more strain and stress than anyone should, and all for the sake of measuring every possibility, to always make the best choice. It’s for this very reason that our people regard this prophetic magic as the most divine of all- because possessing this ability is the greatest burden and responsibility, along with being the most difficult to bear.”

“I thought that it was because of Diviner Zorana- the first seer of our tribe,” Sidon commented, repeating the strict teachings he’d received, in his youth.

“Of course.” Dorephan softly nodded, his own many adornments making much heavier clinks. “But do you think it was easy, being her, in her time period? Foreseeing the disaster that would destroy her kind and most of the world, then being faced with the task of saving her people, who at the time were vicious and barbaric?”

“No, Father, I suppose not.” The Prince let out a defeated sigh, his tail hanging heavily against his back. No matter what, he would never accept that anybody’s suffering could be justified, even when it served a ‘purpose’. Not Brivere’s.. and not Link’s, either.

“Can I ask about one other matter?” Beginning again, Sidon allowed his former subject matter to be placed aside, to make room for intrigue which the King’s words had newly brought on.

“Of course, Sidon.”
“You mentioned.. loving the former First Knight?” The younger Zora’s words were hesitant, careful, but pressed by growing curiosity, by his need for answers. “But, you were soul bound to Mother. How was it that this was deemed acceptable?”

“Hm. It certainly wasn’t much of a secret at the time and people had opinions, as they always do.” A swat of the King’s hand spoke the memory of his aggravation much better than his otherwise calm demeanor. “However, much of it could be deflected by the simple truth of the matter- Prion and I were friends. What most people don’t understand or accept is that, friendship can be loving, it can be intimate, and friends can mean just as much to you as a lover. Couldn’t it even be said that lovers are merely friends who we’ve become inseparably attached to?”

“But, Father!” Sidon interjected. With all he’d ever been told in his life, how could he not resist these wildly different ideas, even when somewhere deep in his heart, he desperately wanted to accept them. “It’s our peoples’ belief that we all have one, single person whom we are meant to love and no more. Our stories and culture, everything that we are, reaffirms that. From the romantic notion of two individuals’ souls combining into one, to the dismissal of the barbaric, loveless mating rituals of our unevolved, lawless kin; it isn’t just a silly rule we invented to seem superior, but something at the very root of our ascension to a wise, civilized, divinely-blooded species. And furthermore, what of the people who you supposedly love, when they learn that their own love was not enough to satisfy you?”

“Oh, Sidon..” Dorephan breathed a tired sigh, exhausted at just trying to comprehend how somebody could say so much, so quickly. If anything could be noted of his precious son, it was that when passion took him, his tongue never failed to turn sharp. “I’m afraid these matters are ones which you must decide upon for yourself. Allow me to say, however- I’ve always believed that the notion that our hearts are incapable of loving more than one person was a gross underestimation of the amount of affection a person possesses within themselves. How is it we can claim to be so great, with hearts that love so scarcely? The only things truly limiting what we are capable of feeling is this society we live in, and the emotional injury that comes with living such long lives. As time passes and our hearts are wounded, we begin to lose the ability to freely love, or at least that has been my own experience.. But you, son, you are still young and still have the capacity to dearly love those around you. If it makes you happy, and you aren’t harming those you care for, then do it. Do it while you’re still able to.”

“I appreciate the encouragement, Father, but I wasn’t asking these questions for myself, of course.” The lie slid off of Sidon’s tongue just as easily as any truthful statement. He supposed he could have intended to return to the original subject and the apparent hypocrisy that his own father could still be an admired ruler, while loving more than one person, yet Brivere’s mother was tormented to the point of taking her own life for the very same reason.

“Oh, my boy, you must think me incredibly naive.” A soft smile impressed itself upon the King’s lips, his golden eyes shining knowingly, even when his son baulked. One finger idly pointed in Sidon’s direction while the King’s voice raised once more in elaboration and warning. “Don’t think that I haven’t heard all about your growing closeness with the Hylian Champion. Laflat may not be an incredible gossiper, but she has ways of mentioning this and that. And if you have it in mind to take on a Hylian lover, you must have realized that this won’t be a life long relationship.”

“I...” Hesitation captured the red Zora’s breath and any further attempts to conceal his complicated love life. “..I have considered that, yes.”

“And, of course, you do have responsibilities as heir to the throne,” Dorephan reminded the Prince. Oddly enough, he could recall having this same conversation with Mipha and worrying over the heartbreak she would face. Yet.. her beloved Hylian outlived her. The King couldn’t help but fear
that by repeating this warning, he may jinx his son.

He did what he could to hide yet another, more prominent fear, because in his heart, he knew better than to blame Link for Mipha’s loss, but.. It was becoming more and more difficult not to worry that this boy wouldn’t simply drag another one of his children to their pyre.

The regal, blue Zora cleared his throat, pushing his unjustified fears back into the dark shadows of his psyche, then continued. “But, these issues aside, please, don’t limit that heart of yours. The magic you possess makes it even easier for you to become close to others- so do so.”

“Again, I worry for those I harm along the way,” Sidon confessed, dejected and ashamed of himself. “Being able to sense the emotions of others means I’m all too aware of when I hurt them.”

“Do you not hurt them just the same when you limit yourself?” the King asked sincerely, upturning one palm to gesture his questioning. “Does it not harm them when you deny your feelings?”

Sidon only shook his head in confusion, the end of his tail giving a weak flick. “I don’t know..”

“I only tell you this, son, because I’ve been there.” The weightiness returned to the tone of Dorephan’s words when he sat back in his throne. He hadn’t meant to say anything more on this subject, yet with how his son peered up with confused, imploring eyes, he could not deny the boy further explanation, only hoping that his insight was truly helpful.

“Once upon a time, my own heart was as free and open as yours,” the King began. “I loved your mother. I loved Prion. I loved your sister, and you. I lost your mother first, then the Calamity came and took everyone else I loved away, save for you. Legally, I’m unable to remarry, but I’ve never even wanted to, anyway. Prion’s position was newly assigned, and though the current First Knight is a charming, talented, powerful man, I’ll never be as close to him as I was with Prion.”

The King’s mouth opened for a moment, in further continuation, but fell shut in hesitation. He took a breath, steeling himself to talk over the background noise of utter heartbreak. “..I feared for Mipha’s life when she became the Zora Champion, but I didn’t want to limit her, so I allowed her to follow her heart. I knew that she was doing the right thing, even if it was my wish to protect her from the dangers of this world. She was strong so I chose to believe in her.. I’m afraid I should apologize to you, Sidon. When I returned from the war against the Calamity, I didn’t make a proper effort to be the best father I could have been. I was almost afraid that.. if I were to become too close to you, something terrible was sure to happen, and I would lose you, too. It felt like, loving so many people cursed me, making it so that everybody I loved was doomed. It was a selfish way to think, I know, and you probably grew up believing that.. maybe I just didn’t love you as much as I did your sister, which absolutely isn’t true.”

“I didn’t think that, Father, I..” Sidon trailed off, uncertain that he could find his own emotions underneath the surge of regret he could suddenly feel from the other. But in fact, he had occasionally, subconsciously, believed this awful thing to be true; it was difficult not to. He was in just as much pain from Mipha’s loss at that time, but rarely could he expect to seek comfort in the King. Only Muzu ever made an attempt to console him, though that stuffy, strict old man’s words sounded more like lectures every single time.

“Sidon, what I’m trying to say by all of this is- there might come a day when your heart isn’t as open and vulnerable as it is now, so you should rejoice in that while you have it.” Despite the turmoil of his heart, the King maintained the appearance of calm, a veneer that Sidon, alone, saw through. “No matter what you do, or who you love, I will still be proud of you.”

The King stooped forward, one massive hand gently reaching toward his son and Sidon took the
other man’s hand without hesitation. The Prince’s own hands were small and almost child-like by comparison, which was maybe appropriate in this moment. His grip could not even fully encircle one of his father’s fingers, but he leaned his head down low, pressing the point of his brow to the older Zora’s knuckles.

“Thank you, Father,” breathed the Prince, honestly, sincerely, relieved.

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“Of all places, this is where you go?” Sidon laughed off the emotional weight of his previous encounter with just one look at his precious companion. After running one very quick errand, he used his electoreceptive sense to pinpoint the wayward Hylian, as always, only to find Link hanging about the very gazebo where they wooed one another for the first time.

“I have good memories of this place,” Link said, his pronunciations a bit strained from how he’d leaned into the railing, folding his arms atop it and propping his chin upon them. Immediately after, he raised his head and turned his gaze to the approaching Prince, a smile making its way to his features with newfound ease. “I cling to things like that.”

The Zora couldn’t help but laugh softly at the notion of Link, his Link, daydreaming of previous romantic encounters like a lovestruck adolescent. It was charming, certainly, but almost unbelievable. That particular encounter also wasn’t so terribly distant, but Sidon said nothing of it- how could he comment on the reflections of a man who barely had any memories?

“You didn’t have to wait on me,” Sidon said when he poised himself at Link’s side, his elbow gently bumping the Hylian’s shoulder. “You could have gone about your business. Surely you have other things to be doing?”

“You haven’t learned by now that I put off everything for you?” Link answered, his voice the usual steady sound, somewhat dismal despite his cynical sense of humor. Still, to Sidon’s ear, he sounded more content than ever, even as things around them only grew harder and harder.

But, as it turned out, the Hylian had merely succeeded in embodying and physically emulating the calm before a storm. The smile slid away from Link’s features, his eyes turning distant, with just enough clarity remaining that Sidon could be sure that he hadn’t slipped into one of his flashbacks. “With everything your people are going through,” he began, his hands tightening into fists, his deep, blue eyes rippling with the reflection of the water below. “I can’t help but feel that it’s my fault, like if I could just get on with this whole hero fate, or whatever you’d call it, this wouldn’t be happening to your people.”

“Link- don’t fault yourself. This absolutely is not your doing.” A careful hand enveloped the tiny Hylian’s shoulder, feeling the breaking tremor in his frame and the taut strength just underneath.

Sidon’s palm was a warm, firm weight while it rested upon Link and he stilled under it, turning to look into the Zora’s face, seeking the reassurance he knew he would find there.

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“Actually,” the Prince continued, “if you hadn’t been here, we would have still been struggling to understand this awful Water Blight. Truly, you offer such a remarkable insight, and you even spoke words that moved the entire council. I’ve never seen such a response. My friend, you’re a natural.” Quietly laughing, Sidon paused in a fluster, then added, “I wouldn’t have thought so, but it seems that was poor judgement, on my part.”

“You always make me feel better..” Link whispered, leaning into the railing once more. “How are you so good at that?”
“Sometimes I have to wonder, has anybody else even tried?” That wasn’t really a question he needed to ask, nor did he need an answer. He didn’t pretend to understand this terrible fate that his beloved was burdened with, but he understood feeling alone. He understood what it was like to never be acknowledged or praised or comforted, and maybe that was the true reason he was always so desperate to console these damaged, melancholy men.

“Hmm..” A quiet hum was the only sound given in return, in place of unnecessary words. Link was tired from the early morning, his thoughts just as blunted as his usual state of emotion. He was glad that he didn’t need to say anything for Sidon to understand him. Despite having been initially wary of how intuitive the Prince could be, thanks to his magic, Link was beginning to feel that it was the greatest blessing of all. A perfect counterpart, enabling his silence.

But even with slow, dull processing, Link remembered his promise to try harder, to make sure that he paid attention to Sidon’s emotions as well. Surprisingly, it felt natural and easy to actually give a shit for a change.

“What about you, Sidon?” the Hylian asked, straightening so that his voice came out clear. “How are you? Obviously this entire situation is stressful for you, but what about your safety? Maybe it’s selfish of me to be worried about you more than anyone else, but I don’t care. I’m selfish and I’m willing to admit it.”

Link shrugged- okay, maybe this was a bit about himself- shit. Letting out a sigh of frustration with his own inherent failures, he reached up to touch the hand that was pressed against his shoulder. The red scales of Sidon’s fingers were a bit rough, but his claws were as smooth as glass. “What are the chances that you could be poisoned by this Water Blight?”

“You needn’t be terribly concerned.” The Prince offered immediate reassurances; Link had to second guess it for a moment, thinking that maybe Sidon was just brushing him off, but no, his voice had an honest sound to it. It was bizarre being able to hear such a subtle difference in the Prince’s lies versus his truths, but Link had learned.

“I’m among those who are highly protected, of course.” The sound of the Zora’s words took a turn toward guilt, almost like he regretted being in a place of absolute safety. Most days, he didn’t truly believe in his own importance, so no, it felt wrong to be so protected. “The food I’m offered is without risk and my cistern has been completely drained, so I’m not even tempted to sleep submerged- not that I can be, with you around.”

A puffed exhale shook the shorter man, a weak laugh and a tiny smile, expressions of the smallest sparks of happiness in him. When he said little else, choosing to just quietly accept this answer, Sidon prompted further conversation.

“And you, my friend? I never asked, but you didn’t reopen those wounds of yours, did you?” The massive Zora moved about at Link’s side, looking as though he wanted to fully inspect the Hylian, the jingling of his jewelry an audible signal that he was fretting.

“They’re sore and they itch like mad,” Link answered honestly. “..so if you see me randomly rubbing up against things, you’ll know why.”

“The stitches have to be removed, so keep that in mind.”

“Stitches?” The Hylian repeated the word in slight repugnance, getting this sudden image of his back sewn together like one of those awful Fang and Bone masks. “So a Zora medic just sewed me up? Like a pair of torn trousers?”
"That is more or less what it amounts to," the explanation came ever so gently. Sidon was vaguely aware of how differently Hylians treated injuries and ails, as compared to Zoras, and clearly Link was put off. "You already know that most of the chemical compounds that have healing effects on Hylians don’t work for us, and magical healing talents are very rare. As such, our medical practices are a bit more hands-on and invasive. Though, we also seem to be a touch more physically resilient. I’ve only had one wound stitched in my life."

"Hnn, right, the octorock," Link nodded, stealing a momentary glance at the scar that marred one of the Prince’s beautiful forefins, then he averted his eyes quickly enough. He remembered that Sidon was self-conscious about the perceived flaw, but personally, Link really did believe the mark gave him a bit of character. It was like something tough-looking to counteract the Prince’s otherwise frilly, fancy persona.

Comparatively, Link probably looked like a goddamn ragdoll. If Sidon thought his one scar was so ugly, what must he have thought of the Hylian’s tiny, tattered body?

“‘Yes- that damnable cur,’ Sidon outright growled, recalling the fight but saying nothing of it. He didn’t need to get in the habit of retelling old stories. ‘I loathe to admit it, but I still have nightmares of that encounter. It wasn’t the most fearsome creature I’ve ever faced, but I was young and inexperienced, and it was one of the first times I’d fought something incredibly dangerous.. I was so desperate to prove myself, back then.’"

“It’s understandable,” the smaller man spoke up to reassure. It was wild how easily he could relate to Sidon now, despite the incredible differences in their actual experiences. “Bokoblins aren’t all that strong, but one of my first fights with them was.. Well, clumsy and painful. After that, I can’t really see my hatred for them ever lessening.”

“Link.” The way Sidon spoke the Hylian’s name, it sounded like a swift interruption, a diversion toward something more serious and Link’s ears twitched at the sound, tilting a bit upward in wariness. He gave the Prince his attention in the form of eye contact, an unabashed questioning to be found on his face.

When Link looked up, Sidon continued, “..before the night of the Blood Moon, you had mentioned riding for Akkala? Do you still intend to do so?”

“Well..” The very first thing that came to mind was the Yiga threat, much as he was attempting to blot that out. The images of those faceless warriors blurred together, like an amalgam of red and gray, overwhelming him, overpowering him. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment, pressing his palms against his face like he could physically remove these images from inside his head.

When his hands fell away, he took a breath, stilling himself all over again. It was just too bad that the high from kicking that one footsoldier’s ass wore off, leaving behind the dread of their threats. They were looming, somehow more dangerous and real than the Calamity, itself.

In the end, Link couldn’t decide if he was really concerned for his own safety, or for the safety of the people he was endangering by lingering here. Surely the Zoras didn’t need more trouble on top of this Water Blight, and Sidon.. Link swallowed dryly, his mouth setting into a troubled frown; he’d already imagined the Yiga Clan taking the Prince hostage, offering to trade his life for Link’s. Nobody would even need to offer the Hylian up to them, because he’d have his own head on the chopping block faster than they could push him down to it.

He was afraid. He was afraid like he hadn’t been in a long time.

“I’m undecided for now,” he answered, having already taken more time than what seemed
appropriate. “I’d like to stay and aid your people, if I can, and I’m sure I’ll be needed to help in handling the move to Hateno Village, if some of your people do decide to go there.”

“Ah, so regardless, you do have plans to stay busy, I see,” Sidon answered cheerfully; it was fake this time. He gave a soft nod, not even trying to hide that something pressing and difficult was suddenly on his mind while he continued to speak, his words flat. “That’s good.”

“What does that mean?” More than a question, it was an accusation; it wasn’t angry, but worried. Link hated when people beat around the bush about stressful crap. “Are you trying to say that you want me to leave you alone?”

“Uhh- no, that’s not quite it, my dearest one!” An actual laugh came from the Zora in response to his beloved Hylian’s concern, though even his apparent amusement was touched with nervousness. “Let me just say, first, that I have something for you; a gift, as it were.”

With quick, jittery movements, Sidon began fussing with something hanging at his hip, dangling from the silvery belt just near where he wore his own sword. He fumbled with whatever it was, speaking up to fill the silence when it became clear that this wasn’t going as smoothly as he must have imagined. “Do you remember that night when you were feeling under the weather and you came unexpectedly to my quarters- it was late but we shared a drink, then we settled down together. You asked if we had any weapons to spare that night. Well, at the time, it occurred to me that you break your weapons dreadfully quick, so when I went to Master Dento to inquire as to if he had any swords to spare, I also specifically requested that he produce a more high quality weapon. Honestly, those swords we produce are awful; they’re really just trinkets for Hylian tourists.”

“Do you need help?” Link spoke up, maybe interrupting a bit. Sidon had clearly gotten leather chord knotted around his silvery chain, and his fingers were too big and clumsy to get the damn thing undone. “Yeah, here, just let me.”

Link scooted right over, brushing the Zora’s hands aside with the tiniest huff from the Prince. Sidon’s hands lingered near while Link’s smaller fingers fiddled with the knot, the Zora Prince hovering like he was afraid that some kind of grand surprise was going to be unveiled too soon, to which Link just let out a muffled titter. “Come on, I can already tell where this is going. Stop fussing.”

“Uh.. so, it did take quite awhile to make, but it seems that it was completed just in time. I’ve got it, I’ve got it.” Sidon’s hands rushed in, scrambling to get in between Link’s quick swats and grabbed up the tiny package which had been tied a bit too securely to his belt. The Prince unfolded the leather wrapping of the package, a task which should have fallen to the one receiving the gift, and he cleared his throat just before presenting Link with the newly revealed prize.

“So, here you are- it’s a Goldenscale Dirk, which Zoras tend to use for combat in close quarters,” he very proudly explained the gift as it was set free in the grasp of its new owner. The sheath was finely lacquered to a glossy, blue shine, much like the one Sidon carried around, set with jewels and attached to a silvery chain that would fasten the item securely in place.

Link’s fingertips traced each intricate detail, his eyes shining with fascination. “The sheath bears the same crest that you wear,” he commented, his voice soft with tremulous appreciation. Just feeling the weight of the dirk in his hands and the way the handle perfectly fit to his palm was overwhelming. He had received so many gifts and various weapons from Sidon in the past, but suddenly he was truly, genuinely moved.

“Yes indeed, the crest of the Zora Royal Family.” Sidon’s tone was as warm as the beaming smile upon his face, his heart erupting with a simple, yet deeply satisfied kind of happiness at seeing and
feeling his dearest one’s response to the gift. “So everyone will know that it was a gift from me, to you.”

“The blade is very balanced and flexible, and you should have a very difficult time breaking this, even actively trying to do so,” the Prince continued, prompting the Hylian to actually remove the weapon from its beautiful scabbard. When he did, he was even more amazed and suddenly understanding of this blade’s significance; the steel of the weapon was a pale gold, made with the same ore and process as Sidon’s trident, so it was sure to be of quality fit for royalty. The Prince made sure of that much.

“It will also be very convenient and easy for you to pull in a tight situation.” Though he had yet to admit the full extent of what occurred the night he found Link gravely injured, he was now thinking of that night, and of the fiends who ambushed and overpowered his beloved one. Had he been in possession of this trinket that night, he would have had a much better chance at escaping their grasp. “I do hope that it keeps you safe while I won’t be able to do so.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Link’s words were punctuated by the way he shoved the blade back inside the sheath with an audible snap. “Sidon, I don’t like the way you said that.”

“You need not worry, my dear friend.” Throwing up his hands in haste, Sidon made the quickest effort to prevent any undue anxiety. “I’m not in any danger or anything so dramatic as that, I assure you. However, I’ll be a bit indisposed for several days and therefor incapable of rushing to your aid or interacting at all.”

“Why?” Link asked, the gift held tightly in one hand, his arms laying flat at his sides. He was calm enough, or trying to be, anyway. His question was merely that— a need to understand.

“Do you recall what I said about.. Feeling helpless and wishing there were some way that I could comfort my people in this trying time?” Each word was spoken slowly, the explanation being granted with utmost care. Sidon gestured, his hands moving in soft circles while he attempted to find the most concise way to offer his dear lover a better awareness of what was to come. Unfortunately, ‘concise’ wasn’t exactly possible.

Link nodded; of course he remembered that, it was just last night. Still, Sidon had paused to await the tiny movement, only continuing once he was sure Link was following along.

“Well,” the Prince began, making it all too clear how wordy this was about to get, “when you asked me about Goddess Bloodstone during the council meeting, a notion occurred to me— I’m sorry, my friend, I’m aware that you know little of this subject matter, so I’m afraid it will take some explaining. I did tell you that the deliberate consumption of the purified mineral has powerful physical and magical effects. What I did not say is this; it is actually a ritual of the Royal Family to consume a draught of purified Goddess Bloodstone. A ‘Spirit Potion’, as we call it. It’s the very thing responsible for our immense size and strength, as well as the extensive life span of Zora royals.”

“If it’s so good for you, then why are you going to be out of commission?” Link posed this question, concerned and confused. The soft skin between his brows was furrowed, his blue eyes wide and filled with questioning. “And what if the mineral has been corrupted, like they were worried about at the meeting?”

“I’ve actually been putting off taking the potion. As such it was mixed long before this Water Blight crisis, so there is absolutely nothing to worry about, on that front,” Sidon answered easily and honestly. He was, in fact, glad to do so, because further stress was the last thing he wanted to cause his dear friend. Had Link been a Zora, this would have been common knowledge, but since he was
not, the Prince did feel it was his duty to make sure that his Hylian companion understood. “Also, because the effects are so immediate and intense, I’m typically rendered unconscious by them.”

“And how is this going to help your people, exactly?” His one, empty hand went up, his palm upturned, his fingers splayed. It felt like the more Sidon explained, the less it actually made sense and if anything, Link couldn’t but become frustrated with his own lack of awareness.

“Please, Link, I am trying to get to that,” the purr of Sidon’s voice cut through the Hylian’s distress. He remained gentle, careful, only stilling the questions of the other, because he had every intention to provide all of the answers, without further prompting. “After consuming the potion, despite the fact that I’ll be unable to wake, my magical powers will be temporarily bolstered. I’ll be able to reach much further and touch the minds of many people at once, without the need to be physically near them. In this way, I can comfort the sick and dying who are tucked away in the Basilica, which I’m not currently permitted to enter."

When Sidon stopped speaking, Link said nothing at all. The Hylian just hovered in a kind of unanswering silence which was typical of him, and suddenly the Prince couldn’t tell if he wasn’t speaking on purpose, or if he was trying to avoid interrupting. “I am sorry, my dear friend,” he apologized. He didn’t need to, because this was important and necessary, but he still felt a touch of guilt; it didn’t help that he’d been reminded of Link’s short lifespan and of his own vast, innumerable years. Even throwing away a week of that time felt like a crime and the Prince’s gaze drifted elsewhere while the silence continued to hang.

“Yeah,” Link began; it sounded upset and he didn’t mean that, so he nodded his head, taking a deep breath to release whatever weird tension made him sound like such an asshole whenever he spoke. “It’s alright, I understand. You have a responsibility to your people before me.. and they need that comforting spirit of yours much more than I do.”

Being with Sidon was this bizarre, entrancing, addicting experience, and the Hylian was all too aware. The Prince had always been the salve to his aches, even at times when Link was so tightly wound that everything pissed him off, and everything about that was unreal, and impossible to make any sense of.

Maybe Link just couldn’t recognize happiness in himself, and as such, he was struggling just to define what the Zora made him feel, but.. There was just so much of it. Maybe happiness was the right word for that, or maybe it was something else.

It hurt to lose that, yes, but Link understood that this situation was much more dire than his hurt feelings, and he had even acknowledged that Sidon had set him free so many times in the past.. He could set the Prince free, just for a little while; for him, he could be patient.

“Thank you for the gift, Sidon,” the Hylian said at last. It felt like the most appropriate thing. He raised the sheathed dirk to his chest, clutching it there like the item gave his heart the will to beat. “It’s beautiful.. and you know, really convenient, as a secondary, emergency weapon that I can easily carry alongside a primary weapon. Your instincts in regards to what I needed were.. pretty accurate. Thank you. I really will treasure it.”

“You’re.. welcome, of course.” Now it was the Zora who sounded a touch overwhelmed. He was shocked that his gift actually had been so well received, sure, but especially by the fact that his news had been, as well. “Thank you for understanding, my dear friend."

“I slept for a hundred years.. who am I to tell you that you can’t sleep for a week?” Link shrugged, attempting humor, even while his voice was tired and deadpan. There was some comfort in the knowledge that, even if Sidon wasn’t awake, he wasn’t actually going anywhere. He wasn’t going to be creepy enough to linger at the Prince’s bedside day in and day out, but if he needed to see him, he
“So, when do you plan to actually take this potion?” the Hylian asked, a bit more mentally prepared to talk about this like a rational person, now that he actually knew what was going on. He took a quick moment to fasten his new weapon in place, finding that it fit just right, then he reached out to press his hand into Sidon’s own. “How long do we have before that?”

“I have some things to get in order beforehand,” answered the Prince, for the sake of clarity. He smiled, however, as his fingers gently tightened around his lover’s, taking comfort in the gesture, grateful at even the simple offer. “..but we have this day, and this night.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, friends. Okay, so, buckle up, because I've got a bunch of stuff to tell you all about.

So, first, I wanna let you all know that my update schedule is gonna be changing. I'm gonna bump my update day to Saturday and not just because of my awful tendency to post late on Saturday. Well, kind of because of that. The biggest reason that I've been running late every week is because my wife and editor's schedule has also changed. So this change is to make up for that one.

Next is this- I will update next week, then I'm going to be taking the following week off in order to prep for Nanowrimo. You all can probably figure out that I have a pretty good idea where my chapters are going every week, but I really need to get a months worth of outline done beforehand, so that I can get a lot of work done in November. For those of you who didn't catch it in my last note, I'm gonna be doing NanoWrimo next month, which essentially means I'm gonna attempt to add 50K words to this story within the month. I'm sure you'll all love that, haha. I'm also hoping to get some comment responses done, because I am so behind on those.

ALSO- you all might have been able to tell from the context of the dialogue in this last scene, but a smut chapter is on its way. I don't want to give anything away, but it's just gonna be.. smutty. Really smutty. As with nsfw content, I will post warning tags around the smut scenes, so that any readers who don't care for that can skip over it with ease.

Casual reminder. Follow me!  
My Tumblr is BanishedOne and Banishfics  
My facebook fanpage is BanishedOne  
I'm also BanishedOne on the NanoWrimo site, if any other wrimos want to become friends on there.

Did you all like this chapter? I feel like it was really fluffy and romany, which was lovely to write. :)
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

The Water Blight was certainly a merciless foe, promising to waste one innocent life after another. However, where Zora's Domain was concerned, the trouble had only just begun. The Blight brought with it another hardship: a sudden food shortage than could leave Zoras to starve, dying en masse alongside the many who were already deathly ill. The Captain of the Guard was doing all he could to spare the fading light of a friend, while Brivere was fighting just to protect his sibling from the hoards of Zoras demanding the aid of his rare magic. The Zora Prince, meanwhile, was battling his tense nerves, juggling a duty to his people and preparations for his hibernation, despite how his home was falling apart around him. At dark times such as these, Link felt as though he may have well been caught helpless in the current.

Chapter Notes

Hey there, friends. I know that this update is extremely late and I'm very, very sorry. However, it is about 3K words over the average length of my updates, so maybe that makes it better? Also, if you've forgotten, there won't be another update this weekend. I suppose with how late I am, though, it's not such a long wait anymore?

Anyway, a few quick warnings for the chapter. There are some sexual themes, but it's only a few quick paragraphs. There are also some dark points, so be prepared.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silence was just something to get used to when attempting to spend quality time with Estuu. Brivere could still remember naive, innocent moments when he’d hoped for something otherwise in a sibling, back before he understood that even having a sibling was going to send his life painfully off course, but he liked to think that he’d put most of that behind him.

There was a time when he’d inwardly faulted his brother for every terrible thing that had come to pass. He had never allowed Estuu to see that much, but there had been days when Brivere hated and cursed the boy just for existing. It wasn’t as if the golden Zora had asked to be forced into this life of social solitude. He’d never asked to lose his mother, his friends, his status, and he’d certainly never asked for the burden of raising a child before he was even a proper adult, himself, but that was nevertheless exactly what he’d received.

For a young Zora to endure so much cruelty without having done anything wrong, it was impossible for him not to constantly seek someone upon which to place the blame, but he’d learned long ago that Estuu was not the one. There were others more rightfully to blame, and Estuu was a victim to circumstance, just the same as his elder brother. They were in this together and all they really had was each other.

Still, the silence was thick sometimes, especially today. It had been years since the last time Estuu
and Brivere had made an effort to spend time together and actually enjoy themselves. Most days, Brivere had training, duties and reports, while Estuu had lessons and low energy levels that could be difficult to bargain with. The boy was always so distant, off in a world all his own, so secretive that the golden Zora couldn’t even wager a guess at what sorts of things Estuu could be pondering.

It was a bizarre felling, being so dedicated to somebody, while also not really knowing them. Of course, it wasn’t entirely Estuu’s fault, but that was a realization that Brivere hadn’t come upon so quickly. The fact was, he could be just as withheld and nonverbal as his sibling. The golden Zora spoke rarely, his words something that had to be uttered with consideration, the entire act of saying anything almost unpractical if it felt pointless and it always felt pointless to speak to someone who could say nothing in return.

However, while Brivere’s back slumped ever so slightly under the weight of the quarry thrown over his shoulders, pointless speech began to feel practical as a distraction; plus, he’d caught the smaller Zora at his side casting concerned sideways glances in his direction just enough times to believe a response was warranted.

“It’s too late to be concerned about me,” Brivere uttered, his voice a low rumble, an additional effort on top of the weight his Blight-weakened frame was already carrying. His shoulders flexed, tightening in adjustment when he tugged the limp creature upward to keep it from slipping out of his grip. His scales were shining with perspiration from not just the work but the waning body heat of their thick-furred kill. Still, he couldn’t help but titter when Estuu’s eyes crossed him yet again, something visibly worried in that unchanging expression.

“You decided to shoot the largest member of the herd, of course,” the golden Zora spoke in complaint, though it was light-hearted enough. His brother never, ever considered the future. He didn’t have the kind of forethought it took to recognize that intentionally killing the mountain buck with the most impressive antlers would force Brivere to carry the beast of a creature home; merciful Hylia, he was just like their mother.

Estuu’s golden eyes wandered down to look upon the dangling head of the buck; Brivere had his hands tight upon the beast’s thin legs, so that its neck flopped to one side, its heavy rack making its head bounce with each step the older Zora took. It was funny how Estuu couldn’t make eye contact with the living, but he had no problem fixing his gaze upon the eyes of his targets, right before he took his shot. He could also peer with ease into the empty, bloody mess he left behind. He’d stared into their mother’s face, too, while desperately attempting to heal her, despite that she had been dead for some time when they found her.

A tinge of regret wormed its way into the older Zora, despite the rather enjoyable hunt prior to this very difficult trek back to Zora’s Domain. He’d spent so long feeling isolated by the world around him and his uncommunicative sibling that he hadn’t properly considered how suffocating it must have been to actually be unable to communicate. Estuu was just as trapped as he was, and he’d failed to acknowledge that.

What a selfish prick he was. He would need to double up his pleas for mercy from the Goddess to make up for that kind of selfishness; he was beginning to think that he was too much like his father.

“Perhaps you did, in fact, consider that I would be carrying this dead animal home and you simply believed that I was strong enough to do so,” Brivere commented, all too relieved to see the entryway to the city nearing up ahead. “But while I’m flattered that you seem to think I’m incredibly strong, you’re carrying home whatever you kill, next time.”

In utter contentment, Estuu reached out, the very tips of his fingers brushing along the dense, bristly coat of the slain buck.
At the checkpoint where the cliffs filtered into serene, blue pathways, there stood a guard eyeing the approaching pair. Brivere did not fail to notice the odd, searching expression of the armored Zora and how strange it seemed for the guardsman to pay any extra attention to passersby that were clearly also Zora, but he tried to tell himself that he was imagining things. When they attempted to pass, however, the guard outstretched his spear, disallowing their entry and Brivere was quick to turn a sharp look at the other, not nearly as confused as he was irritated. Aching shoulders made for bad temperament, apparently.

“Halt,” the guardsman spoke calmly. “If you wish to enter, you must relinquish your quarry.”

“I beg your pardon, guardsman?” The golden Zora’s voice was smooth and even, just questioning enough to betray his confusion with this inconvenient matter. There were laws in place in regards to hunting, but because the Zora people were carnivorous by nature, these restrictions were incredibly relaxed. They more or less existed to limit any wasteful slaughter.

“By order of the King, all food resources are to be seized,” came the explanation of the armored Zora. He didn’t appear all that concerned with informing the others as to why their prize was being taken, but something in Brivere’s cold, unrelenting stare prompted him to speak further. “These measures are being taken to protect the people of Zora’s Domain from the food shortage caused by the Water Blight.”

“Is that so?” Brivere commented, clearly incensed that he was being ‘protected’ in this particular way. His fury was a subtle thing, only audible in his sharp, precise pronunciations and visible within his tightened, slitted pupils. “And what of members of the Royal Order? It seems foolhardy for a King to deprive the people who protect him.”

“I don’t make the laws, I only enforce them.” The response of the guardsman was immediate and impatient. “There will be an announcement later today in regards to where and when you can pick up rationed supplies.”

A slow sigh heaved from the golden Zora moments before the slain buck was cast from his shoulders, the weight of it toppling to the ground in a boneless heap. Brivere straightened, rolling his tired shoulders and carried his tail taut and high, so that his displeasure was plain to see when he passed by.

“I can’t believe this!” the hysterical woman cried aloud to herself, standing helplessly aside while a handful of guards rummaged through cabinets and drawers, taking food off of her shelves without any intention of leaving a single scrap behind. “My husband is on his deathbed and all this food isn’t just to feed myself, but my customers, too! This is the livelihood we built together and you’re all just taking everything!”

Kodah could hardly force any further tears from her eyes, the scales of her cheeks rough and dry from the rubbing. She was emotionally exhausted, almost to the point that even in desperation, her former sass was listless and lacking true bite. She was watching her world descend into the void with only enough strength to verbally complain and little else. Part of her wanted to believe that she was maintaining one last shred of composure to save face in front of the handful of other Zoras who were not part of the guard, but sudden, desperate customers, just looking for a place to sleep in the wake of this disaster.

“Please, stay calm,” a guardsman said, ceasing in her duties to at least acknowledge the other Zora. They’d already searched dozens of residences, to the point that all of these words had turned repetitive and it was monotonous to repeat the same shallow explanations, yet this particular armored
Zora had enough compassion that she couldn’t simply ignore the pleas of another. “You’re just going to have to shut your Inn down until the shortage is over.”

The awkward cluster of other people paying witness immediately began to clamor in nervousness at the guard’s apparent solution; what? Shut down? Where would they go? No, no, no. They already paid for the stay. There was no place else!

“Shut down?” Kodah snapped, abhorred at such a ridiculous suggestion. “I hope you’re joking. The communal pools have been drained and my Inn is the only place with actual beds. These people aren’t here on vacation, they’re here because they have no other safe place to sleep and there’s no food anywhere else, either. I don’t understand how you all can be so unsympathetic!”

For all of a second, Kodah thought she was going to be arrested for making such a scene. She could hear the clink of another guardsman’s armor from outside the Inn and her golden eyes shot to the doorway, unnerved and expecting the worst, only for a tinge of relief to flood her chest when she caught sight of the Guard Captain, himself.

Bazz looked as stern as ever, his expression more shadowed and tired than usual, but in the light of the doorway, his sleek, black scales shined even more brightly than his armor.

“Bazz...” Kodah uttered, her voice weak and cracking; a quiet plea. Every inch of the black Zora hated the sound of it, because it wasn’t even the voice of the fiery woman he knew; it took little consideration for him to understand that he couldn’t stand for whatever had made his old friend sound so utterly fragile.

“Put it back,” ordered the Guard Captain. He was still and calm, his orders both casual and unquestionable, yet even so, the Zoras under his command turned looks of confusion to their superior.

“Sir?” The guard who’d made a minimal attempt to console the Innkeeper now regarded her Captain. “..but our orders.”

“Your orders come from me.” Bazz answered. “I’ll handle this. Just put the food back and clear out.”

It was tense and awkwardly quiet while the handful of soldiers hurried to return the scavenged foodstuffs to the shelves under the scrutinizing gaze of their superior. Bazz kept his eyes on the group of guardsmen, his back turned to Kodah like she was just another civilian to him and she clearly answered his attempts to seem like an unfamiliar presence by keeping quiet and bundling her hands before herself.

Only once the last straggler vacated the now messy Inn did Bazz actually turn to look upon his friend, setting all new eyes on her. Instead of the stern, disciplined Captain, he was a softer, warmer presence, the smooth heat that followed a bitter drink and his feet clicked against the tile with what few steps it took to lessen the distance between them.

“Thank you, Bazzy,” Kodah breathed, her head low, her gaze unable to meet that of the other Zora. As gracious and grateful as she was in this moment, she was also alarmed and ashamed, and losing touch with how to properly express anything at all. Even as a child, she couldn’t remember ever feeling so helpless, and despite Bazz’s big bad boyhood reputation, Kodah had never lost her nerve before him.

“You won’t get in trouble for this, will you?” she asked, scrunching her eyes closed in distress when the possibility of consequences occurred to her, her forefins swaying gently when she gave her head a soft shake.
“My father is part of the King’s council. I won’t get in any trouble.” The black Zora’s words were smooth and sure, though he kept his voice low and serious, giving passing glances of warning to onlookers who ventured too close. He was still on duty, and would break up the crowd if he had to; people seemed to get that message without any need for him to say anything, however. “Just.. don’t get overly generous with the food. Things are going to be really tight for a while, so take it upon yourself to strictly ration what you have.”

Utter silence fell over the Zora woman with such a force that even her body was rigid and still, and she just nodded her head like a scolded child. This wasn’t right; Kodah was overt and chatty, friendly to a fault and possessed an attitude that couldn’t be stamped down.

“Hey,” Bazz said, his voice velvet with concern while he carefully reached out to place his hand upon the woman’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

Shaking her head, Kodah found that she had no immediate answer to that. She was so tempted to force a smile and resume what could have felt like average small talk. She wanted like nothing else to say, ‘Oh you know, we’re getting by. Things are tough right now, but they’ll get better. We’re happy and that’s all that matters. We have each other.’

She couldn’t, because none of that was true. It was so blatantly wrong that she couldn’t even bear to vocalize the words, nor fill the empty space with little lies to beautify the awful truth.

“I’m afraid,” the woman muttered at last, folding her arms in front of herself, her ulnar fins pressed tight against her forearms. “Kayden just gets worse with every passing hour.. I’m so scared of losing him. I don’t know what to do, Bazz.”

Just hearing herself speak those words made the gravity of the situation all the more heavy and though Kodah bit her lip, pressing her fangs into the skin, trying her very best to hold everything back, it all came rushing forth against her will. Her face wrinkled just before her tears escaped, and she muffled a sob against her palms, though it still shook her shoulders.

“Kodah,” Bazz sighed the woman’s name, everything in him aching with sympathy, and he took an additional step toward the breaking Zora, tucking his arms carefully around her shoulders and pulling her closer. Her frame felt as frail as her shaking voice, her body wracked with tearful sorrow that only allowed itself to gain intensity as she was pressed to the other Zora’s chest.

Bazz’s armor was cold and hard, an unyielding layer hiding away the softest parts of him, even as he made his best attempts to be soft now. Kodah’s fingerscales clinked against the metallic plates, almost wary that she may see her own reflection and be made to look upon the mess this sorrow had made of her. For a moment, one cautious hand touched the woman’s tail; the Captain’s fingertips caressed Kodah’s scales, his palms slowly moving along the appendage with warmth and care.

The woman allowed herself to weep for a few quiet minutes, too vulnerable to question or care any longer about the circumstance behind this offering of comfort. When her tears finally ceased, Bazz stepped away, clearing his throat and muttering the first idea of aid that occurred to him.

“Perhaps I can persuade the young healer to lend aid to Kayden,” Bazz said, his words quiet, the thought of losing yet another friend almost too much to even consider, let alone speak. Perhaps he was not nearly as close to Kayden as he had been to Rivan, but this was still more than he wished to endure. “I’ve worked alongside the healer’s sibling, maybe that familiarity is enough to garner their sympathies.”

“Really?” The pink Zora’s voice was still weak and tearful, but her hope still shone with sudden brightness that glimmered in her widened eyes. “Yes, Bazzy, please try to convince them. Tell them
that it’s an emergency, please.’’

“I will, of course,” the Captain nodded, a bit more dismal about his chances. “Just don’t get your heart too set on it. Everybody who needs the healer right now is as desperate as we are. But I’ll try to think of something.”

Unfamiliar faces in their doorway was beginning to be a regular occurrence. One would almost believe now that these outcast brothers were, in fact, very well-respected and beloved by their people. The most current face, however, was a bit more familiar than others.

Brivere had quickly brewed a pot of tea with Hyrule herbs and coarser bee honey mere moments before the guardsmen showed up to raid their food supplies. The group of armored Zoras didn’t bother taking his brew, but advised him against drinking it, as the water itself could have been contaminated. Honestly, what did Brivere have to fear any longer, knowing his brother could remedy any reoccurrence of that awful plague? For now, the warm beverage was a soothing comfort after their tiring hunt.

The golden Zora had only just settled in, and taken the first sip of his tea when none other than the Captain of the Zorana City Guard came to wait at the open threshold of their residence, eliciting a rather troubled sigh from Brivere.

Placing his drink aside, the golden Zora approached the doorway to acknowledge the sudden, uninvited guest. He remained polite enough, despite his irritation with the entirety of the guard force, standing straight while he regarded the black Zora who almost appeared sheepish, rather than the usual vigilant authority he exuded.

“Guard Captain?” The Knight regarded his fellow warrior, curious eyes not failing to notice that the other Zora had come with a package in hand of netted cloth, tightly hugging what appeared to be a large portion of smoked meat.

“At ease,” Bazz uttered, his words almost sounding serious, though this was clearly meant as something of a joke. “This isn’t official business.”

Brivere watched the other man, seeing how his eyes skipped quickly across the obviously emptied shelves. Bazz’s demeanor was almost apologetic, his fins flat, his shoulders not quite as squared as they always seemed to be.

“Then what can I do for you?” Brivere posed the question as though he didn’t already see the other man’s intentions clearly in the very act of him being here.

The package held at the armored Zora side was lifted before himself, just enough that he held in between his hands, his eyes looking down at it, taking one final second to measure it up as an offering, then he straightened himself, raising his eyes to those of the man he’d come to plead with. “In a difficult time such as this, it’s easy to see food becoming a temporary form of currency. It is more vital to us than rupees, after all.”

Bazz shrugged, his jaw clenching for an awkward moment; he clearly wasn’t used to whatever desperation was driving him, and this interaction was uncomfortable. “I came to barter, so to speak,” explained the black Zora, raising his package even higher, in offering. “A friend of mine is gravely ill with the Water Blight. I fear that he won’t survive much longer without some kind of aid. Perhaps, for the aid I seek, this food would make a fair exchange?”
“I see.” The golden Zora’s neutral expression gave little away of his considerations. He did glance back at where Estuu was seated, rereading one of the Cursed Girl novels for the hundredth time; the boy wasn’t so hyper focused that he wouldn’t realize that his powers were being requested, yet he didn’t look up. In other words, he had no interest. As such, Brivere’s gaze returned to the apparently desperate man before him.

“It is convenient, isn’t it?” Brivere began, pale, yellow eyes flicking from the offering in Bazz’s hands, then back to the face of the Guard Captain. “...that your guards took everything we have just before you showed up here. I wonder who that very offering was taken from.”

“I assure you, it was stolen from nobody. The family of my ailing friend offered this of their own accord.” Very quickly, the sleek Zora began to sound much more like himself, rather than the cautious, pleading man he’d intended to be when he arrived. “And you’re a man of service, just the same as myself. You understand well enough that we’re only following the orders given to us.”

“That may be so,” the golden Zora gave a nod of his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “But the fact that these friends of yours had anything to offer surely had something to do with their relationship with you. Is it wise to be taking advantage of your position in this way?”

The armored Captain’s arms fell slowly back to his sides, whatever hope he’d clung to growing dim. He just couldn’t understand what motivations the other Zora could have to be so critical, other than plain bitterness. “I understand that you’re inconvenienced by this shortage. Your resentment with what has happened is all too clear. But please, consider the larger picture, here. This is an emergency situation and it must be handled with utmost care, because in all likelihood, people are going to suffer and die, regardless.” Bazz took a deep breath, trying to steady himself while the image of Kodah looking listless and broken lingered in his mind. “Please. Despite my position, I’m as desperate as anybody else. You have the means to help, so why would you simply choose not to?”

“Yes, you are desperate, indeed, but you clearly have more means to gain the aid you need.” While Brivere spoke, something in his words caught Estuu’s attention, and the boy’s head perked up. The golden Zora did not notice, and continued to speak. “Do you think you’re the only one who cares for somebody who could die soon? Do you think you’re the first one to darken our doorway today, pleading as though you deserve mercy more than anyone else? You’re not. Estuu has the most important strength possible at this very moment; he’ll have his choice of desperate offers and plenty of room to be picky, I’m sure.”

“Be very careful,” Bazz growled, his voice dropping low and his pupils tightening to such thin lines that his eyes shined a vivid gold. “Lives aren’t just things to use and throw away for the sake of making some kind of statement. Your actions now, in this time of peril and difficulty for our people, will reflect on you for the rest of your lives. Think about that.”

“I have.” Brivere almost chuckled at the goddamn irony. The shine of his sharp teeth showed between his parted lips, the corners of his mouth upturning just barely. “And in my experience, nothing changes. Trying to do good, trying to prove oneself, it never changes people’s minds. I’ve seen that much to be true. So I doubt anything could make it worst, either.”

“My own personal opinion isn’t exactly being effected positively,” the dark-scaled Zora muttered bitterly. “Your brother may not be a guardsman, or a Knight or an Apostle, but he has the ability to help people. Personal gain, whether it’s property or opinions, shouldn’t be your focus at this time. Doing what’s right is what truly matters.”

Letting out a relenting sigh, Brivere allowed the words of the Guard Captain to render him momentarily silent. He wasn’t sure why he was carrying on this debate, when this wasn’t even his choice to make, but he supposed it was just difficult not to let all of this get under his scales. Now
that he and his sibling had something to offer others, suddenly they were worthwhile and despite the
difficult lives they’d led, when others suffered, they were expected to put their own suffering aside.

Brivere couldn’t decide if he indeed had a right to his resentment, or if this world had just turned him
cold and unfeeling. Regardless, it still didn’t matter.

“Who Estuu heals is not up to me,” the golden Zora explained, at last. “He may not be able to speak,
but it isn’t as though he hasn’t heard your plea from where he sits. If he hasn’t responded, then
perhaps he is tired or overstimulated and can’t use his abilities at this time.”

A subtle look of defeat came slowly over the black Zora, like a cloud making its way across the sky
to blot out the sun. Bazz’s mouth pulled into a tight frown, his frame slumping ever so slightly, while
also desperately holding onto a certain tension, an inner struggle that was both hopeless and
impossible to simply give up. At last, however, he let out a final sigh of defeat, and made his way out
of sight.

It was obvious that something either very exciting or very dire was going on when the people of
Zora’s Domain were out en masse, and it could only be said that they were out en masse when the
Uppercity streets were lined beyond capacity with people Link understood lived in the Undercity.

And while the event was, in fact, incredibly dire, it was still an amazing sight. Normally, the
Uppercity paths of Zora’s Domain were spacious and scarcely occupied and one could perhaps fool
themselves into believing that the population of the Zora people was modest. However, when the
people from the Undercity came topside, it was a whole new reality. They outnumbered the
Uppercity people five to one, maybe even more than that and they were so different, they almost
appeared to be another species that shared some similar traits.

Link didn’t tend to enjoy observing these things up close, so he had climbed somewhere out of reach
and was now just idly letting his eyes trail across each face in the crowd. Many of the Uppercity
people were familiar to him by this point, but he was sure that he hardly knew anybody from the
Undercity. The Undercity people looked, for a lack of better words, even more fishy than those who
lived on the surface, and maybe that made some actual sense. Their forefins and topfins were spiny,
with thin membranes, as were the fins at their shoulders and some of them even had these same
expressive appendages along their spines. The most obvious difference, however, was their size; they
all stood much shorter than their Uppercity counterparts, with narrower, spindly frames.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” Prince Sidon spoke over the crowd, his tone strong
and serious when he began his address. He stood at the top of the stairs, just before the palace, and
the entire area was scattered with city guardsmen, as well as Knights who wore the same armor as
Brivere. As Link had finally come to understand, this particular order of Knights served the Royal
Family, specifically, which normally made their jobs very well paid and almost entirely for show.

Today appeared to be a different story, though, as many more Knights were armor clad and on duty
than what was usually required. The crowd of civilians stood shoulder to shoulder, pressed tightly
together while they shoved against the perimeter held by the armored warriors, all desperate and
frightened and straining to hear the voice of their Prince.

“Yes, my friends, I understand that you all are terrified and confused in regards to the recent
happenings in our fine city. It is indeed true that the Zorana City Guard has taken possession of all
food resources in Zora’s Domain, by order of the King and I’m certain that many of you are quite
enraged.”
As if to answer the Prince’s assumptions, a roar of voices rose up from the crowd, few of them actually distinguishable from where Link sat watching, though the sound reminded him of swarming coarser bees, exactly one second after you make the move to steal their honeycomb. Sidon paused, nodding his head solemnly, giving the impression that he was agreeing and sympathizing with each and every person, regardless of what they were saying. He raised his hand to them, a polite request for silence, then as the roar slowly dulled, he continued.

“I do wish this explanation could have come before this invasive, forceful action and you have my sincerest apologies, all of you. But please, do hear me out, because this information is of the utmost importance; it is in regards to the Water Blight plague that we’ve recently suffered and the efforts we’re making to amend this terrible, tragic disaster, which has already touched each and every one of us, dotting our formerly peaceful lives with suffering and loss.”

While Sidon spoke, the crowd quieted further, turning so utterly still that the Prince’s every syllable could be heard echoing up and over the crowded streets. His words and soft, subtle motions held even this massive population entranced, every Zora present suddenly seeming to feel his somber sincerity, as though he had breathed his own magic temporarily into them, allowing them all to see into his heart with the purest honesty.

“At this time, we know that this Water Blight has tainted our water supply, as well as the majority of our food, as a result. Because of this, much of the food that has been seized would have been hazardous to consume and is to be unfortunately, destroyed. That which is deemed safe, however, is to be redistributed among all of our citizens in a carefully rationed manner, to make sure that none of us go hungry in the time that it will take to replenish the supply here in Zora’s Domain.”

“What about you, your Highness? Did they take your food, too?” some enraged Zora hollered, faceless and anonymous, mixed into the crowd.

“That’s quite an excellent question, isn’t it, my friend?” Sidon responded with a gentle smile, allowing what was surely a bitter accusation to roll off of him as easily as water over his scales. “For those of you who are unaware, the Royal family does, in fact, have a varied, well-stocked supply of food, which is managed and maintained by those in our employ. Because we make use of imported goods, as well as local resources, I would say that it is true, of all people in Zora’s Domain, we do, in fact, own the safest supply of all. However, while the guardsmen did not invade our space to take possession of our property, the King himself ordered those attending to our supplies to deliver the majority of our excess to the very same place where the rest of your food has been taken. So yes, our food supply was also cut to a minimum. As such, when many of you receive your rationed supplies, please know that it is very possible that it came from us, and we were more than glad to sacrifice a little indulgence, for the sake of our people.”

Sidon paused, his golden eyes moving across the crowd like he could feasibly offer a precious instant of his attention to each and every single person in attendance. Normally, those Zoras who proclaimed to be fans of the young royal might have been cheering and squealing over his apparent fairness, but today was not the time for such silliness, as clear from how the crowd dropped back into a state of absolute silence, allowing the Prince to get on with his intended speech.

Link could still hardly believe Sidon’s patience and dedication. Yet, even as the entirety of the Zora people’s population faced turmoil, starvation and death, the Hylian Champion found a way to focus his concentration on himself, of course. He just couldn’t help but consider the odd, ironic, stark comparison while he found himself measuring himself, his actions, his behavior, against that of Sidon. The Zora Prince was born into this responsibility; he hadn’t asked to be the leader, selflessly caring for all of these people, yet he’d still accepted his fate willingly, almost gladly, with only minor complaints. Link, on the other hand, had shirked similar responsibilities, choosing to allow all of
Hyrule to suffer because of this pitiful ‘why me?’ state of mind he’d dedicated himself to.

But a thought even more threatening and frightening than his usual self-loathing had managed to surface in his mind; while watching Sidon lead his people in the wake of disaster, finding a way to be humble and empathetic and compassionate despite everything, it was impossible not to see Mipha reflected in him. And for Link, knowing that he was the one and only person who could stand against the coming Calamity, and reaching the understanding that Sidon and Mipha were so glaringly similar.. He was getting this overwhelming, awful feeling that he was just reliving a tragedy that was already written into history, repeating itself so obviously that he should have been wise enough to walk away, to take this awful narrative off its disaster course, but he was just too stupid and selfish to give up somebody he was desperately clinging to.. Not even for his love’s own good.

“As I mentioned, our water is what is currently housing the source of this Water Blight. This means that it is no longer safe for consumption, nor communal sleeping. Also, if you are a resident of the Undercity, or you find yourself traveling to the Basilica in the near future, please be advised that you will only be safe from the corruption if you are strictly dry diving. The communal cisterns have also been drained as a result of this risk and for those among us who have the luxury of a private cistern, I would suggest that you all drain them, as well. Please, take every precaution and don’t put yourselves at risk needlessly.”

There was some stir, but most of the Zoras appeared to easily comprehend the idea that their water was tainted. In fact, most probably expected as much, given that this was called ‘Water Blight’. Still, the precautionary measures were important to mention, though it was clear enough that most people were waiting to be told when and where they would be getting their food back.

Hungry people became unmanageable and angry very easily; an entire population of hungry people became dangerous.

“I apologize if I’m repeating myself at this point,” Sidon continued, wanting to be thorough where peoples’ lives were concerned, “but since the water is corrupted, all aquatic wildlife which make up the staple of our diets are dangerous to consume, as well. Please, don’t be tempted to capture and consume any local fish or you’ll be taking a very real risk. Also, though non-aquatic wild game is plentiful, if you venture outside of Zora’s Domain to hunt, any meat you bring back will be subject to our temporary system of controlled rationing. For now, the only real sources of safe food and water will be the two designated locations as follows; for those who reside in the Undercity, the Basilica will be in charge of distributing emergency rations. For those of you living in the Uppercity, unless you are notified otherwise, please proceed to the barracks underneath the palace.”

There was another discontented rumble from the crowd of onlookers, but Link couldn’t make any of it out from his perch, nor did he have enough of a clue what it could be about. He could only pay witness, watching the larger Uppercity Zoras instinctively cluster together in groups, doing everything they could to maintain a dignified amount of space between themselves and the numerous smaller Undercity Zoras who threaded between the more colorful groups.

The Knights of the Royal Order were forced to actively escort the Prince away, while the guardsmen held the crowd at bay, issuing orders for them to disperse. It didn’t take much contemplation to notice that they were really just ordering the Undercity Zoras to return to their trench and they marched away ever so slowly, an indignant sea of silver and blue.

Maybe Link did not possess the Prince’s keen, electoreceptive sense, but he figured easily enough that Sidon could only really return to his tower at this time. With the Uppercity so crowded and with everybody on edge, isolation was safest, even for somebody as hard to dislike as Prince Sidon. It wasn’t as though Link had always enjoyed his personality and presence, so it wasn’t impossible to
believe that there could be a Zora out there that felt similarly.

The Hylian exercised his climbing skills, rather than braving the crowd, making his way along the tops of the winding architecture, and scaling a few gently curving walls in order to climb into one of the tiny windows of the twisting pathway which lead to Sidon’s quarters. He actually had a relatively difficult time, despite how easy he’d assumed it would be, which meant at this point that he wasn’t getting out enough; perhaps he needed to spend the next lonely week practicing his climbing skills.

When Link made it to the top of the tower, he walked through the doorway like he’d just taken a casual stroll in order to get here, pausing on the threshold in momentary concern at the sight of the Guard Captain alongside the Prince.

Sidon hardly missed a beat, his silver tongue moving smoothly across every word of his conversation uninterrupted. It didn’t even slow him down when his golden gaze turned to one side, spotting Link’s small silhouette in the doorway, and the Prince batted one hand at the Hylian to welcome him inside.

From the sound of things, Sidon was having a quick discussion with Bazz concerning security over the next week; maybe it was presumptuous for Link to continue inserting himself into Zora business, but this seemed a perfect time for him to mention something that had been weighing heavily on his mind. “Actually,” he spoke up quietly, his voice a low, steady sound which audibly contrasted with Sidon’s expressive, nuanced tones.

“Oh, Master Link,” Bazz greeted the Hylian kindly, not terribly troubled by the interruption. “It’s good to see you again. Strangely common these days, but good, of course.”

Whatever Link had wanted to say escaped him momentarily- wait, what did Bazz mean by saying it was ‘strangely common’? What was he going to say again? Oh yeah.

“Right,” Link began again, his awkwardness all too apparent; probably another stark contrast, compared to Sidon. “I should probably mention the possibility of an attack by the Yiga Clan. I just mean, with Sidon vulnerable for however long, it’s particularly dangerous.”

“The Yiga Clan?” Bazz slowly repeated the words, narrowing his eyes like this was a danger he was completely unfamiliar with.

“Yes.” Link started to unconsciously gesture with his hands while he tried to find better words to explain. Suddenly everything he was doing felt strange and wrong, but that exact sense of wrongness allowed him to reach a state of hyper awareness that had him realizing that he was beginning to do the same things with his hands as Sidon often did. As soon as he realized that, he placed his arms at his sides. “They are similar to the Sheikah people as warriors and they are skilled at deception. You know, they can disappear and reappear, they can change their appearance.. I don’t know if I’m explaining this well enough.”

“These are the masked warriors that I mentioned before, Guard Captain,” Sidon spoke up, filling in the blanks where Link’s words were insufficient. Normally, the Hylian was incredibly grateful for every moment Sidon spared him from being forced to verbally communicate, but today something struck Link as odd. His blue eyes blindly searched to Zora-filled space before himself, the skin between his brows slowly wrinkling in confusion.

“Oh yes,” Bazz gave his head a soft nod, his voice as serious as usual, but a bit more tired. “Before the Kingdom of Hyrule fell, I believe this group was particularly troublesome. They mostly disappeared over the last hundred years, but if they’ve returned, I’m all too glad that we have Master Link’s warning. I’ll look into the security archives, because we’re sure to have some information on
this group. I just hope it’s not too outdated.”

“You already knew about them?” Link questioned, turning a glance upward at the Prince, receiving a glance of acknowledgment in return. This was one of those times when he could only see one of Sidon’s golden eyes, but something about the way it momentarily widened gave Link this strange impression that he’d surprised the Zora somehow.

“I was recently made aware that this group is a cause for concern, yes,” Sidon answered a bit too plainly, but Link didn’t think too much of it.

“There’s really no need to worry,” the Guard Captain added, not entirely unconcerned in the way he spoke, but moreso dedicated to maintaining foolproof security and peace. “With how tight security is going to get over the coming month, it would be a foolish move for anybody to aggress us at this time. Master Link, you’re perfectly safe here.”

“And Sidon?” Link snapped in concern. “I mean, I was able to climb into one of the tower windows, bypassing the guards out front. If I could do it, a Yiga clansman could easily do the same.”

“Starting tomorrow, the entire hallway leading up the tower will be patrolled by a team of Royal Order Knights in addition to the guardsmen at the entryway,” Bazz explained. “Not only that, but Prince Sidon’s Knight Captain will be stationed within his chamber to look after the Prince while he’s in his vulnerable state.. Uhh..”

When Bazz audibly trailed off, Sidon blinked, quirking his head to one side in questioning and concern. “Is something wrong, Guard Captain?”

“No, I just..” The black Zora’s voice faded into unsure silence once more, his yellow eyes looking between Sidon and Link indecisively. “I’m sorry, my Lord, I don’t wish to be presumptuous or seem as though I’m abusing my station, so to speak..”

“No, no, it’s quite alright,” the Prince said with a calm smile, his adornments jingling as he offered Bazz an encouraging gesture. “What’s troubling you?”

“A friend of mine is very ill with the Water Blight,” Bazz said, glancing aside almost guiltily. Most of the time, he maintained a kind of professional neutrality, strong and stern but just short of the brand of cold detachment exuded by Brivere. Now, however, it was easy enough to see the vulnerable, worried person who lurked underneath that hard, metallic armor. “I clearly heard and understand what you said earlier, my Lord, in regards to having no control over the healer and the use of his powers. But..”

The Guard Captain paused, his hesitance clear in the way he bit his lip, his sharp teeth gleaming before he pressed past that feeling of being utterly unprofessional and overstepping clear, written boundaries. “..well, I can’t help but remember that he has been treated as an extension of his older brother’s service in the past.”

“I’m afraid at those times, Estuu actually volunteered to use his powers for us,” the Prince explained, a dismal, sympathetic tone already so clear that Bazz was turning rigid and desperate at the sound. “The boy has his own will and motivations and he is the only one who decides what those are.”

“.of course, I understand,” Bazz said with a curt nod of his head. “And if I were not utterly desperate, I wouldn’t even think of making such a bold request. But if either of you have any potential sway over the young healer’s willingness to offer aid, might you be able to make that request, in my stead? It’s just that.. I haven’t even properly processed the fact that Guardsman Rivan is gone yet. Losing another long time friend.. It’s too much.”
“I see..” Sidon uttered in reply, watching the other Zora hang his head in a mournful kind of shame; the Prince could certainly feel the sorrow of the other Zora and was inwardly struggling with himself where such emotions were concerned. Should he allow these kinds of expressions to sway his decision making? Would that make him weak? Easily manipulated by the softness of his heart? It certainly wasn’t good praxis to be so emotionally driven, or at least he’d been led to believe it were so.

The situation between himself and Brivere was also a bit tense at this very moment, so he wasn’t actually sure if making any requests of the Knight or his younger brother would be positively received.

“You mean Kayden, don’t you?” Link spoke up when Sidon said nothing. Apparently it was turning into a habit for them to fill each other’s silences. He could recall that Kayden had been ill and unless he was guessing incorrectly, he was fairly sure that Bazz was friends with him.

“Yes, precisely,” the Guard Captain turned to regard the much shorter Hylian, a much more hopeful look immediately brightening his features.

“He is ‘kind of’ my friend, too, I guess,” the Hylian explained. Actually, Kayden often regarded him a bit awkwardly, so he might have thought to question events of the past which escaped him, but as far as he knew now, the man was kind enough. “Why don’t you just let me ask for Estuu’s help. That way, Sidon won’t be abusing his position.”

“But, my friend...” Quickly cutting in, Sidon cleared his throat awkwardly, then continued, “I’m not sure how well that will go. It’s difficult for me to see Brivere allowing you to persuade his young sibling in such a way.”

“It’s alright. Estuu and I are on pretty friendly terms, regardless of what Brivere thinks.” Link shrugged, trying his best not to be too smug about all of this. “Plus, the kid has his own motivations and only he decides what they are, right? If I ask for his help and he actually wants to help me, then what is Brivere going to do? Tell him he’s not allowed to help people?”

“Thank you, Master Link!” Bazz bent lower, wearing a small smile on his face as he awkwardly patted the Hylian’s shoulder in an expression of gratitude. “Really, I can’t thank you enough.”

He tried his best not to be smug and he liked to think that he’d mostly succeeded, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t remove the shit-eating grin from his face.

Link had definitely misjudged Brivere, that much he could admit. The golden Zora wasn’t quite the spoiled rich boy the Hylian had assumed him to be, sure. Regardless, Brivere was still an absolute fucking tool.

Just as Sidon had predicted, the golden Zora was unhappy to see Link in the doorway of his residence, with unhappy being a gross understatement. The Hylian couldn’t figure out what it was about that guy’s face, but he always had this look like... like the inside of his mouth just naturally tasted like unripened wild berries and he was using every bit of his willpower at all times, trying not to react to the taste of it.

Most people would call that the ‘stick up your ass’ face, but since Link was all too aware about Brivere’s feelings for Sidon, he tended to expect that a different expression would be produced if he actually had something stuck up his ass. Then again, maybe he would just maintain that pinched look the entire time; he would just be laying there with his eyelids slightly narrowed, like always, his
mouth set into such a plain, relaxed line, it was like he couldn’t and had never felt the muscles of that part of his face.

Oh- but wait- what if Brivere actually imagined himself being the one to penetrate his partner? Well, people who were intimate didn’t usually stick to just one particular kind of sex, but for some damn reason, Link was suddenly a bit too curious what exact position would excite that walking knob of butter, if he had the chance and IF he could really, actually, truly get excited.

The smug grin quickly turned into a bout of cackling which Link couldn’t properly contain, even with one hand splayed across his mouth. He wanted to contain it, because not only had Estuu agreed to heal his friend, but he was presently walking at the Hylian’s side and had turned a sideways look in his direction, which was the boy’s equivalent of, ‘This guy is laughing at nothing. I probably need an adult.’

Realistically, having mockingly impure thoughts about the kid’s brother while in said kid’s presence probably wasn’t the best thing to be doing, so Link successfully chased away the bizarrely inappropriate things he was imagining as a way of coping with his jealousy. Once he was wearing a fairly straight face again, Link shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers and spoke up to address the last awkward encounter between himself and Estuu.

“So, I never really apologized about that, uh.. thing.” Very specific, Link, very specific. “You know, when I asked you to shoot me in the face. It kind of occurred to me later that asking a kid to shoot me in the face was pretty irresponsible and selfish. I shouldn’t have just assumed that your history of shooting people in the face meant that your were automatically up for shooting just anybody in the face.”

A quiet titter came from the boy in apparent response to the Hylian’s senseless babbling, and one of Link’s ears twitched at the sound. It wasn’t like he’d never heard Estuu laugh, but from what he’d gathered, it was a rare occurrence. “Merciful Hylia, Estuu just laughed at me.” He drew his hands from his pockets, pounding one determined fist into the other open palm. “I really am the chosen Hero.”

Estuu turned to face forward once more, his tail idly swishing in a very subtle expression of contentment; Link knew because he’d noticed Sidon doing the very same thing whenever he embraced the tiny Hylian. It was funny- he’d originally puzzled the fact that Zoras have tails attached to their heads, because they didn’t seem to have any real purpose when it came to swimming. It occurred to him eventually that the appendages were used mainly for body language, and now he wondered if Zoras thought it was strange that Hylians had weird lines of hair just above their eyes. Yeah, they did, most likely.

“All joking aside, I just wanna be clear,” Link began again, his voice actually coming out sounding serious this time. “I’m not angry or upset that you decided not to do it. I don’t blame you for hesitating to shoot another person who only gave you wild claims of immortality to go on. Or for hesitating to shoot a person, you know, period.”

All Estuu could really do was nod in response to Link’s long-winded apology, and the Hylian guessed that would have to be enough to reassure him that this kid wasn’t irreparably psychologically scarred by their last interaction.

“All out of curiosity,” the Hylian spoke, about to ask something he most likely shouldn’t. “Did you tell your brother about what happened?”

A quick shake of the young Zora’s head was offered in response. He didn’t even need to think about it for very long, so Link was going to assume that it was a truthful head shake. Estuu couldn’t talk,
but that didn’t mean he couldn’t communicate; the Hylian knew that well enough from only a few exchanges with him. So, assumably, he still found ways to tell his brother things that were important.. and maybe things that weren’t? Kids didn’t always focus on what was important, or as far as Link knew, anyway.

“He just seemed really pissed off about me showing up to ask for your help,” Link commented idly, seeing the Seabed Inn drifting very near in the distance. “I thought he might have had an actual reason for a change, other than just..” Link paused, biting his tongue before uttering the word, ‘jealousy’.

“..stupid things,” the Hylian muttered bitterly, as something to finish off his previous thought. He didn’t want to leave it hanging, because at least with the sentence finished, it felt more like it was done and behind him. Very quickly, he started again, needing to shift the mood between himself and the Zora boy before they entered the Seabed Inn.

“Anyway, this is the place. Thanks for agreeing to help my friend, by the way. I know that you’re probably a ‘hot commodity’ right now, with those powers of yours, but it means a lot that you would choose to help me, specifically. I’ll never doubt the bonding power of letting someone get swallowed by monsters ever again.”

“Oh, there you are, Linny,” said the pink-scaled woman just as soon as the shorter man walked through the door, shadowed by young Estuu. She had a tiny, broken smile on her face when she laid eyes on the Hylian, her expression a dull shadow of her usual sweetness, but there was still a touch of relief to be found on her features.

Link just gave a curt nod of his head when he was greeted, raising his hand to Kodah and attempting to return a pleasant expression. As much as he inwardly criticized Brivere, smiles felt alien on his face.

“When the Prince arrived to inform me that you were coming with the young Healer, I just couldn’t believe it. I’m so very grateful that after all these years, you’re still thinking of us.” Kodah chattered while gesturing to Prince Sidon, her words overflowing in a way that made it seem as though her nerves were very taut and she was doing her best to cope.

As the Zora woman verbally expressed her overflowing gratitude, Link’s gaze flickered momentarily to Sidon, who was doing this odd thing were he attempted to be courteously curious, peering here and there in what looked like innocent observation, while keeping his limbs tucked near himself, because the truth was, the surrounding space felt constricting to him. He was a spoiled Prince, just pretending not to be.

“..and I haven’t received the first letter from Finley yet, so of course she has me so worried. You must tell me how she’s doing in Hateno Village and if the people there are treating her well. Oh, Linny, it’s unbelievable how kind and thoughtful you are. You’re a Hylian, sure, but you’ve always been so dependable for your friends here in Zora’s Domain.”

While Link just continually nodded, Sidon at last piped up to raise the most obvious question of all. “Pardon me, Ma’am,” he interrupted ever so politely. “Should we not show the Healer to your ailing husband?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Kodah said, shaking her head at herself and reaching up to pat her rounded forehead at her foolishness. “It’s just that, well, strangely enough, just before you all showed up, Kayden had actually awakened from the spell on his own. He’d been unconscious for the last couple of days and I was starting to think he wasn’t going to recover, but now I-”
The sound of a few sharp patters cut the Zora woman off and Link spun around to face the source of the interruption - Estuu. His gaze wasn’t lifted any higher than the ground but he was determinedly shaking his head ‘no’ while his tail flapped against his back.

“Oh dear..” Sidon muttered, his previous casual, friendly persona melting away with the strained sound of his voice. He bundled one fist, drawing it up against his chest in worry, looking to Kodah first while giving Estuu’s sudden reaction a more comprehensible voice. “The boy believes that, if your husband has awakened from the spell caused by the Water Blight, then this is actually quite a bad sign. He needs to see him immediately.”

“W-What?” Kodah stammered, glancing momentarily to where the beds were, then back to the trio that had come to aid her. Her own body went tense, her hands gesturing desperately while words suddenly failed her. “Kayden, uh, he, um-”

“He’s back here,” the Hylian verbally filled in while Kodah lost control of her tongue, and without wasting another second, he began toward the room in the back of the Inn, leading Estuu, who followed right at his heels. “Come on, come on.”

“Surely now that young Estuu is here, your husband will be able to recover,” Sidon was uttering in uncertainty. Link could still hear the Prince lingering at Kodah’s side, making an attempt to comfort away the sudden rush of anxiety she must have been feeling. Both of their feet pattered a bit more slowly behind Link and Estuu, with the Prince’s voice coming out smoothly all the while, even as each word was for the sake of pretty, pretty pretenses. “In my experience, the boy is quite talented with the use of his magic, so please do try to remain calm for now.”

Normally, there were few beds available, as they were intended for Hylians but tourist traffic to Zora’s Domain was a rather slow trickle. Now, however, Link and Estuu had to walk on their on toes, navigating between a messy collection of extra, newly-inflated mattresses, all lining whatever floorspace was available. A divider had also been extended between the bed Kayden occupied and the rest of the room, both giving him privacy and allowing others the comfort of not having to see that a man was on his deathbed, just a few feet away.

A hanging curtain provided a makeshift doorway into the closed off space, which belonged to the ill Innkeeper and Link pushed it aside, then side-stepped to allow Estuu to duck past him. Estuu hardly even glanced at the bedridden Zora, clambering up onto the bed with such steely focus, his goal was unquestionably the only thing in sight.

Link, on the other hand, stopped right in the doorway, allowing his gaze to slowly pass across Kayden in trepidation. He remembered having seen the Zora man before, days ago, when he had only just fallen ill and it was all too apparent now that he’d gotten much, much worse. There was no color to his scales at all, save for a sick, dingy gray that deepened into a sallow, smokey color where his skin was thinnest. His lips were pallid and cracked, his eyes ringed with blackened bruising and sunken so far into the shadow of his pointed crest that his sockets looked hollow. Kayden’s gill covers were open wide, whereas they would usually be sealed tight on land and in place of pink flesh, there was a mucky, black fluid weeping from the slits.

It was a truly horrid sight and Link only refrained from any form of physical reaction, because Kayden was indeed still aware enough to look up, gazing in the Hylian’s direction with eyes that were impossible to make out. No, it wasn’t just the blackness ringing his eyes and the sickly, sunken appearance; the whites of his eyes had turned dark, as well, a dull, charcoal gray that was just light enough to be visibly bloodshot.

“Link,” Kayden groaned, the vocalization hardly even there, but Link still heard his name on the choked, rasping breath and his ears twitched in recognition. Immediately after, they softly lowered,
something tiny and sharp pinching in his chest at the sight of the Zora man trying to smile like he expected salvation. His mouth opened like he had a hundred things he wanted to discuss, but there wasn’t breath in his body to force even one more word out.

Estuu’s hands pressed to the Zora man’s chest, the healing light issuing forth with vivid intensity, though the boy squinted in response. Link stood breathless and hopeful, just watching Estuu’s webbed fingers, the scarlet of his scales shining a pinkish orange with the brightness that beamed from underneath his flesh. The magic was like the glow of furnace embers in his palms and his hands appropriately trembled at the feeling, as anybody’s might if they tried to hold their own so close to the flame.

“Oh my..” The voice of Prince Sidon drifted over Link’s head when the much taller Zora came to stand just behind the Hylian. An enveloping palm laid upon Link’s shoulder, the sharp tips of Sidon’s fingerscales gently raking the cloth of the shorter man’s tunic, while his heart clenched at the sight of one of his own, so sick that he looked as though he’d already begun to rot from the inside.

It had been difficult for the Prince to take in the sight of Brivere, somebody he deeply cared for, stricken with this awful Water Blight, but a veritable torrent of emotion rushed over him while he observed Kayden’s condition. The man’s physical and mental torment was an uncontrolled, radiant thing, echoing right through Sidon like a wave of tiny pins, going in one side and out the other.

For one instant, Sidon’s mind went blank and black and all he could feel were Kayden’s own symptoms; the tightness in his chest, the frightening inability to draw breath, a pounding ache cracking through his skull like a violent, nonstop beating, threatening to leave behind naught but pulpy flesh and bits of bone, shattered like delicate porcelain. The pain and vertigo might have knocked the Prince to one side, if not for the way he had his hand on Link’s shoulder.

Worst was the confusion, images coming and going, all faded and run together like an inconsistent dream that one couldn’t fully wake from. In those snippets of memory and imagined horror, there were remnants of old emotion mixed in with the kind of fear that came when one still had just enough awareness to know that they were fighting a battle against death, and death had much more endurance than life.

Sidon pushed it all away, successfully forcing out the invading threat, but as he regained his sense of self, he addressed Estuu first and foremost. “How can you be so calm?”

The Prince’s words were a quiet breath, but the sound of true astoundment was audible, even so. It might have sounded like admiration, if not for the fact that it was, in a way, accusing. Estuu’s inner reserve in the face of this horror was like a wrongdoing that Sidon failed to comprehend, because even though the Prince could fake that kind of steadiness, he could never truly feel it.

Link inclined his head, peering directly up at the hovering Zora and seeing an expression that was gravely familiar; Sidon’s jaw was clenched and his pupils had widened while they mournfully gazed ahead. It was the same look of restrained emotions and desperate attempts to be strong and solemn that he had on his face the night when Rivan died in his arms. Even without the dull, orange flicker of fires burning all around to illuminate his features, Link still recognized it and stepped aside to usher Sidon past him, closer to the bed where Kayden laid.

While Sidon drew nearer to the hopelessly sick Zora, Link took a few steps back, turning instead to Kodah, who suddenly was pale and rigid, utterly paralyzed with nervousness. “I didn’t know.. I thought he was getting better,” she tearfully mumbled when the Hylian walked over to her, her golden eyes wide and shining.

“We came to help him, regardless,” Link said with a shrug. In truth, her chattering had only delayed
them for a few worthless minutes and that probably wasn’t much in the scheme of things. “You look faint. You should probably sit down.”

While Link diligently guided the fretting wife away, Estuu continued his attempts to heal the very far gone Zora. The boy was taking deep breaths, counting each and every one, focusing and holding the number in his mind, seeing it, feeling it, all for distraction. His tail had tightly curved inward, the cloth which hung around his head wrinkling while it was grabbed by the writhing appendage.

There was just so much damage and it was spreading, darkening, consuming whatever life was left within the ailing Zora much faster than Estuu’s magic could prevent it. The flesh just underneath the boy’s hovering hands remained sickly pale, while everything else began to turn black, every drop of Kayden’s blood swallowed up by the corruption, everything under his skin losing structural integrity, dissolving.

A choked sound escaped the desperate, dying man, like a broken whisper. He wanted to cry out from the pain, but he was too weak to do so. His chest tightened in his attempt, a sputtering cough forcing black, viscous fluid from his lungs, down his chin and neck, then he gasped, his body tearing itself apart just trying to keep functioning.

Sidon quietly moved himself nearer, kneeling at Kayden’s bedside, because he was much too tall to reach him, otherwise. The Prince took the suffering man’s thin, frail hand, ignoring how his skin felt like cold, wet paper, waiting to fall apart. His other hand was outstretched, pressing to Kayden’s cheek, turning his head to one side so that their gazes could meet; even in his final throes, his consciousness still lurked behind his eyes. The Prince’s magic reached for the man imprisoned and tormented inside of his own Blighted body, finding him with ease and taking hold.

The red Zora fell utterly still, his pupils blown wide, his gaze unseeing as he connected. In the fragmented chaos of a mind that was flickering out, Sidon’s magic was steady. He was a specter entering a breaking world, taking what was left of Kayden’s awareness and guiding it elsewhere. Sidon stole all of the pain, feeling it shudder through him while he closed it down.

A Blighted mind in a dying body was a burning home and the Zora who owned it could only huddle from the flames, watching them turn the walls to charcoal and ash, while fighting for each labored breath in the smoke. But the Prince’s power allowed him to brave the destruction, making it as though the fire was not even there. He could lead the victim ever deeper into the danger, closing a door on the inferno like that could stave off the end to come. He could safeguard a metaphorical wall of portraits until the last awful second, so that by the time they were gone, nobody had even noticed them burning.

Sidon sent Kayden’s psyche elsewhere, to memories both distant and new. There were happier, pain-free moments to be found and there was peace in reflecting upon the life he had, even as it was being stripped away from him.

By the time Sidon recovered from the heavy expense of energy, Kayden was long gone. He blinked slowly until his sight returned, taking a breath like it was his first. Coming out of the trance the magic left him in was always hardest when someone laid dead before him. Kayden’s eyes were blank and dull, his lids heavy but not quite shut, his cheeks marked with inky tear stains.

“I’m sorry,” were the first words on the Prince’s lips. His head hung lower and his eyes shut in mourning. Nothing hurt like feeling something as vibrant and alive as a person’s consciousness slipping away into pure, unbroken silence. No matter what anybody said, to someone who could feel and understand the way Sidon could, life was a miracle. It existed unexplainably, against odds and reason, for no real purpose at all, but for the very sake of existence. It was simultaneously the most immutable thing in this world, yet the most fragile and impermanent at the very same time.
But another voice distracted the Prince from his moment of silence; no, it wasn’t quite a voice, but a flurry of emotion begging to be acknowledged, a comprehension of language forming sentences that were directed right at the Prince, yet unspoken, knowing that he would find them in the quiet.

Sidon raised his head to peer in Estuu’s direction. The boy was sitting upon his folded legs, still hands stained with blackened blood while he stared into Kayden’s vacant expression. When Estuu noticed that he’d gotten Sidon’s attention, he turned his eyes sideways to look at the Prince peripherally.

“I’m fine.” Sidon uttered these words very quietly, almost able to feel Estuu’s resulting pain whenever he spoke too loudly. “...but what of you?”

There was a momentary wait for the boy to process this question, feeling around for words to express whatever emotions were trying to nudge at him. Once more, Estuu’s yellow eyes stared down at the dead man who now laid still, and the young Zora considered these events, this loss, this failure, and most of all, death itself.

The sunset-colored Zora could not speak his answer, but Sidon had long been given permission to reach a bit deeper for the answers, for understanding, so he listened to the boy in a way few others could. When Estuu had nothing else to say, Sidon nodded in solemn agreement.

“You’re very brave, to be so young,” the Zora Prince commented on that which Estuu had explained. “I know that was hard for you and I understand how it feels. I experienced something similar when I was young.”

A gentle hand extended to touch Kayden’s face, ever careful, even if the man’s pain was over. Estuu watched carefully when Sidon’s fingertips pressed the other Zora’s eyelids shut, then the Prince climbed slowly to his feet, bending down only to pull the sheet over the Kayden’s head. After, Estuu slid down from his perch atop the mattress, a tiny presence at the massive Prince’s side.

“I know that you did your best,” Sidon addressed the much smaller Zora, his voice somehow encouraging, though it was terribly sad. “...I’ll make sure his family knows that.”

Sidon closed off the curtain behind himself when he stepped out of the blocked off area. Estuu lingered in the dark of Sidon’s shadow, his tiny webbed feet tapping with quick steps. It was a short stride into the front room of the Inn, where the Prince found Link perched upon one of the countertops, with Kodah at his side. They were sitting in tense silence, the Hylian unable to offer much else but his company while they waited.

The fretting, hopeful, tense look that immediately washed over the woman’s face when she caught sight of Sidon very quickly, visibly morphed into silent denial, her head shaking to wordlessly plead for an answer other than the one she could see on the Prince’s own darkened features.

“I’m very sorry.” Sidon didn’t allow the unanswered question to linger, trying not to draw this awful thing out any more than he had to. “Young Estuu fought to save the life of your loved one, but I’m afraid it was much too late for the magic to have any effect.”
“..no,” Kodah mumbled, her tongue hardly able to pronounce that terrible word, her voice a muffled squeak of sound. “..no, no, no, please, no..”

The woman slid from the counter, down to her knees on the floor, her arms folding before herself, her head pressing into the support of her arms like she was trying to shelter herself. Link watched from his perch, his expression vague and unsure, unknowing what action he could even take. Yet it was Sidon who did not hesitate to kneel before the mourning widow, placing a hand upon her shoulder, ready and willing to offer whatever consolation he could, even if he did not know Kodah very well.

“He went peacefully, without any pain- I made certain of it,” he explained, his voice a soft purr, just loud enough to be audible over the Zora woman’s sobs. So that he could be sure that Kodah was, indeed, able to hear him, he bent further, dipping his own head down closer to hers. “I entered his mind in order to alleviate his pain and fear, and in the process, I did manage to witness some of his memories. He loved you dearly and he lived his life to make you and your daughter happy. Would you like to see the memories from his perspective, before they leave my own mind?”

“His.. His memories?” Kodah repeated, sniffling, tearful and confused. She raised her head just enough to look into Sidon’s face, her own expression a thing fractured by suffering and loss.

“Yes,” the Prince nodded softly. “It would be a very intense sensation, but if it would give you any comfort to feel what was in his heart, I can do that.”

Kodah said nothing, simmering this bizarre notion in silence, too much pain and trauma forcing her mind into such a fog that she could hardly truly think or consider much at all. Reluctantly, or perhaps warily, she nodded her head and Sidon was careful in asking if she was very sure of this choice, only to receive an even harder nod.

The Prince guided Kodah’s watery stare to meet his own and Link waited quietly, witnessing this strange magic in yet another instance of tragedy. Yet again, he was unsure what he felt or if he properly felt anything in response to this awful loss.

There was something, he was sure. It was heavy and still, deep in the pit of his gut. It was melancholy and cold. It didn’t hurt, it had no sharp edges to speak of, but it was noticeable. It wasn’t something that could be ignored.

The transference was quick, something sharp and painful followed by something warm and numbing. The tears still slowly caressed Kodah’s pale cheeks, but she sat still and subdued, so quiet that when Sidon himself recovered, he carefully checked on her again, to be sure that she was alright.

Link understood only one thing perfectly; while he was so concerned with his own feelings and trying to sift for them in the chaotic riverbed of his mind, he could be of no help anyway. But, maybe he should have been used to that.

Instead of dwelling on his own helplessness, the Hylian turned his attention to the other person who was lingering, quiet and awkward and unable to do anything more; Estuu. The boy’s gaze was down low, as it often was, unmoving while he vacantly worked over something in his own mind, much as Link was doing. His hands were held just fractionally away from the rest of his body, his black-stained fingers splayed and frozen into place.

“Estuu,” the Hylian uttered in quiet concern, sliding from his perch to approach the young Zora. Link couldn’t help but wonder if it was right that this boy was constantly forced into these situations, just because he possessed healing powers. That was something too morally complex for Link to even bother trying to work out, but the notion did occur to him.
The rosy orange Zora turned his head in Link’s direction, in acknowledgment that he’d been spoken to. His movements were slow and soft, so minor that Link might not have noticed at all, were he not looking at the boy. It was odd when Estuu went into such a state of still and Link worried about what that must have meant.

“What do you want me to take you home?” asked the Hylian. Estuu had done all they’d asked, so he wasn’t obligated to remain any longer. Link could related to that overwhelmingly out of place and worthless feeling that came with having to linger about, trying to pretend that you weren’t an emotionally blunt piece of shit.

Predictably, Estuu nodded in response and Link gave a nod of his own in reply, saying, “Come on, then. I’ll walk with you.”

Chapter End Notes

How are you all feeling? Did you make it through okay? So, hey, even though there will be no update on the upcoming weekend, my first NanoWrimo chapter should be the smutty one I warned you all about, so be ready for that.

And follow me. :) 
Tumblr is BanishedOne
Art/Fics Tumblr is BanishFics
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Even in times of hardship, there were tender moments to be found. The Hylian Champion laid contentedly in the arms of his lover; a bittersweet, temporary goodbye. Another romance came to a burning end, yet even so, the disenchanted lovers dared to fling their bodies to the flame, in one, final, passionate blaze that would leave them bleak and cold. Yet while some romances died, others bloomed to life, sweet, soft and so very cautious.

Chapter Notes

Hey friends. Yes, I took a break and still managed to come back late. I'm awful, haha. A lot of the dialogue in this chapter went longer than I was expecting and I'm constantly adding more that I wasn't intending, but oh well. That really just makes the chapter juicer for you all, and it pokes my Nano count higher and higher.

So, because this chapter went longer than expected, there is unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your opinions) no smut. It does, however, give a VERY good indication where things are going. So, please enjoy, my friends, and if you've been waiting to comment, now's the time. For Nanowrimo, I'm gonna need all the motivation I can get. :D

The bottled Spirit Potion had already been delivered to Sidon’s chambers by the time the Prince and the Hylian returned. Night had fallen over Zora’s Domain, with the sky still maintaining a soft, evanescing light on the mountainous horizon.

The private bedchamber, shadowed in the absence of the sun, glowed softly from the ever present luminous stone lamps. Strangely, the waiting potion gave off just as much light, which drew Link in like a curious moth, and he stood staring at the item which would take his Zora lover’s consciousness away for a lonely stretch of days.

Encased in the most lovely glass bottle, which utterly screamed Zora aesthetic, the royal blue liquid shined like the molten pit of Death Mountain and just that detail had the Hylian regarding it warily. Link had swallowed down some questionable concoctions in his day, but even he felt quite unsure that this was fit for consumption. Some quiet voice in the back of his mind kept whispering unusual suggestions while the Hylian continued to stare, like, ‘Why don’t you just grab it and pitch it out the window?’

He probably could toss the potion away quickly enough that Sidon would fail to notice. It wasn’t just the fact that this brew was going to knock the Prince out for an extended period, either. Link had a bad feeling that was proving difficult to shake and it just continued to grow in the depths of his gut. He had this feeling, too, like maybe someone was watching him?
Glancing toward Sidon’s bed, Link realized that the Prince had seated himself and was quietly watching the curious Hylian, a questioning expression wrinkling his pale features; okay, maybe that explained the weird feeling, anyway. Still, a cautious hand moved upward, almost unconsciously coming to rest upon his own chest and he felt the weathered texture of his tunic beneath his fingertips, rather than the bizarre warmth he seemed to be expecting.

“This potion,” Link began, his voice soft and unsure. “It reminds me of.. Something else.”

“Oh?” the Prince responded, the questioning present on his features only growing in intensity.

“When I venture inside the shrines, there are always tests that I have to complete, as some kind of training, I guess,” the Hylian continued, his explanations feeling inadequate and incomplete. He couldn’t begin to describe the strange, otherworldly nature within those hallowed shrines. Maybe it was because they were an untouched remnant of a world long gone, but whenever he entered one, he never felt safe or at peace; he felt like a trespasser, his fearless heart turning as vulnerable as that of a child. “Anyway, whenever I complete the trials inside the shrines, a mummified Sheikah monk with a disembodied voice offers me a small, glowing orb that sort of.. hovers over to me and enters my chest, filling me with this strange, intense, radiant power. This potion of yours gives me a similar feeling.”

“Interesting,” Sidon muttered like a scholar making very important observations. He was sitting with his back perfectly straightened, his legs draped over one side of the bed and crossed at the ankle. His hands were folded atop his thighs, his posture calm and unassuming, and so much smaller than he was, himself. “Could it be that these orbs were crafted from similar ingredients as my potions? Also, they absorb directly through your skin and pass into you? And with no debilitating effects, such as the lengthy unconsciousness I, myself, fall prey to?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. I think the shrines are in a state of stasis, because when I finally exit, it feels like no time has passed. And after I receive the orb, my awareness does go kind of... fuzzy. Like I said, the orbs cause some pretty intense effects and it’s overwhelming. I usually come back to a state of awareness to find myself in the entranceway of the shrine. For all I know, I could have been out for a week, but without actually losing any time.”

“That is..” the Zora Prince started, words failing him as a thousand questions erupted in his mind, all begging to be voiced first. “That is fascinating, my friend. Why did you never mention these details to me? I, personally, have always believed we could benefit from unraveling the technological secrets that were lost to time, much as Zora elders cling to our own outdated traditions.”

“Maybe some other time,” Link said, brushing off the Prince’s apparent captivation. He could barely believe that Sidon had failed to notice the creeping fear twisting its way up the ragdoll stitch of the Hylian’s spine. Maybe he was ignoring it or hoping to rationalize it away, but whatever he was wanting, Link was too tired for this conversation.

Just thinking about the shrines and his responsibility to Hyrule as Champion, or Hero, or whatever, had him feeling like he was going to slip out of his own skin again and he was suddenly desperate to physically run away from it; it stole everything he was, everything he’d built to become a real, living person.

Was he still himself? He hadn’t found himself asking that question in such a long time. He didn’t like the reoccurrence of that awful doubt, but regardless, there it was, still as tenacious and thriving inside him as always.

“All right then,” Sidon spoke up, accepting Link’s wish to drop the conversation. Link’s distant gaze snapped up to peer in the Zora’s direction at the sound of his voice, just those simple words
grounding the Hylian back in reality and wrapping him in something warm and comforting. By Hylia, Link was still absolutely dependent on Sidon, he’d just been trying to deny it for a little while.

As he stared across the room at the magnificent creature that was the Zora Prince, Link’s aching heart began to overflow with the same urge he’d been fighting from the very beginning- his want to confide in Sidon, to tell him everything.

But no. Link couldn’t do that. He couldn’t burden his Zora lover on the evening prior to him devoting himself to the suffering of his people. Sidon wasn’t a container for his angst and confusion, and just because he seemed endlessly understanding and compassionate, that didn’t mean he couldn’t be pushed to a state of exhaustion.

Instead, Link strode over to where Sidon was waiting, his bare feet pattering against the cold stone of the floor. He’d finally learned to take his boots off at the door, because apparently he’d been making more work for the servants that kept Sidon’s quarters pristine. The Prince had been too polite to ask the Hylian not to wear shoes inside, and honestly, he’d probably hesitated so long out of general uncertainty; was it appropriate to ask a Hylian to remove their footwear?

Link climbed up, onto the edge of the mattress, nestling himself right into the space between Sidon’s thighs and he laid his much smaller body against the comparative excess of Zora. The Prince immediately entwined the Hylian in a gentle embrace and Link settled there with comfortable ease.

Sometimes laying still and letting Sidon hold onto him made Link feel like a tiny baby, but fuck it, babies were generally kept warm and safe, and Link could use some of that.

“You seem incredibly tired,” the Prince said quietly, the points of his fingerscales combing through the Hylian’s soft hair, the texture seemingly a treat for the Zora to touch. As if on command, Link’s face scrunched in a yawn, one hand pressing over his mouth and the Zora watched, chuckling over it, though he commented in gentle disappointment. “It is terribly unfortunate. I had wished to spend a relaxed day by your side, as well as an evening splendid enough to give you something to fondly reflect upon, over the next week.”

Link nearly choked on his yawn, a laugh sputtering from him just before he pressed his face into the Zora’s smooth, white scales. He kept his expression hidden away while his frame shook with amusement, then he finally drew his head upright again to say, “The way you ask for sex is almost enough to let me forget everything else. Almost.”

Reaching up, the Hylian pressed his palm to the Zora’s cheek, one corner of his mouth quirking into something of a grin at how Sidon never failed to lean himself directly into the touch. He sort of wished he could convince himself that ‘relaxed days’ and ‘splendid evenings’ were even something he could offer, but as long as he resisted the call of his fate, it was difficult to believe that it could ever be so.

When his hand fell away, the Hylian let out a quiet, dismal sigh and softly shook his head just before he let it fall against Sidon’s shoulder. “Everything in this world is stupid, except for you,” Link huffed in frustration.

“Yes, well, things certainly have been better than they are right now, you have my agreement on that.” The Zora’s voice was smooth and serious, but it still held some quiet tinge of hope, a pillar to uphold the Champion’s strength. Sidon slowly laid himself back, his hands tightening against the Hylian to keep him from being jostled or disturbed. His tail tucked up under his neck, providing support that likely wouldn’t last too long before it became uncomfortable, or Sidon’s fins began to fall asleep, but that was all assumption on Link’s part. He supposed it was the Zora version of folding one’s arms behind one’s head.
“These last few days have broadened my understanding of how bad things can get,” Sidon purred, the sound vibrating in his chest so that Link pressed his face ever nearer, wanting to be engulfed in the feeling of that sound. How could he speak such broken words, yet sound so unbreakable at the very same time? “..It’s good that we have one another, or there really would be too little solace.”

Raising his head and adjusting himself while he laid flush to the Zora, Link peered down into the Prince’s face, finding it unusual and pleasing that, for once, he could easily see both of Sidon’s eyes. He inched closer, searching for the subtle splashes of blue in the golden depths just before tucking himself far too close to see anything at all, instead pressing a kiss to the pale, pliant lips of the Zora, who gladly lifted himself to meet the gesture of affection.

Sometimes Link swore that both he and his lover held the truth of their feelings, in physical form, held inside their mouths like secrets, because whenever they kissed, he believed that for a moment, he understood Sidon’s heart the way Sidon had always understood his. Maybe it was just the rarity of the occurrence, since their difference in height made these gestures too much effort to casually, commonly steal.

Before he drew back, Link bumped his head softly against the Zora’s crested brow, feeling Sidon happily nuzzle back. This show of affection was not something Hylians practiced but it had begun to feel strangely natural and Link was sure that he might wake up one day and be surprised to remind himself that he had no fins of his own.

Curious fingertips traced along one of the Prince’s forefins when Link at last raised his head, and Sidon echoed these gentle touches, moving his palms idly against the Hylian’s back, still cautious, still careful.

“How do you find the passion for these things after such an awful day?” the Hylian asked, a troubled sound to his voice and a very soft furrow upon his brow.

For an unsure second, Sidon blinked, perhaps not catching his lover’s meaning, or maybe even wondering if he had moved past the day’s events too easily for Link’s comfort. He had never known Link to be easily stirred, not even by death and destruction, so it was a curious shade on the Hylian’s face.

Clearing his throat, the Zora shifted his position once more, raising himself upright on his elbows, his tail swishing back and forth to amend the stifled blood flow. “Well,” he said, having to really consider his feelings before he could put them into words. Death and suffering were not things he could ever take lightly, especially when it was his people, and therefor lives he was responsible for. “..every day of my life, the emotional burdens of other people find me and attempt to shake my peace of mind. I do not begrudge this truth, but it is something I must live with. I feel what I must, as deeply as I must, when it is necessary. I understand these emotions and whatever reality is attached to them. I give them all as much time and consideration as they are due. But when everything is done, I must always find a way to set it all aside. If I couldn’t do that, then I would never have any peace. So that is what I’m doing now- I’ve set everything else aside, because I want to focus on you and this moment.”

“That’s too hard to comprehend,” the Hylian commented, his words immediate and bemused. “I get exhausted just being expected to play along with what other people feel and express.”

“We don’t have to do anything, Link,” the Prince reassured, without any hesitation, suddenly certain that he’d been a bit selfish in expressing his previous disappointment with his companion’s exhaustion; he didn’t mean to pressure the other, so he was going to make sure it was not taken that way. “It’s satisfying enough to spend this night in your company, and to revel in that. It will still be a splendid evening, as long as you’re here.”
“No, that’s not it. I’m fine,” Link brushed off his lover’s concern, combing his fingers through his lengthy fringe, which was still way too long; he was disappointed in himself for not asking the Yiga Clansmen that slashed off his ponytail to cut the front to match. Selfish bastards. “I was actually worried about you,” Link clarified. “You witnessed a man’s death. And you used your powers, which I’m starting to think causes a physical strain on you. Can you really recover from all that so easily?”

“Perhaps not.” The Zora’s muscular shoulders moved in something of a shrug and a single one of the Hylian’s hands drifted upward, drawn to the motion. Link’s fingertips traced along the colorful fringe of the Prince’s shoulder fins, fiddling with the delicate folds and finding the membranes to be much silkier than they appeared.

“It isn’t just that man’s death which is weighing on me, but the deaths of countless others,” Sidon explained, allowing a mournful sound to pour back into his tone. “The toll of this Water Blight has been troubling my thoughts for days and that does hurt, however, knowing that I have some small way to be of assistance, and that I’m soon to act on that very plan, it does leave my feelings of hope and resilience a bit restored.. as well as the comfort I find in your company.”

“So yes, I am ‘fine’, as you say,” the Prince continued, though a sudden show of worry left him looking as though he hadn’t spoken true. “If I may pry, however? This man was a friend of yours, which is why I was more concerned with how you were dealing with his loss.”

A small, bittersweet smile traced the Hylian’s lips, though his eyes had taken on a distant, starless look. Whatever he felt, at least it was numbed by the quaint amusement that Sidon, even after asking Link to be more conscious of his emotions, just couldn’t focus on his own suffering.

“I didn’t really know him,” Link spoke bluntly. He was processing this strange lack of emotional awareness, the same as he had with Mipha, but to a lesser degree. Or maybe it was to a greater degree? He still hadn’t figured that part out- was a numb reaction to a recent loss better or worse than a numb reaction to news of a woman’s death a hundred years ago? Did the greater closeness he once possessed with Mipha outweigh the lost possibility of closer friendship with Kayden, even if he couldn’t remember his bond with the Zora Champion?

“.I just mean, I didn’t remember him and even if I did, he would have been just a child when I knew him. That doesn’t really count as knowing somebody.” The Hylian tried to explain himself, glancing aside in uncertainty as he made these failed attempts to verbalize his failed attempts at feeling. “Still.. his family was kind to me and he seemed a good man. He lost his life too young and he left behind people who care about him.. and that’s unfair. I’m able to feel bitter over it. Maybe I feel sad, but it’s dull.. I’m not sure.”

“It’s something,” said the Prince, looking as though he actually believed what he was saying. “Just because you’re not debilitated by the loss, that doesn’t mean your emotions are wrong. You beat yourself up far too much over what you feel and what you don’t.”

“It doesn’t seem right.” Sighing, Link turned his head to one side and laid it against the Zora’s chest. “.especially when I compare myself to you.”

“Well, then, that’s the problem, my friend,” Sidon tittered, clearly seeing the flaw in his Hylian lover’s logic like it was a silly mistake to have made. “.You’re setting yourself up for failure, in expecting to be like me, as much as I’m flattered to be the standard you’ve set. However, if I may say, you’re the one who actually took the initiative to help this man, so perhaps you owe yourself more credit.”

Link couldn’t give himself more credit. Only Sidon believed he deserved more, but would he really
still believe that if he knew the supposed ‘Champion’ really had no wish to fight the Calamity? Link had even wondered what would happen, if and when the Calamity broke free. Would he just be sitting bitterly at the peak of some high place, watching the destruction occur and telling himself, hey, it was all they deserved for being so damn complacent in the face of their demise. He might get killed a few times himself, but it wasn’t a problem for him, after all.

Well, it had been easy for him to imagine those kinds of things before. It was becoming a bit more difficult for him to think such a thing of the Zora people, though. That didn’t mean he believed protecting them was a responsibility that should fall to him, alone.

“Sometimes it seems like.. Maybe somebody more like you should have been chosen for the role I’m suppose to play,” the Hylian quietly uttered, after a pause. “When your people face disaster, you do whatever you have to, without any hesitation. You even put this, whatever this is between us, aside as well.”

“Whatever this is?” Sidon went rigid, becoming immediately hung up on the Hylian’s choice of phrasing. There was a sound of mild offense to his tone, like his princely sensibilities couldn’t permit such casual dismissal of their bizarre friendship-turned-romance. “Indeed, well then, what is this?”

Link pulled himself upright just enough to look the bristled Prince in the face once more, or perhaps to allow Sidon to see the mischievous glimmer in his eyes or the tiny fox grin softly curving his lips. How funny it was- Sidon could be so endlessly understanding of the Hylian’s plight and his troubling lack of emotional depth, but if that very nature reflected itself in a lukewarm mention of their relationship, it was sure to cause trouble.

Of course, all Link could do was laugh, brushing his hair aside just before it fell into his face. As if Sidon really needed to worry that Link could simply drift into a state of disinterest, with how the Hylian was clinging to him and this relationship like it was vital to his existence. Was that really possible? Them, falling out of love? The notion was as frightening as it was silly and Link quickly pushed it aside in his mind, instead busying one idle hand by tracing the edges of the Zora’s arrowhead-shaped head fins.

Sidon calmed like a friendly cat under the touch and a quick but random thought occurred to Link- the Prince’s headfins were definitely a unique trait among his people. Was it something other Zoras found attractive? Was it part of what they believed made him as handsome as they proclaimed him to be? Most of the men did have rather prominent, angular brows compared to the women, so did that mean that Sidon was the pinnacle of ruggedly handsome masculinity? Or was this the Zora equivalent of having a really big nose, but everybody conveniently avoided acknowledging it? Maybe they thought it wasn’t necessarily attractive, but that it gave him a ‘distinguished’ look?

Link really wished it were appropriate to ask these stupid questions. At any point in time that he’d complimented the Prince’s looks, Sidon himself had been fairly dismissive about it, but that could have been out of a sheer distaste for being measured by his appearance, alone. Well, whatever, Link wasn’t going to risk making his Zora lover feel self-conscious; that forefin scar was already too much for him to bear.

Leaning forward, Link pressed a reassuring kiss to the Zora’s lips and Sidon grappled at his tiny body, pulling him in closer, not seeming to want even that simple touch to end. Was it the lingering uncertainty about their relationship that had him so desperate for affection? Or did his innate hunger for positive attention manifest itself in this way? Whatever the answer, Link was unwilling to disappoint his lover, allowing the much larger Zora to bundle him close and kiss him like the touch of their lips and the exchange of breath between them was a life necessity.

When the Prince was satisfied enough to allow the smallest space between himself and his lover,
Link finally took the initiative to answer the oddly hanging question, all while Sidon nuzzled the softness of his hair in fascinated delight. “We haven’t really put a name or definition on what this is between us yet,” Link breathed against the Prince’s lips, his eyes closed so that the sound of their voices and the feeling of their bodies was all that existed. The distance that kept them apart still somehow naturally found a way to close itself. Their mouths pushed together, soft and needful, yet unhurried, any sense that this could be their last night together, even just for a long period of time, absolutely absent.

A soft purr of sound escaped into the kiss, a content and quiet moan vibrating in the Zora’s throat so that the Hylian’s pointed ears pitched forward, that audible pleasure a tantalizing treat. Link wanted those noises the same way he wanted the touch, yet he withdrew from the kiss, sitting himself up straight instead of lazily laying against the Zora like Sidon was an enormous pillow. “Your people definitely have ideas and expectations..” Link continued his previous thought, unable to forget how many Zoras had commented on his relationship with the Prince so far. He had this weird image in his mind of Brivere, arms crossed over his chest, saying, ‘What are your intentions?’ like an overprotective parent. “..And opinions,” he added, distinctly grumbling this last word.

Letting out a sigh, Link paused to fully consider this odd situation he and his Zora lover were in. It wasn’t the first time he’d contemplated it, but this was the first time he’d bothered to discuss it with Sidon. “You are a Prince and even your love life doesn’t fully belong to you, because of duty to your people. I suppose, in a way, this is all just for fun, isn’t it?”

“Hmm,” Sidon hummed, much more unworried than Link seemed to be. Hadn’t this silly Hylian learned by now that the Prince was a damned rebel who didn’t let the opinions of others sway him? “Well, it is perhaps a bit soon to be considering something as drastic as marriage, if that’s what you’re trying to imply,” he said with a quiet laugh, joking like an idiot kid as he added, “..after all, I haven’t quite had time to wrap my head around the craftsmanship required to make the Zora armor.”

“Oh ho ho, yes,” Link mocked, having gotten pretty good at imitating Sidon’s stupid laugh and upperclass accent with all the time he spent talking to Crazy Girl in the same way. “I say, you are indeed quite amusing.”

Unbothered, Sidon laughed right along as his companion imitated him, his eyes gleaming, one hand reaching up to capture a single pointed ear between his fingers so that he could give it an affectionate tug. By the time the laughter between them subsided, Link had leaned his entire head into the hand that had clasped him by the ear and the Zora smiled up at him in contentment.

“If it gives you any peace of mind,” the Prince said, his sharp teeth shining while he spoke through the smile on his face. “Mipha saw nothing politically incorrect about being with you, and being wed to you, so it isn’t a concern of my own, either. For now, would you say that we are.. friends as well as companions? Lovers? Affectionately courting sweethearts?”

“Companions will do.” The Hylian physically reached out to press his fingertips to Sidon’s lips, to quiet him. The Prince could probably recite every possible synonym for the word, if Link allowed it. “Making the Zora armor is still something princesses do.”

“It’s a lovely, beautiful tradition that I see no reason not to make use of, myself,” Sidon spoke in retort, just as soon as Link removed his fingers. Clearly he was still willing to rebel, even against Link’s playful mockery. However, it took only a few seconds for his gaze to wander aside in thought, a troubled furrow shadowing his features. “I do lack the proper scales for the design, I’m afraid... I’ll think of something.”

“Use one of those gleaming teeth of yours.” Link’s voice pitched low and sarcastic, yet he couldn’t help but let a laugh escape at the idea. He hadn’t told the Prince, but the shine of those sharp teeth
could probably be compared to diamonds, as a meter by which to measure clarity and quality. Still snickering, the Hylian added, “That would definitely make a statement.”

“I understand that you are attempting to be humorous,” the Zora commented, the first sign of his budding excitement visible in the way his pupil’s widened and his tone trembled with glee that he only barely kept bridled. “...but that is actually quite a fantastic suggestion! I do shed them regularly, you know, so I could very easily save one the next time! Oh, my friend, you are brilliant.”

Link said nothing at all, choosing instead to quietly admire the pure beauty of this excitable idiot’s happiness. It was difficult to believe that any member of royalty could be so easily satisfied by such simple things, but Link could tell that Sidon was being sincere. He swore, even the red of the Zora’s scales became more warm and vibrant when he was happy and Link couldn’t help but lean in and kiss that smiling Prince again. He caught him off guard, but Sidon quickly acted to return the gesture, all too glad to do so.

Link wanted to absorb those smiles into himself, to become one with the light of Sidon’s happiness. He wanted the Prince’s hands all over him and he imagined that with each touch, he’d be smeared in the same shade as Sidon’s joy.

“You really are okay, aren’t you?” the Prince purred, still concerned enough to check and double check.

“I’ll be okay,” the Hylian’s voice was a whisper. His hands fell against Sidon’s own, which laid upon his hips, his much smaller fingers finding the furrows between the Zora’s knuckles. “Your touch is going to make me okay.”

With another soft, doting smile, Sidon leaned in, the point of his brow nuzzling the top of his lover’s head in tender affection. “You know I adore you, yes?”

“I know,” Link breathed with what few seconds he could spare before he inclined his neck and brought his lips back to the Prince’s.

Zoras had a lot of respect for their long held rules and traditions. They put a lot of faith into the people in power and figures of authority. As such, Bazz’s office, in the barracks below the Palace, actually had a door, whereas the private residences of nobility had nothing but obscuring, curved entryways.

It was Gaddison who pushed that very door shut behind herself and the structure swung with a soft creak, heavy in her hand. The door was sculpted like every other structure in Zora’s Domain, but from glistening, rust-proofed ore and smokey glass.

When the pastel-scaled Zora turned away from the door and faced the Guard Captain’s desk, she found Bazz slumped over the pale, blue surface, his yellow eyes cast downward in focus, the weight of his entire upper body propped upon his elbows. He was quietly looking between what appeared to be two different documents with a kind of thoughtful intensity only he could manage.

Gaddison used to be charmed by the way Bazz would go out of his way to maintain that constant tough guy appearance. Today was another day, however, and she didn’t have time for his methodical, broody stretches of silence. She cleared her throat sharply, so that it couldn’t be mistaken for anything but impatience, and at last his head snapped up to regard her.

The sleek, black Zora took a deep breath, letting out the longest sigh possible, then he pushed one of
the documents forward, stating, “I have the request you submitted for a transfer. I sent for you to inquire, however, as to what your actual concerns were regarding Guardsman Dunma, other than the fact that it’s preposterous for her to be on duty at the fort where.. where Guardsman Rivan died.”

“Oh, so we’re talking professionally while on duty, are we?” Gaddison mocked, her own voice the usual slow, smooth sound. To further exaggerate her aggravation with the way Bazz used his position to act as though they hadn’t known each other since childhood, the Zora woman straightened and folded her arms behind her back like a new recruit looking to get noticed for their discipline. “I’m not entirely sure if my suspicions have any real truth to them, sir,” she stated, suddenly as serious and stern as Bazz, himself. “But I would like to be sure, one way or another.”

If Zoras possessed the ability to raise an eyebrow to express a lack of amusement, Bazz would have done precisely that. Instead, his tail went rigid, resisting the urge to flick, because he was a goddamn professional, unlike some people.

“Do you know anything about this?” One sharp fingerscale tapped the other document that laid before the Guard Captain, then he rotated it and pushed it to the edge of his desk when Gaddison approached to have a look, her head tilting, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. It was a request of another sort, one that had arrived at exactly the same time as the other Zora’s. Maybe Bazz’s state of constant thought caused him to draw false conclusions in his mind and he occasionally tended to notice otherwise innocent coincidences, painting them as dire situations when in fact, they weren’t. This time, though, he was sure that these events must have had a connection and he hadn’t figured out if it was good or not or even what it meant.

“A promotion to Corporal? Dunma?” Gaddison was momentarily impressed when she read over the document, but not incredibly surprised. “I hadn’t known about this until now,” she confessed, idly shrugging her shoulders, “but if you’re asking me if I believe it to be related to my concerns- then, yes.”

“Are you afraid that she’s just doing too good of a job, guardsman?” Bazz questioned, utterly serious in the way he asked, managing not to paint a single syllable in sarcasm, despite that it was nothing but.

“It could just be that she’s overworking herself. That seems typical of her,” the lavender Zora answered in casual dismissal, this verbal wrestling match a common occurrence between herself and her ‘superior’. Her golden eyes met Bazz’s own intense gaze, every little interaction between them a miniature war that neither was willing to back down from. Gaddison’s lips parted ever so slightly, the tip of her tongue tracing the sharp edge of her canine fangs, then she added, “But it could be something else and again, I need to be sure that she isn’t making the same kinds of naive, thoughtless mistakes that her father did when he was her age.”

“Gaddison,” Bazz growled, his hands bundling into lose fists upon his desk, then he drew them together, folding one hand around the other as though it could hide the tension overflowing from underneath those shiny, jet black scales. “I’m not fooled by any of this. Do you really think I believe this is your reasoning for wanting this transfer?”

“There goes the professional talk..” An soft, amused chuckle was elicited from the Zora woman. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed watching her stern, serious Guard Captain losing all patience and control. She hadn’t forgotten how troublesome he was for her, however. Her toeclaws clicked with a slow, smooth gait while she closed the small space between herself and the desk. Gaddison put her weight on one foot, her hip swaying to one side just before she bent herself lower, placing her hands against the surface in a small show of defiance. “Bazz, it doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. As a guardsman, I’m not obligated to share my reasoning or even have reasoning
more logical than ‘a change of scenery would be nice.’ Your personal approval isn’t required, only your professional approval.”

With a soft flick of her finger, Gaddison shoved her request back into Bazz’s reach and she loomed, impatiently waiting for him to stop being the stubborn, little control freak that he was and sign the damn paper.

Bazz did not immediately back down- he never had where Gaddison was concerned. For so many years, this back and forth between them had been cute, coy, maybe even fun. There were times when he didn’t mind losing, when he actively enjoyed having all control stripped away. But suddenly he was fighting just to keep the Zora woman around and she was vehemently resisting, not demure, not playful, but serious. She was walking away and Bazz was helpless to impede her. Even worse, she only hated him more for wanting her to stay.

Eventually the black Zora’s shoulders stooped and his head dipped low. A hesitant hand reached for his quill and he brought it slowly to the document, scratching his signature across it, as demanded. He couldn’t see the smile that stretched across Gaddison’s lips as the last of his willpower bowed and broke; he didn’t want to see.

“...there,” Bazz hissed, trying his best not to sound as weak and defeated as he felt. “...I suppose now you have all you need to finally leave me behind for good.”

“You’re right,” Gaddison’s voice immediately snapped without an ounce of remorse. “If you’re still blaming me for your own inability to compromise, then yes, I’m going to move on. It didn’t work out between us and no matter how hard you try to make my job boring and unenjoyable, I’m never going to settle for being the person that you want and expect. I’m never going to be the little wife who raises your family while you live your life of glory and leadership..” She paused, leaning nearer so that hardly an inch was spared between herself and the Guard Captain. A bitter, venomous word rested at the tip of her tongue, her voice dropping to a low purr when she set it free. “..Bazzy.”

“Stop,” Bazz sharply piped up, raising his head just enough that his gleaming eyes were visible from underneath the shadow of his pointed brow. “Don’t you dare call me that,” he growled, his lip curling with his words.

“What?” A mockingly innocent laugh bubbled from the pastel Zora and she straightened, placing her hands upon her hips. “You think I’ve forgotten how badly you always wanted to be with Kodah when we were younger? That was the whole reason you asked the Hylian Champion to tutor you- because you wanted her to notice you the way she noticed him. And that’s still what you really, truly want- a sweet, domestic woman like her, not somebody who could ever challenge you.”

The Captain quietly seethed while the other Zora went on, her every word wounding him in ways that she wasn’t even aware of, leaving him to bleed in his guilt and anger. “Kayden is ill with the Water Blight,” he finally cut in, somehow managing to sharpen his words as diligently as the other. “...so your mockery is extremely inappropriate at the moment.”

Silence; a lack of retort was an unusual thing from Gaddison, but it served to prove that as abrasive and challenging as she could be, she wasn’t heartless. Her thoughtful pause was in recognition of the fact that she’d screwed up and she felt no shame in amending that. “I didn’t know, Bazz. I’m sorry,” she said, her tone softened and sincere. “I should visit with them before I go..”

“I just thought..” Bazz spoke, his voice quiet and trailing off almost as quickly as he’d begun. He knew Gaddison had heard his fretful whining more times than she cared to, but some part of him hoped that, for once, she might listen or sympathize. Sighing, he continued, “When we were younger, I thought our lives would be so much different from.. this. I had dreams then, we all did.
Then the Calamity came, and even though it was temporarily imprisoned again, nothing was ever the same after that. Every day just made it more and more apparent that the world was slowly turning bleaker and bleaker and nothing I’ve ever done has made a difference, as much as I desperately wanted it to. So no, I’m not going to try to stop you from leaving. One way or another, everyone leaves in the end. Everything falls apart. Nothing good ever stays. It’s not worth trying any longer.”

Gaddison could only loosely cross her arms over her chest, shaking her head at the tall, dark pessimist before her. He’d fallen so damn far from his tenacious youth- Big Bad Bazz? What a laugh. “Alright, average-sized, strictly rule-following Bazz,” the woman softly teased, her voice warm and rich, the sound like honeyed wine. “I know a way to cheer you up.”

Again, the lavender Zora bent lower, her palms pressing into the desk that stood between herself and her once-upon-a-time lover. So softly, she pushed every bit of space between them apart, bumping her forehead against the black Zora’s in the most tentative way. She didn’t rush- she watched. The worried creases in Bazz’s face fought to remain, but slowly faded away. His eyes shut at Gaddison’s nearness and it was difficult to know if it was in apprehension or longing.

And despite how she made the final move to severe all ties to this man, she would always know the truth- even the temptation he posed made her heart pound in excitement. This entire relationship was like a bested enemy splayed before her feet, writhing in the pain of her finishing blow, yet she still didn’t want the conflict to end.

Her lips hovered near the dark Zora’s, her golden eyes still curiously watching, her own gaze shadowed by the smoky hue of her lids at half-mast. The warmth of the Zora woman’s breath was a teasing ghost, a promise of a kiss left unfulfilled.

“How about a nice goodbye romp?” she whispered at last, sure that the words alone would be enough to elicit a muffled, shameful moan of desire. Instead, Bazz opened his eyes, his golden stare meeting hers and speaking all the need that he verbally denied.

“We can’t submerge right now.” The sound of Bazz’s voice was low, secretive and bound by a kind of restraint that was impossible to separate from simple disappointment.

“We don’t have to swim out to do it.” Bumping closer and angling her head to one side, Gaddison spoke every word with aching slowness, the surface of her lips finally touching the other’s, but not to kiss; they brushed Bazz’s while she talked, the calm vibration of the sound enchanting his senses, the actual inability to receive any real affection ensnaring his heart full of wanting. “. . .Your office is private enough.”

“You want to do this while we’re on duty?” His tail flicked in indecision, his tone imploring even the smallest show of goddamn mercy. Bazz moved aside, pulling away just enough to spare a glance in the direction of his office door, one fang pushing against his lower lip in a show of frustration.

Gaddison laughed, her amusement hushed but as coherent as spoken words. Bazz knew what she was going to say before she even uttered a single thing.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” the Zora woman leaned right into him, her mouth resting against one forefin as she whispered these words like some sort of dirty secret. The soft touch of her lips fell there, chaste, coaxing, then she said, “. . .only if you want to.”

It was strange not have one’s head titled all the way back to stare at the sky; in Zora’s Domain, the view was always minimized by mountainous walls at every side. It was strange but breathtaking in a
way that Betaal scarcely had time to acknowledge, with how busy the fort kept her. She’d imagined views like these; flat, endless fields of warm, shallow water that flowed into the horizon, everything painted in the same shade of deep, dark blue and dappled with the light of a thousand stars.

Out here, in the free and open space of the Lanayru Wetlands, the land touched the sky, one inseparable, indistinguishable from the other, and everything was just so big, yet she still felt that if she opened her arms wide enough, she could touch all of it at once.

She was incredibly moved, while at the exact same time, she was disappointed that she’d failed to notice the beauty of this place, this world, for such a long time. Meanwhile, she’d spent years tucked away in her Undercity home, the dank, dark cave that it was, imagining places like these in every spare moment that her studies allowed.

Some part of her ached knowing that her one and only talent outside of battle had been born from escapist necessity, but that part was overshadowed by the flood of relief she felt just looking around and thinking, this is it, I’ve made it, everything is perfect now.

“I’ve never seen you out of your armor until now, sir,” came the sound of a soft, sweet voice, yet regardless of how gentle it was, it didn’t fail to startle the unarmed warrior right out of her reverent pondering.

Betaal turned to her blind side out of instinct, finding nothing but empty space, and only after being forced to rotate in nearly a full circle did she realize that the other Zora had approached on her sighted side. It was Dunma, of course, because who else would bother to follow their superior out of the fort, unless they were looking for even more work. The blue Zora’s arms folded across her chest instinctively, knowing that her scales were an awful, chaffed mess to look at from how often she was armored, in fact.

Then she remembered that Dunna’s were the exact same; she saw as much, actually. In watching the younger woman take the last slow stride in her direction, Betaal noticed with ease the dull, warped scales on the other, bent and misaligned where her breastplate hugged her body, and where her biceps strained against the straps that kept other pieces in place.

“We’re off duty. There’s no need for the formalities,” the Sergeant uttered plainly, hiding the smile she couldn’t keep off of her face by turning away and peering upward at the Lanayru Tower that stretched mysteriously upward. Betaal had never been out this way prior to taking the fort, but she’d heard that these towers were a new sight across Hyrule.

Turning back to Dunma, Betaal was still grinning like a fool, and she let out a chuckle of amusement just before her gruff voice spoke up to tease the other. “Even when you’re out of your armor, you’re still in it in your mind, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” the violet Zora laughed right along with the playful banter, water rippling around her knees while she inched closer to Betaal’s side, in an attempt to get the older woman’s attention. Once she was sure that she had it, Dunna stood straighter, putting on her most serious expression, as well as a slightly deeper voice. “‘A true warrior is the flesh underneath the armor- a true warrior is always ready.’”

“Pfft.” Restraining a snort of laughter, the shorter Zora stuffed her face right into her roughened palms, though her powerful frame shook with surprise amusement. Dunna was determined not to allow this sudden sheepishness, however, and she reached out to grasp Betaal by the wrists, tugging her hands away from her face, all for the sake of seeing the older woman’s mouth wide with laughter, her sharp teeth shining, even in the silvery moonlight.
“So you do know how to laugh!” the younger woman accused, giggling while her attempts to keep Betaal’s hands down turned into something of a grappling match. “Come on, if I can act like an idiot for your amusement, you have to let me watch you laugh like an idiot, too!”

When the blue Zora’s giggles quieted and she finally stopped resisting Dunma’s efforts to keep her hands down, her arms loosely hung before her, still in the violet Zora’s grasp. The other woman probably had this silly notion that if she let go, Betaal might resume hands-over-face mode again, just to spite her.

“It seems,” Betaal began, almost unable to speak without descending into another bout of laughter. “It seems like a true warrior actually just quotes works of fiction to justify never relaxing.”

“It would feel nice to stretch out in the water, actually,” the young woman nearly groaned, taking her hands away quickly, like she somehow just remembered that Betaal was her boss. The violet color of her scales began to stain into the pale of her cheeks, but Dunma carried on the casual conversation, trying not to acknowledge her own sudden embarrassment. She placed her arms behind herself, bending backward in a stiff stretch. “I swear, the masonry of that fort isn’t as balanced as the architecture back home. Standing and walking around it all the time is absolute murder.”

“Agreed,” purred Betaal, peering out at the glassy wetland that stretched out before her once again. “It gets deeper up a bit further, though, near Bone Pond. I was on my way out there, when I stopped here to admire the scenery.”

“That’s cute,” Dunma teased. “Are you one of those that believe flowers in spring poetically symbolize the short lives of warriors in a time of war, too? What a Lorelei trait.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Betaal batted one hand at the taller Zora, honestly amused at how hard she tried to prove that Betaal was less like General Kita than she was. It was like they suddenly had this bizarre rivalry that revolved solely around trying to embody a fictional character more.

Instead of falling at her side, when Betaal’s hand ceased in its waving, she reached out to gently grasp Dunma’s own for all of a second while she continued walking, urging the younger warrior to follow along. “Come on,” the blue Zora casually coaxed, her single, golden eye glancing over at the lovely violet-scaled woman.

“Coming,” the voice of the younger woman was soft and unusually shy, a certain tremor to her tone as she spoke. But while her typical bold nature failed to make itself apparent in her voice, before Betaal’s hand could slide away, Dunma bravely tightened her own fingers around those of her Sergeant, refusing to allow her touch to escape.

For a short stretch of silence, the two women walked together, both of their hands remarkably still, not tightening, not loosening and not even a single one of their fingers twitched. The experience was simultaneously comfortable and terrifying, confusing yet it spoke a truth shared between them that neither of them had fully realized until this very moment.

“Betaal?” At last, Dunma couldn’t endure the silence any longer, especially when there was undoubtably more to be said and she knew her superior well enough at this point to understand that, for as gutsy as she was, Betaal didn’t have the nerve to speak what she must have been feeling, at least not without a push.

“Yes, guardsman?” Oddly serious, Betaal’s voice dropped to the same rough, stern tone that she would have used to address any other soldier when she spoke. She didn’t even turn to look at the other woman at her side, and that reaction was a blow to the younger Zora’s certainty and nerve.
Dunma did not immediately voice the very question she’d been intent on posing, because she was too busy trying to discern if maybe she was wrong, if maybe she would run the risk of making this wonderful friendship awkward if she pressed any further.

“I thought that..” Dunma mumbled, her tail stiffened against her back, her gait slowing just enough that her hand began to pull free from Betaal’s. “...the formalities weren’t necessary?”

“It’s just..” Tightening her grip at the very last moment, Betaal held on, disallowing the other to pull away discouraged. Instead, she gave a reassuring squeeze, though she was almost certain that now her own hands were shaking. “...habit,” she finished, glancing to the side again, but only enough to look at the other woman peripherally.

Honestly, she found herself kind of wishing that Dunma had been walking on her blind side, because she was too flustered to fully look at her.

“Right,” the young woman muttered, her silvery voice unsure yet steeled with a kind of determination that made it sound as though she expected to go into actual battle at any moment. “Listen.. I’ve never really liked doing this thing where we’re both trying to read whatever signs the other person is giving and figuring out if they mean what we think they mean.. If that makes any sense. Personally, I would rather speak my mind and be straightforward. Maybe that wasn’t true when I was a girl, but waiting around just to be disappointed doesn’t suit me any longer.”

“So speak your mind, Dunma.” These words came out a soft purr of sound, still serious, still stern, but somehow gentler than before. “What is it you need to say?”

“Is this- what’s going on between us, I mean,” the violet Zora’s voice was quiet but steady and she walked only closer at Betaal’s side, their hands still entwined and their sides gently bumping with their stride. “..is it just friendly or.. Is it something else?”

Betaal chuckled at the suggestion, her actual heart doing funny acrobatics somewhere under the heart-shaped marking on her chest, her stomach turning with a kind of fearful excitement that even fights to the death couldn’t provoke. Dunma was looking down at her with this confounded expression and the blue Zora could tell as much, even from the corner of her eye. So to amend any misunderstanding, Betaal spoke the thought which had provided such amusement. “You mean like Kita and Lorelei?”

“No,” Dunma scoffed, her tone going just a bit shrill at the suggestion. Being able to chat and joke about her nerdy interests was definitely a bonus, but if she really thought about it, the attraction had been present before she was even aware that Betaal knew about ‘The Cursed Girl’ series. “I mean like you and me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think I deserve somebody with answers as smooth as yours,” Betaal joked, trying to laugh off the fact that she was an absolute mess right now. When it subsided, however, she went quiet in thought. Maybe Dunma had been the one to finally pose the obvious question, but the very same consideration had been prodding at the fort Sergeant, distracting her at all hours of the day and night, but she’d been doing all she could to ignore those thoughts and the feelings that came with them. Betaal’s head drooped forward, the sound of her voice quiet and unsure. “..You’re wonderful, Dunma. You have good taste in books, and you’re a strong, capable warrior, on top of being absolutely lovely.” In an attempt to brave her own flustered nature when it came to pretty girls, Betaal actually turned to look at the woman by her side, meeting Dunma’s gaze and taking stock of the way the hope was fading on her features. “Whenever I look at you, I wish I still had two eyes, because I probably can’t even fully appreciate how very beautiful you truly are..”
When Betaal trailed off, Dunma broke the eye contact between them, glancing down at the rippling water before her. A soft smile was forced onto her pale lips, and she warily spoke up in question. “..but?”

“But..” the Sergeant began, taking the other woman’s prompt, and sighing as she did so. “I didn’t want you to think that this was my only intention. I honestly made the effort to befriend you because I felt like.. you needed one.”

“I didn’t think that, Betaal,” said Dunma. She knew better than to assume her friend could ever be so shallow and her voice was warm and sincere while she addressed this concern with reassurance. Still, she didn’t want to push, if it turned out that her superior was trying to find the easiest way to let her down. “And, if you want to keep this as it is- a friendship- it will still mean everything to me.”

“Having anything more than that wouldn’t be without risk,” the blue Zora explained. As much as she’d already considered this subject, she was painfully aware of the dangers it presented. “First of all, I’m a good bit older than you. Also, there’s an unfair imbalance of power between us, because I’m your superior. From every angle, it would look like I was taking advantage of you.”

“But you’re not,” the taller Zora hissed, the pitch of her voice going up at the suggestion. “You wouldn’t.”

“No, I wouldn’t, but,” Betaal shrugged, the gaze of her single eye drifting downward. “..like I said, appearances would speak louder than anything we could claim. Dunma, if it weren’t for these concerns, I wouldn’t hesitate at all, I want you to know that.”

“I don’t know what to say..” Sighing, it was Dunma now who gave the other’s hand a squeeze and Betaal couldn’t tell if it was for comfort or in frustration. “I’m not naive,” the violet Zora continued, “I know that you’re the only one who’d be put at risk with this relationship and I hate the idea of being responsible for any kind of trouble that doesn’t involve using spears and arrows to overcome it.”

Though the younger Zora claimed that she didn’t know what to say, Betaal was, in fact, the one left speechless. She adored Dunma. She wanted nothing but happiness for her. She would love to be the one to provide even a fraction of that happiness, but just as she’d said, romance between them would jeopardize her position, without question. She was the superior, she was the one responsible for the safety of the warriors who served under her and if it was discovered that she was taking advantage of that position, or even unfairly favoring one over the others, she would almost certainly be removed.

She had come so far from her little place in the Undercity. She had fought for everything she had up to this point and the idea of being knocked all the way back to the beginning filled her with real terror, because it was a very real possibility.

“It’s so unfair!” Dunma hissed, finally yanking her hand away and giving the water a slap while it rose up around her hips. The reflections of trees and stars and even the two wandering Zoras was obscured by the violent ripples and the splash of the younger woman’s strike. “There’s no reason that we should be forbidden to each other. It’s just cruel.”

“Dunma,” Betaal uttered the other warrior’s name, even the sound of it on her tongue a forbidden feeling. She reached for the frustrated other, her hand laying on her shoulder, a comfort that relaxed her tense frame, yet still Betaal had no clue what she could do, what she could say. Nothing could make it better. Nothing could make it easier.

“That’s just like me, though,” the violet Zora uttered pitifully, bitterly, her voice both sweet and sharp, then she reached for the hand that was one her shoulder, her fingers delicately tracing the other
woman’s. “..Falling for people that I can never have.”

Their gazes met once more, Dunma’s morose and beautiful, Betaal’s conflicted and wanting, each one pulling the other in. They were on a crash course and surely they knew in this moment that it was unavoidable. Maybe if they hadn’t bravely ventured this far, there might have been hope to go back, but now there wasn’t- they were captured by the current, helpless to resist.

They would see each other again and again beyond this night; of course they would. Even if they turned back now, there would be other chances, the temptation would present itself again and again, and they knew that.

“What do we do now, sir?” the violet Zora breathed, her hands twitching, trying to resist reaching out to the other, failing to do so. Cautiously, she turned to Betaal, her hands tentatively laying upon the shorter woman’s hips. “Do we stay friends and pretend to be satisfied? Or will that just make things worse, until we’re so desperate that we turn clumsy and foolish?”

Betaal let out a quiet, bitter chuckle and shook her head, her hand slowly moving from Dunma’s shoulder to her cheek. “Don’t ask me,” she said. “Don’t ask me what to do- I can’t lead you in this situation, remember?”

“Then ask me what I want,” the younger Zora breathed, bending herself lower so that their forehead’s nearly touched.

“What do you want, Dunma?” purred the blue Zora, her red fins flaring ever so slightly in mounting excitement; she could see it on Dunma too, in the dilation of her slitted pupils, in the vibrant flush deepening the color of her scales.

“I want you to kiss me,” the young woman coyly answered, a soft, sad smile on her pretty lips. “Just one kiss can’t hu-”

She didn’t even finish her sentence before the older woman’s lips were pressed to hers, a soft, warm, tender touch that lit the violet Zora’s insides to flame. Dunma’s hands on Betaal pulled her in closer, closer, until their bodies were flush, and ‘one kiss’ was turning into much more than just one, but technically no more than that, because if it didn’t end, then it couldn’t be any more.

Betaal’s other arm slithered behind the taller woman’s back, holding onto her like they could get any physically closer, and as she did their kiss was broken, Dunma’s head dipping down lower, her mouth pressing against the blue Zora’s exposed neck. The violet Zoras fangs grazed Betaal’s scales, nipping softly, secretly, not enough to draw blood, not enough to leave evidence, yet the older woman’s hand at Dunma’s back still tightened, her sharp fingerscales making soft furrows that would be tucked away, under the armor of the other, if they were even noticeable at all.

“Maybe..” Betaal mumbled, though that soft utterance still ensnared the attention of the other and Dunma raised her head, pressing her rounded forehead against Betaal’s own battle-scarred one. “..just this once, if we keep it secret.”

“We could just.. Go for one swim together,” Dunma added, “as ‘friends.’”

The Sergeant took a quick moment to think over this suggestion, about what it meant and what it could mean. But they were already here and they’d already come this far, and Dunma was right- this would make them foolish. This would make them careless.

They had to take this chance while they could, because if they didn’t, then it would take them when they absolutely couldn’t.
Betaal offered a gentle nod of her head, then leaned in for just one more kiss; one more couldn’t hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, so how was it, friendos? I really do hope you all are still enjoying this story. :]
If any of you are curious about my nanowrimo word count: 11,496/ 50,000
Looks good, right? That definitely means this chapter was a bit longer than average. :)
So, next weekend I will also be at a convention (Fan Expo) so the update probably wont actually come on Saturday or Sunday. I might write a short, smutty chapter and try to post for Thursday and if not Thursday, then it'll have to be Monday. Watch my tumblr for updates, because I do post little messages in regards to the new chapters.
My Tumblr is BanishedOne / BanishFics
My NanoWrimo is BanishedOne if you want to friend there, too. :)
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Even in times of hardship, there were tender moments to be found. The Hylian Champion laid contentedly in the arms of his lover; a bittersweet, temporary goodbye. Another romance came to a burning end, yet even so, the disenchanted lovers dared to fling their bodies to the flame, in one, final, passionate blaze that would leave them bleak and cold. Yet while some romances died, others bloomed to life, sweet, soft and so very cautious.

Chapter Notes

;NSFW WARNING;

This entire chapter is utterly NSFW. This chapter is the gourmet meat of fanservice chapters, so just know that there is a lot of smutty junk ahead. I know I made you all wait for this chapter much longer than planned, so instead of yapping, I'm gonna let you all sink your teeth into it.

Enjoy.

The cool air and the dark of the night drew people together across Zora’s Domain. Summer was waning into autumn, the balmy air turning crisp, pushing bodies together to preserve ambient warmth. Old instincts from even older times whispered underneath the logic possessed by a civilized race; when summer began to cool, it was the perfect time of year for Zora mating. Their energy was still high from the warmth of the days, and the winter rain would cool the water to ideal egg-laying temperatures.

For now, the chill brought a rise of thick fog off the water and while normally the Zora people would begin to seek the water earlier in the evening, nobody at all had that option. The communal cisterns were drained and lined with woolen mats, the area still patrolled by tireless guardsmen while dozens of merchant class people slept uncomfortably, but safe. At least the space was familiar, and that familiarity and security gave them solace, even in these trying times.

Carefully, secretly, hours and hours after dusk, a mated pair of Zoras pulled nearer to one another while tucked within the cradle of the emptied cistern. They were warm together sharing a mat and his fingerscales tugged at her hips. She gasped in nervous excitement while her partner nipped at the crook between her neck and shoulder, her fretting turning to wanting when his sharp fangs broke her pretty, pale-blue scales. She pushed back against him and he entered her, their bodies moving together like softly rippling water, and not a single person took notice.

Across the Undercity, people were still lining the Basilica halls, waiting to receive rations in the dead of night, having been there since the afternoon. There were whispers that the food was gone, or that the Apostles had all sought sleep while letting the hungry masses wait and wait. One young woman
patterned along the moist, blue stone of the corridors, following the length of the line in order to locate her brother, to change places with him, to give him some time off of his feet. She counted the number of guards that harassed her along the way, knowing by the looks in their eyes when they stared down upon her that this one was no different than the last, this one would try to stop her, too.

‘You have to wait in line,’ they would say. ‘Get back in line!’

She stood against their threatening spears, just to explain that her brother was already somewhere in the queue and that she was looking for him. They never believed her and it always took a tiresome amount of pleading just to get by, but she did.

When the young woman located her tired sibling, she took his place, sending him home to the tiny space shared between their family. The woman was unwed, but had two small children of her own. Her brother had a wife, who he found weeping over their lost eggs, which had turned black and dead in the Blighted water. A comforting touch escalated into sad, frustrated sex, to forget what they had lost, to try again perhaps, to hold on to what they had for tonight—each other.

One lone guardsman swam up from the Basilica, to report that the situation below was tense, but so far incident free. She approached the door to the Captain’s office, only to find it shut tight, however. Any kind of shut door was rare throughout the city, but the armored woman merely turned on heel to return to her post, knowing either Bazz was away, or not to be bothered.

On the other side of that door, Bazz was indeed, not to be bothered. The pastel Zora in his company had thrown aside the papers which lined his desk, climbing atop like it was her castle, a piece of territory that she was claiming despite his weak protests. Any further words of complaint he could have uttered were lost while the armor adorning his brow was cast away and his head was pushed all to gladly between the woman’s thighs.

Gaddison leaned back enough that one elbow kept her excited body held in a tight suspension, one hand firmly grasping the edge of the desk, her sharp fingerscales turning dull as they scraped at the blue stone. Her other hand scratched and tugged at the black Zora’s head, grabbing at his forefins and tail to keep him where she wanted him.

Occasionally, the soft skin at the base of the Zora man’s crest would wrinkle in rebuke, his lip curling to expose his fangs just before he sank them into the supple flesh of Gaddison’s thigh, producing a feisty hiss of delight, then she would push his head down all over again.

He otherwise greeted the crease between her legs with loving familiarity, his tongue prodding and caressing it toward a blushed and swollen state of arousal, so that the softer, more sensitive flesh would be revealed from underneath the woman’s protective scales. His arms hugged her legs, folding them back and drawing her closer, pulling her nearer like he was intent on dragging her down from the desk, and she was forced to hold on to keep it from being so.

If she did not resist, they would almost certainly end up on the floor and continue like nothing was any different. It was always this way between them, both vying for dominance, measuring their strength against the other and finding some way to make it a challenge. The challenge stoked their desires and fed their drive, until they found themselves in helpless, hapless pursuit, chasing their pleasure in desperation that was painful and nothing drove them more wild than that.

Elsewhere, another Zora man found himself stirred, with his mouth seeming to hungrily consume his lover’s arousal.

Clothes might not have been something that Zoras wore, at least not in the same sense as Hylians, but the concept had turned into something both intriguing and stimulating for the Prince. Somehow,
the act of unwrapping his lover had turned into a tantalizing game, and just the sound of buckles being unfastened had Sidon swelling to near-protrusion.

Link had wriggled free of his trousers and tossed them away, like always; Sidon held onto the Hylian while he did, to prevent any clumsiness and to sneak in little kisses where he could. Every soft and beautiful inch of his lover was a treat to look upon and maybe the Zora became a bit too bold in assuming that every inch would be revealed to him tonight.

Sidon took hold of Link’s Champion tunic with care, his fingers bundling in the fabric near the hem, only for the Hylian’s hand to grab at his wrists, pushing them downward, keeping him from removing the last article. A curious, questioning expression shadowed Sidon’s features, his pale lips parted in a quiet, unasked inquiry that Link answered without hesitation.

“I just want to keep the tunic on this time,” Link whispered, a nonchalant tone to his voice, yet Sidon had already made the deep, empathic connection he enjoyed during sex and felt the small, dark emotions blemishing the Hylian’s otherwise placid mood. He wouldn’t prod those insecurities, he wouldn’t bring them to light, he would only respect his lover’s wishes, and so gave a gentle nod of his head.

“Alright, my beautiful one,” he purred, a tiny smile on his lips that said nothing of his intimate understandings. The words returned a glimmer of the formerly dwindling confidence and the Zora couldn’t have been happier to feel the difference he made with such a small effort.

Link gave a heave to shove the massive Zora flat onto his back and Sidon went with an easy huff, squirming under the feeling of Link’s palms on the firm musculature of his chest, the weight of the Hylian just enough to push the air from his lungs and make even Sidon feel comfortably small. It was no wonder the Goddess chose Link, because as much as he doubted himself, he was truly so amazing.

The Hylian leaned down to nip at the soft, pale areas of Sidon’s chest and the Zora hummed his approval, the sound a vibration that moved in his throat and reverberated under Link’s hands. It rarely took more than three firm bites to part Sidon’s thighs wide and loosen the tight slit where his organs were tucked away so that it began to open. And if that wasn’t enough, the way Link sat up again and crawled higher, coming to straddle the Prince’s face, certainly would be.

The Zora eagerly lunged for the leaking excitement presented to him, his mouth kissing and consuming, his tongue hot and aggressive while it invaded the other, lapping in a way that was pleasantly overwhelming and far beyond diligent. His eyes fell shut as he worked, but every now and again he would peer up and Link would catch the glazed appearance of that golden stare, clouded and heady with his arousal. A soft, steady thump, thump, thump echoed throughout the chamber, the sound of Sidon’s tail flicking in delicious contentment. Everything about his lover’s body pleased him- the feeling of him, the scent of him, the taste of him and the way Link’s flesh sweltered with heat that didn’t dwindle when the sun was down. The Hylian’s core was molten, yet Sidon still wanted to touch his tongue to it.

Link’s body could hardly hold itself upright, his muscles turning liquid, a tremor of pleasure passing so deeply through him, it shook his bones and took him apart, one little piece at a time. Sidon’s hands were tight against his thighs, encircling them and pulling the Hylian down with an intensity so desperate, it was as though he believed his lover was to be his last meal.

Something about being so entrapped by his partner’s hunger excited the Hylian that much more and he even bowed forward when his pleasure-weakened frame gave way. His fingers tightened in the sheets, his body wriggling like he was trying to escape, only for Sidon to bare down further, carnal and unwilling to allow his prize to be taken.
“Ohh..” Link moaned the word, the sound expelled from somewhere deep in his gut, his face scrunching, his lips remaining parted just to recapture the breath he’d lost.

But not only the Hylian was suddenly rendered breathless; so, too, were another pair of Zoras, submerged and swimming about in the freedom of the Lanayru wetlands. At first they remained true to the lie they told themselves, that they planned to tell others, and for that time, it felt so right. For the time they spent just playing around, just being ‘friends’, it almost felt as though they intended to stop at that.

Bettaal and Dunma darted here and there in the dark water, their vivid colors nearly lost to the inky depths, their pupils widened to let in not just the light, but every quick glance they took of one another. Their gills pumped hard at the rush of energy they expended, the wetland water warm against their most delicate flesh, not nearly as cool as the waters back home.

They didn’t know these depths well, yet they still raced boldly about, dodging around old, submerged trees and long lost debris, their paces daring and driven by their exhilaration. It was hard to know, though, if the source of their liveliness was the company of one another and the sweet, tender romance blooming between them, or the very nature of this secret rendezvous- a forbidden act.

A racing swim together quickly escalated to chasing and coy, soft touches- a favorite Zora flirtation. It was Dunma who made herself a challenge for her superior to meet, flitting with powerful kicks and sharp, complicated turns at any point the older woman managed to chase right at her tail. Each time they got close to one another, they snagged a moment of contact, some shy, some careful, some full of admiration and tenderness.

Dunma was certainly a powerful, graceful swimmer and watching her bolt through the deep blue, the gentle curves of her frame blurring into the surroundings like violet watercolors, had Bettaal giving every ounce of her passionate heart in chase. She didn’t want to miss one moment, and she didn’t have it in her not to rise to any challenge presented.

The game eventually came to a close, however, and Dunma slowed, spinning round to greet Bettaal in the water like she’d simply forgotten the other Zora was even following. Their hands came together, fingers lacing and Dunma continued onward, allowing Bettaal to swim at her side; she’d found something of interest during their play and dove down to show the other her discovery.

Within the deepest trench, there was a small deposit of luminous stone and the veins jutted up from the sandy bed below, casting a lovely, pale-blue halo of light. Dunma cut through the water, her body a graceful sway of flowing fins and she went right to the shining crystals, dancing proudly around them like she’d discovered a sunken city.

Even submerged, Bettaal grinned, bubbles rising up from her as her lips pulled back in the expression. At first, all she could so was watch, admiring the way Dunma was silhouetted by the soft light and how beautifully she swam, every inch of her the very essence of grace. She sort of looked like a magical, mythical maiden captured in a glowing, watery orb and willingly, Bettaal came to join her.

The Sergeant joined the dance, locking hands with the other woman once again, and slowly they spiraled about in a silent, underwater waltz, their fins weightless and drifting around them like silk gowns.

Such smooth, lushly colored fins begged to be stroked in this moment of intimacy and Bettaal braved her wariness first, her hands gently coming free from the grasp of the other, then her fingertips traced the youthful yellow and blue that softly drifted downward from Dunma’s elbows. The young
woman’s fins flared further at the contact, her idle water-treading going still with the shiver that echoed through her frame.

Fins were attractive features to any Zora, their color and length a sign of vitality, so to compliment them was highly flirtatious, and to caress them was as good an expression of desire as biting, though much more tender and affectionate.

Betaal waited and watched the pretty grin that appeared upon the other woman’s face, seeing it even through the dream-like haze of the softly lit aquascape. When her attention shifted to the fins that adorned the other Zora’s shoulders, Dunma, too, reached to admire the jagged crimson of Betaal’s own, her touch curious and appreciative.

Dunma’s attention was quick and meandering, her golden eyes roving across the blue Zora like she was seeing her for the first time. The carmine hue of the older Zora’s forefins was captured between the other woman’s fingers, then her hand wandered upward, to smooth along the silky surface of Betaal’s topfin and it folded flat beneath her touch.

Maybe the older Zora hadn’t said anything of it, but this was the very first time she’d been considered romantically by anybody who wasn’t also Undercity. And while she had nothing but pride in what she was, having those characteristics acknowledged and appreciated, rather than ignored and overlooked- that felt good. It felt right.

With a smile still on her face, the blue Zora gave a tiny kick of her webbed feet, moving in nearer, tucking herself into the space before the other Zora, like they’d been made to fit together, like the space between them didn’t belong. Their foreheads bumped softly, rubbing in affectionate greeting that cobbled a path between their lips, until they were kissing again.

The gesture was both tentative and gentle, but filled, too, with a wanting that neither was bold enough to set entirely free. They clung to one another like an unexpected current could wash through at any moment to tear them apart, their legs twining together, their arms embracing, their lips petal soft and conforming just so. With utmost care, Dunma’s fingers dragged across the glassy scales of her lover’s gillcovers, a bubbling giggle still audible underwater as the touch momentarily interrupted their kiss, causing Betaal to draw back with an intense shiver.

The younger of the two smiled impishly in her apparent boldness that somehow outshone that of her superior, leaning in again to nuzzle the other while Betaal’s palms explored every delicate curve of Dunma’s body, from the strength of the pliant muscles so often hidden beneath her breastplate, to the willowy taper of her waist and her lovely fin-draped hips, then at last to her fleshy backside, both firm and supple beneath Betaal’s appreciative grasp.

The blue Zora’s muscular shoulders tightened, her arms flexing just slightly when she slowly lifted Dunma’s feather-weight in the water, the heat of her mouth leaving a trail of warmth down the pale softness of the violet Zora’s beautiful frame. Once she’d risen the other woman up just enough, her arms tucked between her parted thighs, palming both cheeks of her ass to keep her supported, yet she also paused, peering up with a questioning one-eyed gaze and looking upon the flushed loveliness of Dunma’s features in inquiry.

Dunma’s normally pale cheeks were painted with warmth, in embarrassment or maybe excitement. Her dark eyelids were heavy overtop of the golden shine of her eyes, dream-like and seductive and one sharp canine had pressed against her lower lip; she certainly looked like a woman who was eager for more, but Betaal wouldn’t risk wrongful assumptions. Easily enough, however, the younger Zora gave a nod of her head, and reached down to stroke her lover’s red fins in gentle encouragement.
The violet Zora’s legs drifted over Betaal’s shoulders and the older woman’s head dipped all the way between her thighs, her mouth an intense heat in the deep, nighttime waters, engulfing the other woman’s feverish excitement. She kissed and lapped at the swollen crease while it opened up in arousal, her movements slow and careful, yet impassioned and hungry. Dunma’s body arched gently backward almost immediately, and Betaal’s fins flared in excitement at such a reaction, her one shining, yellow eye watching, in awe of the way the violet Zora’s face scrunched in pleasure, her pretty lips opening in silent moans that produced a stream of bubbles which raced upward and disappeared from sight.

Betaal couldn’t assume much about her partner’s experiences, aside from thinking that they must have been minimal, judging only by how slowly Dunma was recovering from her adolescent pining. Regardless of whether they were minimal or not, it must have been quite a while since her body had been coaxed to a state of ecstasy, because it took only a few short minutes before she was shivering and squirming, her toes tightly clenching as her very existence threatened to come apart at the seams.

The blue Zora pursued her lover’s taste and pleasure with mounting pride, her hands drifting upward and tightly clenching at the other woman’s hips to keep her in place, to prevent her from escaping while her body went taut and trembled in release.

In the privacy of the Guard Captain’s office, Gaddison, too, reached her peak, much as she fought to make it a challenge for her on-again, off-again lover. Bazz grabbed at the pastel Zora with passion and excitement in his touch, his exuberance a thing that overflowed whenever he succeeded, whenever he brought his lover over the edge, as though it were a struggle in which he’d proven his worth and not the very thing that Gaddison desired. The woman’s toe claws scraped at the black Zora’s shoulders while her body shuddered and her moans unabashedly escaped her, unconcerned with whether or not anybody heard.

Thankfully for Sidon and Link, the increased guard presence in the Prince’s tower was not to begin until the following morning. For this night, screaming aloud in boundless pleasure would go unnoticed, should they have found themselves unable to prevent such things. Link’s vocalizations perhaps didn’t reach the kind of volume to be described as screams, but he bowed only further forward, his face pushing against the rough, red scales at the top of Sidon’s head and he let out a throaty groan, his hips wiggling in his bliss and riding out the unfurling waves of pleasure erupting inside him, shaking him from the tips of his pointed ears, down to his tightly curled toes. He yanked at the sheets, his parted lips falling almost shut while he pressed his teeth together, his moans softening into a hiss, each shuddering breath trembling in and out of him.

“..fuck,” Link purred, lucid and spent, his body a flopsy heap of hot mush, like some kind of unattractive breakfast porridge. His thoughts also turned hazy and bizarre in his afterglow, and he laid himself back where he was, Sidon’s body as good as any mattress.

The Prince chuckled, utterly pleased with himself, then he turned his head just enough to kiss one of his Hylian lover’s muscular thighs; Link’s skin was as wet as the Zora’s lips.

“You know how I love to please you,” Sidon spoke, his words like a confession, but an unnecessary one; of course Link knew. The much smaller man only had enough energy in his body to quietly titter while making a clumsy attempt to scoot himself down, so that Sidon wasn’t ‘trapped’ beneath him.

He rolled over as carefully as he could, his movements slow and lazy, like a sneaky river snail, and he ended with his hands on Sidon’s hips and a face full of swollen Zora cock- the Prince couldn’t have possibly exaggerated in saying that he loved to please the Hylian, because his organs spoke that love just as honestly. “I see that,” Link uttered, still laughing under his breath and loosely taking hold
of one wet, rigid member, pumping it with languid, teasing strokes and even that little attention had Sidon’s head pushing back further into the sway of the water mattress.

It was difficult to believe that he’d been daring enough to allow the Zora to stick even one of these inside him the very first time they were together, but that was his usual thoughtless, reckless, overly brave way of doing things.. and people. He remembered the feeling of being stretched much too full, yet still Sidon had length to spare. The second time they laid together, Link had attempted to pleasure the Zora man with his mouth, hoping to do even half as good a job as Sidon always, always did. He thought, sure, with the rate that he could shovel food into his gullet, surely he could swallow at least some of Sidon up, but no, it was almost a completely hopeless endeavor, and Link just embarrassed himself choking left and right. The Prince assured him that what little Link could fit into his mouth was pleasurable enough, and he swelled his cheeks like a bushy-tailed squirrel, his head bobbing, his hand pumping, the effort eventually rewarding him with a hot, thick mess that spilled over and dribbled down his chin.

It still took him a lot longer to get the Zora off, however.

Sidon’s size had been a tantalizing, fun notion, at first- oh yeah, back when Link didn’t actually give a shit about being with him, but rather, having some temporary fun. Now, the Prince’s growth posed something of a threat to their potential for lovemaking, and it was something Link was forced to consider and worry about.

He hadn’t really believed that it was something he could cease before now, because he merely assumed that Sidon’s progression toward absolute massiveness was a constant, ongoing process, and inevitable, therefor. He still didn’t see there being much hope for him to stop it, because it was clearly Zora tradition, which was something he had no say in and no business interfering with.

But that wasn’t to say that he wasn’t disappointed, because he was.

“Sidon,” Link whispered, his hand on Sidon’s swollen arousal slowing to a stop. “Can I ask you something?”

“Oh?” A soft bout of laughter from the Prince shook Link where he laid, then Sidon intentionally pitched his voice to the huskiest of tones, purring the words, “Excited, are you?”

It took Link a moment to even process what he’d heard. He wasn’t completely within his sharpest state of mental functionality, thanks to the explosion of orgasmic bliss that had rinsed over him and waned, but when he finally did comprehend exactly what the Zora was trying to get at, he let out a frustrated sigh. “I asked a serious question, and in return, I received a dick joke.”

Again, Sidon tittered, one hand falling against his face, a sharp-toothed grin stretching parallel, then with a slow heave, he began to sit himself upright. Link shuffled into a more viable sitting position, his hands falling upon the Zora’s shoulders for steadiness while his thighs tightened around Sidon’s hips.

“My apologies,” the Zora giggled, still obviously very amused with himself. “I hope this break in my manners and the descent into crude behavior didn’t lessen your affection for me.. But it was quite hard to be serious, knowing that you were facing my privates. This is much better, however.”
Sidon’s arms encircled his beloved companion and his head dipped lower, in order to offer the Hylian an apologetic nuzzle. “I wouldn’t worry so much,” he said, his voice low and comforting and Link couldn’t help but tuck his head underneath Sidon’s chin, one pointed ear pressing against the graceful column of the Zora’s bared throat. “Though I will be larger, the growth won’t be as excessive as you’re likely thinking.”

“Hm,” the Hylian idly nodded, feeling the weight of Sidon’s head resting atop his own, though the Prince was likely taking care not to lean in too much. “Then, to answer your question from before—your ‘swords’ are already too big for my ‘sheaths’, so there isn’t much to be excited about. For tonight, though, I’m still willing to try.”

“My love, you were doing a fine job with your hands,” the Prince praised, pressing kisses to the top of Link’s head and squishing the Hylian against his chest as though he were the most dear and precious thing in existence. “There’s no need to strain yourself.”

“I want to,” Link uttered in reassurance, inclining his neck and raising up, onto his knees to press his lips to Sidon’s, his hands cupping the Zora’s face. “It feels good for you,” he whispered against his mouth, hips rocking in growing need upon the Prince’s lap. “..and it feels good for me, strain or no.”

Link’s ears twitched at the sound of a quiet whine vibrating in the Prince’s throat and his tight embrace fell away at the Hylian’s request, that touch replaced by grappling hands upon Link’s hips. Sidon tugged at the much smaller man in excitement, not forceful, as Link could have easily spoken up to dissuade him at any time, but with intent that aligned with his lover’s own request.

A soft exhalation of breath passed across Link’s lips at the feeling of Sidon’s thick members squirming and wet against his backside, leaving slick trails upon his supple flesh while they sought the Hylian’s warmth. At last, Sidon reached down to take one in hand, guiding the tip toward his lover’s entrance, causing Link’s chest to heave with pants of excitement when at last he began to feel it slide in. A full gasp was elicited at how surprisingly easy it went, as though Link’s body had remembered the shape with fondness and welcomed its return.

One hand on Link’s hips coaxed his body downward, the sharp fingerscales tight against the Hylian’s soft skin, making occasional, accidental pinpricks, despite the care Sidon took. Link’s gaping mouth and furrowed features only intensified when his body swallowed up the welcome invasion, accommodating every inch that was pushed inside until he could feel it heavy and stretching within his furthest depths.

“Ahhh,” the Hylian groaned, his head falling against the Zora’s chest, his fingernails scraping his lover’s shoulders, but doing no damage at all. Even Link’s ears pushed downward in the overwhelming and pleasurable fullness that threatened to overcome him.

Sidon bent his neck, leaning his head down to kiss his Hylian lover’s soft hair, though his teeth were already clicking together in his excitement, the muscles of his jaw clenching. “You must have really wanted it, indeed,” he purred, his voice a sultry sound that prickled Link’s skin. “With how smoothly I slipped inside.”

“You’re fantastic,” Link mumbled, not sure if he was even half coherent. It was made clearer for him, however, by the soft laugh he received in return and the impatient movement of Sidon’s hips beneath him.

“Yes, well,” the Prince bubbled, this moment of amusement he only thing that could tame his immediate want to start bouncing Link’s easy weight astride him. “I could say that I am equally stimulated being encased in your tight confines, but.. It seems more right to simply state that- yes, it feels good being so deep inside you. It feels good.. fucking you.”
“Dirty,” Link commented, a choked laugh attempted to rise from him. He hadn’t thought Sidon even knew those words prior to this very moment. He’d have to praise the Zora’s sense of humor, but later. “I’ll make it feel even better,” he stated, blue eyes peering into the passion-clouded gaze of his Zora lover, a tiny grin of challenge upturning one corner of his mouth.

There was a distinct look of challenge upon Bazz’s features, as often was true whenever he dallied with the pastel-scaled Zora. The tip of his tongue traced his lips, one hand coming to brush away the wetness which dribbled down his chin and he peered up at his lover laying still and panting for breath in absolute contentment. The edge of his desk was puddled from the veritable monsoon of moisture, a mixture of the woman’s raining excitement and the black Zora’s saliva; the edge of his seat was just as wet with his own arousal, his protruded organs dripping with natural lubrication.

Gaddison always appeared like a less fearsome foe within the placid minutes following the precipice of her pleasure and in a way, it almost seemed like the one and only viable moment to have any chance for further escalation. The truth was, though, that she never stopped being a fearsome foe and just because she was exhausted and breathless, that didn’t mean she would make one single thing easy.

As soon as Bazz moved from his seat, his hands laying against his desk with his intent to climb up, the queen atop the mountain knocked him back with one foot, a coy, snarling smile wrinkling her pretty features. She would never just allow the Zora man to take what he wanted, no, that just wouldn’t do.

Make no mistake, any kind of physical challenge became all the more difficult with exposed, excited appendages dangling and dripping wet, but the black Zora had never let such a thing deter him in the past. Taking hold of Gaddison’s ankle, he pushed the resisting appendage aside, again making an attempt to climb up, only for her other leg to make a sideways sweep at him, knocking him off balance just enough that she yanked her other leg free and shoved him back once more.

In frustration and excitement that was only intensified by these silly games they played, Bazz rushed himself atop the desk, not even trying any longer to crawl with care, but mounting the piece of furniture and mounting the other Zora at the very same time. He grabbed for her arms and took hold, his hips pushing forward and working their way between her thighs, though she fought to keep them from being parted.

Just as the Zora woman could feel Bazz’s cocks bumping against her swollen entrance, she gave a push of one leg, rotating her hips to one side and hooking the Zora man with her leg as they rolled over, ending atop him, her weight pushing down hard so that their unshed breastplates clinked together.

Bazz squirmed beneath the woman, a whine captured in his throat, because regardless of who was on top, his members were still pressed between her thighs and she ground her hips against him in temptation, teasing him with no intention to reward his patience. He laid still for a few moments, his arousal twitching toward the heat that he was being denied, then in rebuke for his lack of fight, the Zora woman bent her head down, grabbing one of Bazz’s forefins between her fangs and she bit him without restraint.

A hiss escaped the Captain, both in pain and stimulation, then at last he heaved the other Zora off of him and she scurried back, intent on avoiding any further grappling, but to no avail. The black Zora reached for the armored woman’s waist, pulling her back to him and pushing her down, but even astride her he struggled for control and she wriggled nearly free, turning over onto her belly and grabbing the edge of the desk for leverage, only for Bazz to sink his sharp teeth into her tail, holding on with absolutely no plan to let her free.
“Ahh!” the woman shrieked in pleasure-pain, her body going still at the biting just long enough for the Zora man to tug her hips upward, one erect organ pushing against her slick opening, then at the last moment she bucked backwards to unsteady her lover and delivered a kick that would knock him, at last, back down from her mountain.

“Unff.” Bazz’s body clanked against the floor and he laid blindsided by the utter swiftness of it, peering upward at the triumphant way Gaddison folded her arms underneath her chin, basking in her victory like a contented lynel. He clambered back upright to spare even an ounce of his dignity, making one last attempt to crawl atop the desk, every move slow and wary.

The lavender Zora folded herself at one end of the surface, her legs crossed and one hand tucked between, to guard her vulnerable sex from any penetration that she didn’t expressly permit. She had that sweet, sultry look on her face, a tiny fox smile upturning her pouting lips, her honey-gold eyes gleaming with mischief that Bazz wasn’t sure he could challenge any further.

“Come on, Bazz,” she whispered, her voice velvet and laden with longing, her legs finally unfurling, though her hand didn’t yet move aside. It sounded very distinctly like a trap.

Still, the sleek, black Zora advanced, but ever so carefully, his own yellow eyes intense and distrusting. With care, he slowly closed the gap between himself and his lover, until he was so close that their lips nearly touched and the air between them was a hot, humid thing that they shared ever so begrudgingly. They were both permeated with the heady scent of arousal and sweat from their struggles, their scales shining and vibrant, their fins flared in a showy, flirtatious and somewhat challenging way.

Gaddison’s lips parted, the tip of her tongue tracing the sharp edges of her teeth while she stared down at Bazz’s waiting erections, flushed and twitching in excitement as the black Zora’s pressed boldly nearer, bumping the wet appendages against her blockading hand. She couldn’t help but chuckle over how powerless and desperate she was able to make her Big Bad Bazz and she left him literally dangling for a few more excruciating moments before at last sliding her hand away and permitting him to enter her.

When at last he was inside, his feverish intensity returned anew and he clutched at the woman’s thighs, pulling her nearer so that she rested atop his own while his hips pistoned rapidly upward, driving into her core with all of the pent up frustration she’d worked so hard to invoke, yet even that wasn’t enough.

“Ahh, Bazz,” the lavender Zora uttered, her voice a jostled sound thanks to her lover’s hurried thrusting, though it was hardly enough to break his sudden fixation on the goal of making sure that she’d be too tender to properly walk away afterwards. So instead of words, Gaddison held tightly to the black Zora’s shoulders, her fingerscales furrowing the sleek surface while she tilted her head to claim the other’s lips with her own.

A moan of yearning that went much deeper than physical desires hummed in the Zora man’s throat and his pace began to slow, part of his focus redirecting itself to the act of savoring the affectionate touch and returning it. His mouth pliantly opened against his lover’s, the tip of his tongue grazing the soft surface of her lips; a careful, irresistible taste. His hands slid away from the woman’s thighs, his arms encircling her frame and keeping her close while he kissed her tenderly, the motion of his hips a deep, sensual flick.

“Mmm.” Gaddison’s hips squirmed atop her lover’s, his delving reach whetting her sexual appetite, leaving her quickly longing for more and now that she had his attention, she purred just such a request against his lips. The very shape of each word melded from her flesh and onto his, so that her words may have well been received upon his tongue and still he understood. “Why don’t you use
“both?” she spoke. “You know how I like it when you do.”

The suggestion, however, effectively yanked the Captain free of his previous immersion in this act and moment, and his body tilted back so that he could peer up at the pastel-scaled Zora with skepticism plain upon his features. “That seems like a risky choice, especially considering there’s nothing more between us than this.”

Bazz’s words slid from his tongue like an accusation, even though his body reacted with interest, his single, unused member twitching upward and bumping at the space between the woman’s legs.

“It’s going to be a while before we see each other again. This needs to be a night to really remember,” Gaddison reasoned with a little scoff. She could hardly believe that Big Bad Bazz was even having such concerns, but then again, maybe it was meant as some odd, indirect guilt trip for her utter lack of maternal intentions. Either way, when the other Zora didn’t immediately move to give her what she wanted, she offered some other words of reassurance, even if she felt they were unnecessary. “I’ll visit the Basilica Apothecary before I leave for the fort and take care of it- I always do.”

It wasn’t a requirement for Zoras to be so excessive during lovemaking and rarely did they use both of their endowments at one time; the fact that they even had more than one was a physical remnant of their more carnal, uncivilized form. Their anatomy provided tools for tricky reproduction, extending the possible reach of the one seeking to penetrate the other. Nevertheless, using both at once did heighten the likelihood of egg fertilization.

But Gaddison had fully expressed her disinterest in having her eggs given life, so Bazz did not doubt her when she stated that she wouldn’t let it occur. Even if it did happen, it wasn’t like it was uncommon for unwanted eggs to be destroyed before they fully developed. That was even considered to be the more responsible course of action, given their people’s opinions of children produced by unwed couples.

The problem that the Zora man was having was the temptation that it provided, then ultimately left unfulfilled. In a strange way, by increasing this likelihood, it dangled before him a future that he, alone, desired and the thought of his lover having to take extra measures to destroy that very future pained him somehow.

Still, Bazz wouldn’t deny himself or his partner on such melancholy whimsies, especially when there was no real problem to address. He relented, ever a slave to the spell the lavender Zora had him under, and he uttered the words, “If you say so,” though he also did not give in without some show of rebuke. Gaddison was dropped from his embrace and instead pushed onto her back, a change which she did not fail to resist by scratching and pressing back against his breastplate, her eyes a furious inferno, her teeth bared in discontentment.

It took only one slow movement of the Zora man’s hips for him to withdraw until he was shallowly sheathed, his hand guiding his second appendage into the tight space and pushing inside with another gentle rock of his body.

Yet the woman beneath him still writhed as though this was not, in fact, the very thing she’d requested, her face wrinkling with both the gratification of being filled almost beyond capacity and the sudden indignance of being thrown down onto her back by surprise. The black Zora knew better than to assume this little moment of control would go unpunished, and maybe that made it all the better.

Lowering himself against the pastel Zora, Bazz grasped her thighs, folding her legs back to give himself room while he resumed his previous pace, his body smooth and rhythmic, pushing against
and into hers. With every movement, Gaddison fell more still, her head falling back at the delight being injected directly into her blood, the ache in the pit of her very being suddenly answered and fulfilled, wet and stretching, so deep that it began to feel that this intrusion was her missing piece and it felt unbelievably, overwhelmingly good to have it back.

Trembling and still, the Zora woman set free another soft, ecstatic sound from her lips, each one echoing free from the steel-encased chamber somewhere near her heart and above the pocket where she’d imprisoned her lover. Once she ceased in her struggles, Bazz bent himself only closer, their breastplates clanking while he wrapped his arms behind her head and stole a chance to hold the woman he loved so dearly, while she would allow it.

This was a chance that both women knew they would not have again soon, and this night was something that they were all too aware couldn’t be spoken of without risk, yet even so, they did not allow these difficult truths to spoil the simple, beautiful joy that they had found for this one evening.

Dunma drifted down in the water, down into Betaal’s arms, her body a still pool, content and warm. Her gills opened, then contracted, her breathing almost in perfect tandem with her steadying heartbeat, her thoughts flip-flopping into a bizarre and profound state, where emotions were steady and at ease, and she understood so many things that no words existed for, though she wished it were so.

Rolling to one side in the other woman’s arms, Dunma smiled up her, grateful that no words were needed underwater. When at last she was set free from being cradled like a babe, she gave a soft kick of her webbed feet, bringing her forehead affectionately to Betaal’s, then she delivered her lips to the other Zora’s as well, cupping her face and kissing her with reverence and appreciation that was physical enough to leave a sweet taste on her tongue.

Somehow, the memory of a day so long ago managed to show itself to the forefront of Dunma’s mind. Even if she had been above the water’s surface, she wouldn’t have risked speaking of it again, knowing that Betaal loathed the subject, but.. It was difficult for the younger Zora not to think of the tourney and the struggle she witnessed between this magnificent warrior and the man who was now Knight Captain of the Royal Order.

She hadn’t thought she could admire the blue Zora more than she already did at that time. That day, Dunma strained to catch every gripping second of that match, her chest heavy with hope that, even despite her injuries, Betaal would prevail. The fight itself had been such an emotionally loaded event, for all of Zora’s Domain, with part of the population cheering the woman warrior on, because what kind of a miracle had it already taken for her to survive an attempt on her life and still be capable of standing strong? The rest found this entire event to be an insult to tradition, yet they sat tense and gritting their teeth, hoping and praying for Betaal to fail, and to prove that the Undercity Zoras were indeed inferior.

And it was gut-wrenching when those people were granted the excuse they desired to go on touting their backward logic as a simple fact of nature. Betaal must have known that day that, by losing, she failed the entirety of the Undercity.

But even her fall had been powerful and proud, and as much as Dunma’s heart had broken for her, she’d never seen a warrior still look so graceful and strong while disarmed and bleeding at the feet of her opponent. And Brivere? As far as the violet Zora was concerned, he might have stood victorious that day, but he did so as a coward, a cheat, and a sneaking serpent unfit to even stand in Betaal’s presence.

Dunma remembered the fight; she remembered the way the blue Zora moved, her instincts carrying her with fast, merciless fluidity. Dunma recalled the power in every one of the woman’s strikes, her
body a force of nature seeking not just vengeful retribution, but the victory she was owed. Maybe, at first, the golden Zora had not dared to steal any cheap shots, not while every person in Zora’s Domain was watching, but even fighting his hardest, a woman of supposedly inferior blood, smaller stature and suddenly limited sight still matched his skill, still kept him on the run and still threatened to take the win, despite everything.

Brivere had built a funeral pyre around his reputation, and with his final move, he lit it to flame, proving himself to be a wretched coward before his people, and an honorless, graceless sham of a warrior. When fighting fairly didn’t deliver him to victory, he resolved to do otherwise in his desperation, stealing the win by shifting his movements and attacking on Betaal’s blind side.

Dunma’s arms tucked around the other woman’s chest, and for a passing moment, she squeezed her tightly– she deserved so much more than she’d been given and if Dunma could make up for even an ounce of her losses, she would do anything it took.

A questioning expression stole the light from the older woman’s face, however, in response to what she could only perceive as a sudden drop in her lover’s mood. A careful hand moved to gently caress a single one of Dunma’s forefins while Betaal silently inquired as to what was wrong with nothing but the concerned look shining in one eye.

The younger woman just shook her head, forcing a smile to her lips to act as reassurance. She didn’t want the drifting tide of her mind to give Betaal the impression that she was displeased or unhappy. If she had the chance, she might tell her Sergeant that she was merely swept up in the rip currents of her own emotions, where everything she’d been through reinforced a need for the closeness that the other Zora was here, offering.. and she was so thankful for that.

A nod of Betaal’s head was granted in return, an acceptance of the fact that the younger Zora still seemed comfortable with this secret rendezvous, but she made no other move to continue further contact in her uncertainty. Instead, Dunma took it upon herself to go on, all too glad to return the affection her partner was due.

A curious gaze wandered over the blue Zora’s short but powerful frame, idle hands exploring casually, innocently, admiringly. Dunma’s fingertip traced the blue marking upon her lover’s broad chest, a quaint, lovely detail that she was only now having the pleasure to observe for the first time.

The young woman paid no heed to their limited time, her touch unhurried, examining every wonderful line and curve of the other Zora, from her muscular shoulders and strong arms, to the slightly shorter length of her waist and the soft curve of her hips.

Every inch of Betaal was marred by numerous scars, her scales misaligned here, malformed there; some were fine and hair-thin, whereas others were ghosts of injuries severe enough to warrant stitching and clearly, she’d seen a great deal more battle than magical healing. The less experienced of the two warriors couldn’t help but wonder- what awesome fights had this beautiful creature come through to be so marked up? Each scar surely held behind it some wonderful story, and Dunma wanted to hear every single one.

At last, the younger Zora’s explorations grew bolder and one hand slithered slowly down between the other woman’s thighs while a shy moment of eye contact passed between them, just enough to reassure. Dunma felt that, up next to Betaal, her inexperience as a warrior was glaringly clear and probably her inexperience as a lover, as well. However, she hadn’t come this far and taken such a risk to become wrapped up in her own self-doubt, especially not when her want for the other was overflowing inside her, begging for some kind of sweet resolution.

..especially not when she’d already imagined this playing out in her mind, walking herself through
every little thing she wanted to do with her superior while she laid awake in the rest tents. She followed the stirring prompts of her imagination, her fingertips smoothing across the furrow in the other woman’s scales which was normally shut tight, yet now had bloomed open in arousal.

The ease at which Betaal shivered at the younger Zora’s touch offered newfound confidence and Dunma nestled her body only nearer while her hand caressed and rubbed the sensitive, scaleless flesh of the other. The sound of a moan passing across the blue Zoras lips echoed softly in the secret depths where they’d hidden away, a thin stream of bubbles being set free with it and Betaal’s body began to curl into the contact, around the hand firmly pressed to her privates, providing the stimulation that she’d been aching for.

Kisses were sprinkled across every inch within Dunma’s reach, admiration translating to affection and fascination. The blue Zora returned what she could, her lips pursuing those of her lover in hunger so desperate, it felt in this moment that it could never be sated. She clung to Dunma’s shoulders, doing her best not the scratch the lovely violet of her scales, and her thighs were tucked over the younger Zora’s hips, her own pushing insistently against the hand that was pleasuring her.

With her other hand, Dunma carefully dragged the sharp tips of her fingerscales along Betaal’s gillcovers, producing an additional shiver of sensation, so that the older Zora’s face was tucked into the gentle curve between the other’s graceful neck and shoulder. Betaal’s sharp teeth snapped together in her want to bite down on her secret lover, to express her joy, her fondness, her body’s excitement that was making embarrassingly hurried strides toward euphoria.

When that very precipice could no longer be resisted, and the Sergeant fell delightfully over it, her hold on Dunma tightened, her webbed toes splaying then curling again, and her entire body trembled and squirmed in release. The younger Zora, too, held tightly, not taking her hand away until her lover had stilled.

In the quiet of their complete and utter fulfilment, they drifted together entwined in one another, just basking in sweet, peaceful contentment of the moment. Both were sure that the awkward, shy, social clumsiness would return to pester them when they surfaced, but that was of little concern now. Instead, they filled this time with careful, gentle kisses and caresses, sometimes unsure, sometimes absolutely sure, but no matter what, not one single touch felt out of place; every one felt just right, a colorful array of wordless expression.

It felt just right and that was a difficult balance for them to find; just enough, not too much and definitely not too little. Sidon’s fingers had encircled the single rigid member that Link was astride, his fisted hand tightly supporting the base to keep it steady while the other bounced upon it like it was his intention to ride the Prince straight across Hyrule. The tight hold of his palm slowly twisted around the slick length, stimulating those stray inches that could simply never fit inside his smaller lover.

Still, it was enough, and maybe the word ‘enough’ didn’t even give full credit to the pure delight of their love-making. When the Prince magically aligned his senses with those of his dearest one, these sessions became a carnival of pleasure that overwhelmed and overstimulated, but in the very best way.

Sidon, in all his experience, had certainly never wriggled himself into a crevice more tight than the one provided by the Hylian. Link’s body was fire and flesh, hungry and consuming all the Zora had to offer. His needy frame had a death grip around the Prince’s length and he freely delivered an abundance of friction as he rode, his easy weight raising and lowering upon Sidon’s lap with wet, rapid thumps.

The Prince could feel it all- the softness of his lover’s skin, the heat of their bodies working so hard
toward finish, the burn of effort in Link’s thighs overshadowed by his rising pleasure, the stretch that swallowed Sidon down, the fluttering pace of their hearts, both of them, an ache for breath that was lost, his webbed toes curling, the hook of his claws grabbing and pulling at the sheets, his own bliss twisting in the pit of him, like a bundle of energy ready to burst free.

Most of all, more than anything physical, there were the emotions, and sometimes Sidon got a bit lost in it all, allowing whatever he was feeling to blend and combine with what he sensed from his lover. He didn’t block any of it out, and that had only ever served to heighten his enjoyment, even if it left him exhausted.

Their hearts were a tangled mess of affection, bright red strands looping and crossing and Sidon wouldn’t even consider straightening any of it out, because the truth was that it was perfect that way. They both felt an underlying fear of loss, an intense need for the presence of the other, a dependence that had grown to questionably unhealthy proportions, but the Zora couldn’t help but wonder.. Was it really wrong to need someone? Was it wrong to need everything about another person, like breathing, like the blood that raced with every heartbeat, like every repetitive action required for life to go on.. Was it wrong to let another person make all of that worthwhile?

Sidon was beginning to think that it wasn’t selfish, nor wrong at all and he wanted to be sure Link knew that, too.. when it was appropriate.

One careful hand fell upon Link’s thigh and Sidon’s fingers traced the definition between the straining muscles, moving slowly upward until his hand tucked between the Hylian’s legs. It took only the touch of the Prince’s thumb to bend the Hylian forward in gasping pleasure; his fingertip pressed lightly and flicked against the engorged bundle of nerves, every little brush echoing up the Hylian’s spine with delectable tremors of bliss and leaving Link to come undone with shameful ease at the lightest contact.

“Nnngh,” the Hylian cried, his shoulders shaking, his pace slowing but not to a stop. Instead, his hips wiggled atop the Zora, forcing Sidon’s length in deep and churning upon him. A desperate hold tightened on the Prince’s wrist, keeping his hand close and making sure that the stimulation which had thrown Link into this surprise orgasm didn’t vanish at an inconvenient moment.

When the much smaller man’s breath steadied into longer, slower gulps which expanded his chest, he bent his neck, laying his head against his lover, but he still refused to cease in his movements. His body was spent and exhausted and his slowed pace was evidence for that much, yet some determined part of him continued, so that the Prince was forced to speak up, to acknowledge and to question.

“It is.. rather impressive how long you can go on like this. You have quite powerful thighs for somebody who doesn’t spend very much time in the water,” Sidon mumbled, his typical clarity somewhat blunted by the odd mixture of sexual tension he was feeling, combined with the sensitivity of his partner from two consecutive orgasms.

“Before I met my Crazy Girl..” Link began, his own voice muffled by how he had his face pressed into the Zora’s chest, “I rode all of my horses bareback. I can keep going, don’t worry..”

“You may not have ascertained as much, but because I can experience all of your own sensations, I’m already fairly satisfied.” The hand which had been used to bring Link to his finish was at last wriggled free from the Hylian’s hold and Sidon paused just long enough to bring his wet fingertips to his lips, the very tip of his tongue sneaking between the points of his teeth to lap at what remained of the Hylian’s flavor.

This action drew the other man’s attention, and Link upturned his gaze, dragging his tousled head
upright so that he could observe this small, sensuous show through narrowed, blue eyes. It was an extra treat to catch the way Sidon’s mouth immediately curved to form a smile, all because Link had merely looked at him.

In turn, Link grinned, straightening up onto his knees and stretching himself to reach the Zora’s lips; Sidon bent his neck to meet the gesture, tucking his arm around his lover’s waist. Their lips touched lightly, sweet and needful, that little shine of fear in both of their hearts making them afraid to let go, afraid of being parted, as silly as it was to feel such things while one was still tucked inside the other.

Sidon did not draw back, his lips or otherwise, instead speaking his reassurances against the soft of his lover’s mouth. “There’s no great need for me to physically finish, if you’d like to be spared the mess, my love.”

“Since when did you start assuming that I don’t like to get messy?” Link laughed, the gesture tightening the core of his body and squeezing the welcome invasion that had apparently decided it was home; the Zora reacted with a tiny shudder, so clearly the edge must have still been there for him, even if he claimed to be ‘satisfied’. “It’s actually one of the best parts.”

Link’s first assumption was that his lover’s princely demeanor was the cause of this suggestion and Sidon’s expression certainly gave little else away. However, for a discomforting instant, Link was forced to reflect again upon that night of hurried love making, and the feeling of Sidon’s razor-edged teeth slicing into his flesh while he urged and pressed. The Hylian even unconsciously glanced toward the place he remembered the faded image of Mipha hovering, silent and broken while she was forced to pay witness.

That wasn’t the person Link wanted to be and it definitely wasn’t his wish to leave Sidon feeling so used and disgusting ever, ever again.

“.as long as you want to,” the Hylian hurried to elaborate. Some other part of him was vaguely concerned again over his insufficiencies, being so much smaller than the Prince, but somehow he actually managed to be more worried about his lover’s feelings than his persistent self-hatred.

“Do you want to?” Link asked, his voice gentle and concerned, his tone placing particular emphasis on the word ‘want.’ He reached up to touch the Zora man’s forefin, careful fingers brushing along it before moving to rest against his cheek- the only thought that was even capable of drifting through the Hylian’s mind was, ‘How was I able to hate this man? How was I able to intentionally hurt him?’

“I assure you,” the Prince spoke up, his voice the same warm, enveloping purr that he always used to address his lover, “.there is absolutely nothing impeding my desires, other than the concern for your convenience.”

“It’s no inconvenience at all,” said the Hylian, nodding and pressing another soft kiss to the Zora’s lips before he began to lower himself again. “It’s a delight and a pleasure, so please, finish.”

“As you wish, then, my beautiful one,” Sidon answered, the point of his brow brushing affectionately against Link’s mess of blonde hair. “.if you really don’t mind indulging me.”

Sidon’s hand beneath Link came free from its previous grasp, and without that support, the heavy intrusion began to slither free, with Link shivering at the feeling, then sucking in a sharp breath at the sudden emptiness left behind. The Zora’s hands took hold of the Hylian, keeping him steady while Sidon shifted, tucking his legs up under himself so that he was perched upon his knees, then he let Link rest atop his thighs; this shift not only boosted the short Hylian just a bit higher, but also gave Sidon a bit more capacity to assist in the actual work involved.
Link made an attempt to lean himself backward, to raise himself up as a means of allowing better access, but Sidon was decidedly not having it. Instead, he pulled the Hylian to his chest, one hand careful and delicate against Link’s back, sharp fingerscales fiddling with the tiny creases in his tunic. His other hand took hold of Link by his pert, fleshy backside, holding him just high enough to allow Sidon to enter him once again.

The Zora man arched at being newly engulfed, his wetness having turned cold enough that the heat of his lover’s core was suddenly overwhelming, yet even so his hips lunged for more of it.

“Ahh,” the Hylian felt himself curling, every inch of him shriveling at the sensation. His hands bundled, his arms twisted around the Zora’s graceful neck. His legs were useless, exhausted, boneless flesh, his toes clenching, and his head fell against his lover, not able to stay up. None of this appeared to hinder the Zora, however, as he only continued to hold Link closer, so that he touched every inch of him at once, striving toward some ultimate goal of complete oneness, physically, mentally, emotionally, perhaps even spiritually, depending on how seriously he took the mythology of his people.

With Link suspended, yet tightly embraced, Sidon’s hips pushed upward, the length of him reaching for a place to bury itself, succeeding, but not too much. He delved himself inside, giving only what his lover’s body had the capacity for, slowly, deeply, his mouth lowering against the Hylian’s concealed shoulder, nipping at the fabric, his visage wrinkling in longing frustration.

Giving a minor squirm, Link regained enough freedom from his lover’s pleasantly smothering embrace, intent on indulging his simple desires, even unasked. He pulled the tunic over his head and placed it aside, just barely out of reach, his fingers clinging to the article in shame that he couldn’t shed quite as easily.

Despite Link’s displeasure with his body, with his skin, Sidon’s palms still caressed him and held him like he was precious, a soft purr of approval vibrating across the expanse of his chest, then he muttered the words, “You’re so beautiful.”

“Sidon,” whispered the Hylian, his tongue curling around the word with praise, and the Prince seemed to shiver at the sound, while bending to cautiously gaze his lover’s skin once more with his sharp teeth.

Link couldn’t doubt the Zora’s affection for even a moment, but even so, he also couldn’t prevent a momentary reflection that sprung to mind; Sidon had recounted to Link two instances when Brivere had uttered his name, as though such a thing was important or significant, and clearly, to him, they were. He held these instances within himself with vivid distinction, noting the shift from reverence to hatred and he’d allowed it to wound him.

The Hylian had no other choice, now, but to acknowledge his jealousy. Even when he’d hated Sidon, some confused part of him had looked on with envy, when he realized how close the Prince was to his Knight. Even now, it was impossible not to feel threatened, knowing that Sidon cared deeply for the other man and that all the territorial behavior in the world wouldn’t change it. It was impossible not to fear, considering how easily Link and Brivere could have been in opposite positions right now, or even some time in the future. It was impossible, because Link knew that he absolutely was not ideal for his Zora lover, and all of those insufficiencies mounted to something big and ugly, and ultimately manifested into the jealousy he was feeling.

But suddenly remembering what Sidon had told him about the way Brivere said his name- Link didn’t feel jealousy in response to it. What he did feel was sympathy and a distinct want to amend this grave wrong, because while the Knight might have been responsible, Link knew his own presence was partly to blame, and.. For some odd reason, he didn’t mind admitting that to himself.
For now, all he wanted to do was ease that ache, to erase whatever scars Brivere had left behind, and overwrite that awful memory of Sidon’s name being bitterly spat. Not to spite Brivere, but to console the Prince.

“Sidon,” Link uttered once more, the word beloved, each syllable overwhelming and pure. If the breath needed to pronounce it had been a precious resource, the Hylian would still speak it gladly. And perhaps every inch of Link’s body had been formed as a tool to serve an absent deity, but if Link had to steal back a fraction of himself, he’d wring his tongue from her control and use it to praise the person he truly loved.

“Nnn,” the Prince hummed, his mouth closing tightly, his teeth snapping together so they were bared against the Hylian’s skin and only kisses were left behind. He held his lover tightly while his body shook, and Link arched in the Zora’s embrace, his center suddenly flooded with warmth that filled him and overflowed, spilling between his thighs and dribbling down.

The very moment Sidon caught his breath, he allowed Link to slide from the tangle of loving imprisonment in his arms, then muttered an apology. “I’m so sorry, my dear friend,” he spoke, his voice full of the typical exhaustion that followed orgasm.

Link weakly laughed over it and shook his head, vaguely wondering if Sidon’s mess had painted every empty space in the hollow husk he called a body, because even his chest felt tight and full of warmth. “It’s fine. The feeling is worth the cleanup.”

Despite what the Hylian said, however, when the Zora began to soften to the point that his members pulled free and tucked away, a veritable dam broke and added additional liquid to the previous cascade.

“I suppose the tainted waters are still fine for washing, at least,” the Prince stated bleakly, a deep sigh coming from him. It was disheartening to see how rapidly the real world stole his happiness away once their lovemaking was done and for the rest of the evening at least, Link swore that he could not abide this.

“Sidon, can I say something?” Link piped up, his words being set free like battle blows, flowing from somewhere secret and instinctive and largely reckless inside him. It was outside of his usual character to allow thoughtless action to drive him, at least where speaking was involved, and that very notion almost immediately gave him the distinct feeling that he was making a huge mistake, but he ignored it.

Taking a deep breath, Link let it out to steel himself, to steady whatever logic was within him that could translate the bizarre foreign language of his own emotions into words that he knew how to speak. His hands tentatively took hold of Sidon’s forearms, his fingertips idly fiddling along the surface of the Zora’s fins, all because he wasn’t otherwise sure what to do with himself.

“Go on, my dear one,” the Prince quietly spoke, dipping his head lower to affectionately bump his Hylian lover, then he sought out Link’s pretty, blue gaze with his own.

“..I don’t even know if I properly understand what it means to love somebody. I don’t know how to express it or how to describe it. But I do think that I finally understand exactly what it feels like, and.. You deserve all the credit for the incredible and impossible task of teaching me that.” Link’s voice was tremulous and soft, his shoulders moving in a shrug of confusion. He still wasn’t perfect and he wasn’t entirely sure of himself, but the Zora’s hands moving to softly stroke the bare skin of his upper arms acted as quiet, gentle encouragement. “I just.. I wanted to make things fair, and kind of even the playing field here, because.. you’ve expressed what you feel in some words, eloquent and flourished as they were. I can never hope to rival the skill of your tongue, not in any regard, but..
Before you take this potion and go to sleep for days, I do want you to know how I feel..”

Hesitantly, Link at last raised his own eyes to meet the searching gold of his Zora companion. Sidon’s slitted pupils had widened so that they actually appeared round and somehow it made him look a bit disbelieving, like he could scarcely grasp the words presently being uttered, or he was otherwise overwhelmed by this rush of emotional nonsense being hurled at him in his immediate afterglow.

“The future is really uncertain right now,” Link started again, a tremor in his hands physically showing his sudden nervousness, yet the more he spoke, the easier the words flowed from him. “I don’t know what is going to happen, not to me, not to this world we live in.. but because of you, I finally care. I care about the world, because it’s a world in which you exist. Maybe my position in that same world is unfair and unjust and for the most part, I’ve rejected it.. But it was just as unfair for you to have to take responsibility for the person I was when you met me. You didn’t deserve the shit I put you through. You didn’t deserve to be the beaten surface I used to smooth my own rough edges, but.. you did it, anyway. You poured every ounce of yourself into soothing my ails and I swear to you, I will repay that every day from now on. When you are hurting, I will find a way to comfort you. If you are weak, I will find a way to give you strength. If you’re in danger, I will protect you. If there is anything you need, I will give it to you. And more than anything, I won’t let you feel alone or unwanted or not cared for ever again.. because I’m going to love you.”

“Oh, well,” Link fumbled, his head dropping low at the perceived verbal blunder. “I mean to say..I do. Love you.”

One of Link’s hands unconsciously made its way to his mussed hair, combing through it in a show of frustration, then he took a deep breath before shyly peering up again, only to find the Zora in stunned silence that hardly suited him. Sidon’s mouth had fallen open ever so slightly, so that just the points of his sharp teeth were visible. For once, though, it was not his teeth that gleamed, but instead, his eyes; the dark of the Prince’s widened pupils was shining and glassy with tears that threatened to freely spill over.

“Uh, Sidon,” the smaller man uttered in concern, raising up just a bit on his knees to press his forehead to the Zora’s. “Hey, no, come on.. Don’t cry over what I said, it wasn’t that profound.”

“I’m sorry, my dearest one.” Sidon bubbled through the tears that caressed his cheeks, a bright smile finding its way to his features even so. “You caught me by surprise, I’m afraid, so I hadn’t quite severed my deepened connection with you. However, if I may say.. Maybe you don’t find your words to be profound, but to me, they are. It is a simple matter for me to plant myself within the beauty of your heart, but for you to make the effort to explain what you feel and that you care, even though you must know that I already understand.. Well, it only means that much more and I know every word was the absolute truth.”

“Thank you, Link,” the Prince continued with a sigh that held the sound of a weight falling from his chest. He quickly brushed the tears from his cheeks and pressed a kiss to the Hylian’s lips that lingered for a sweet, affectionate moment, then he drew back just enough to speak again, his voice a soft, contented hum. “Your feelings are certainly acquiesced and mutual, for I love you dearly.. and I do so very hope that when I awaken from my slumber, your loving heart will be the first thing I sense nearby.”

With ease that was thoughtless, effortless, Link gently nodded his head. As much as he planned to stay busy while Sidon was under the effects of this awful potion, he didn’t see himself leaving the side of his sleeping Prince for very long.

Sidon nodded in return, a sincerely happy smile lighting his features. Link observed every detail, his
blue eyes moving across the Zora’s visage, not turning away for moment while the beauty of that simple expression lingered before him. He had thought the Prince’s smiles were warm and comforting before, but now that they were truly happy, they filled the Hylian’s very existence with comfort and fathomless joy.

“Clean yourself up, then sleep with me?” the Prince requested, heartfelt, glad. Link hoped he was still connected to him, so that he could know and understand how happy he made him. His chest was so full it ached, it was hard to breathe, it was hard to think.

He hadn’t known it was possible to be so happy.

He wanted to be happy, he truly did, but where Bazz was concerned, happiness was a fleeting, unobtainable dream. Happiness was an ember bursting to life in a bed of kindling, lighting to a vibrant inferno that blazed too brightly and burned itself out, much the same as he did inside his lover.

Happiness was something that came in one perfect moment and teased his heart, then left him cold and lonely.

His hips rocked against the woman beneath him, his occasional grunts of effort getting lost alongside her sweet moans of pleasure. The whole of his body was energized with that distant feeling, the pursuit of drifting perfection, the warmth that swallowed him, immolated him, consumed and owned him. He gave in to it, he appeased it, he chased it, hungry, thirsty, pleading. His arms tightened around Gaddison, one hand clenched and clawing at the steel that encased her shoulder blades, one cradling the back of her neck, his fingerscales dipping between the rings that encircled the beautiful column.

The most surprising thing about the embrace that Bazz had insisted upon was that as the other Zora grew ever closer to pure satisfaction, she returned it. Her arms tangled around his chest, pulling him down, holding him close, and that was all he wanted, all he longed for- for her to want him like that, but always.

His forehead pressed against hers in affection and she pushed back. Her pretty lips opened in a gasp of breathless, carnal bliss and he pressed his own to hers, his tongue seeking refuge in her mouth, her own wet muscle greeting his like an old friend. They fell together like fractured glass, their edges sharp but perfectly matched, fitting back to one another, but not well enough to look less than broken.

Bazz’s hand drifted down, to stroke his lover to her finality, his fingertips circling around the swollen bud that his thrusting members hardly grazed. Her voice was a deep, velvet whine, caught in her throat, unable to escape past her bitten lip until at last her mouth opened wide and she cried aloud while she peaked.

Her orgasm shook her and her webbed toes pushed against the surface of the desk, her lithe frame arching upward, into the weight of Bazz on top. As she came, her muscles tightened in spasms of delight, her wetness dripping and drenching her lover’s delving erections, so they glided in deep with slippery ease.

She was finished and he could have pulled out on that knowledge alone, but the way she felt around him when she came, the way she clung to him, the way his body goaded hers to relief; it was irresistible, too good to let go of, and he pushed in that much harder, his hips slapping against hers with boundless enthusiasm, until he exploded inside, his release a thick spurt that got lost somewhere within the furthest depths of her.
“Bazz,” she whispered so goddamn sweetly when he stilled, laying his body against hers and resting peacefully there as though he truly belonged. Both arms wrapped around her again, holding onto her with every intention of keeping her, thinking maybe she could never go if they never moved from this spot. For a few, fleeting minutes, she even allowed it, though maybe it was just the time she needed to catch her breath again. Then, like the ghost of happiness evanescing, she began to wriggle in the black Zora’s embrace.

“Don’t go,” he breathed, his voice not even a voice, but the sound of anything that had been strong in him crumbling. Rivan was gone, Dunma wouldn’t come home, Kayden was terribly ill, or perhaps even dead for all Bazz knew yet.. He couldn’t stand this. He would say the world was cruel, but the world didn’t have a single, fucking thing on Gaddison, because she actively made the choice to take herself away from him. “.please. I need you.”

In a show of something almost akin to sympathy, Gaddison stilled, one hand reaching up to gently stroke the length of the Zora man’s tail; she did this in silence for a tense, extended moment, delaying the blow that Bazz felt would be the killing strike. Then, when whatever attempted softness had dwindled, the pastel Zora’s voice spoke up with a clear, concise demand.

“Resign as Guard Captain,” she stated plainly. “Promote me to your position.”

The silence that followed was an aching, painful one and the woman’s touch drifted away in the lack of response; Bazz couldn’t say no, but he couldn’t suffer answering with a ‘yes.’ Being Captain of the Zorana Guard had been his dream since childhood, the position a shining emblem of hope that he had wanted to embody since before his father trained the Zora Champion, since before the Hylian Champion tutored him, since before the Calamity and all the stories of glorious battle.

His father had been a Knight of the Royal Order and was a surviving veteran of the Calamity. Bazz had discarded the highest potential of his nobility, to serve the people, to protect his people; being Guard Captain was the only thing that allowed him to feel as if he made a difference in this stagnant world. If he gave that up.. Could he still be truly happy? Or was it just another thing that this cruel life wanted to inevitably strip from him?

“Bazz,” Gaddison said again, her voice not harsh, but imploring. “Bazz, I want you just as much. I want us to be together just as much as you want it, and being denied that happiness is hurting me as much as it is you. But this dream you have of marriage and family- that’s what you, and you alone, want, and if that’s what you’re so intent on, then this is the only way to have it.”

She stopped- she gave him another moment to think, to speak, to do anything, but he didn’t.

“This is the same choice you’ve been facing all this time,” the Zora woman said, her voice growing more insistent. “Your job, or this life you have envisioned with me. You’re the one who is consistently refusing to choose me. You’re the one who is doing this to us, Bazz.”

“Gaddison, please,” the black Zora muttered, his fins pressed flat and his voice low. “I just can’t. I can’t give up what I have, what I’ve worked for.. I need this position. It’s the only thing giving me stability and strength, it’s the only thing that keeps me going. I need it.”

“Then when you say that you need me, it’s just a lie,” she answered with a shrug, her eyes downcast. Still, even as she pushed him off of her, when she sat upright, she leaned in to press her lips to his once more. “It was fun. Thanks.”

Their lips gravitated together again, and again, each time in precious silence that they didn’t break, even as they surfaced and tread into the shallows that would bring them near the fort once more. Dunma was fascinated and in awe of how sweet and soft the Sergeant’s lips were, so plush and
warm, despite that not one other part of her appeared to be anything but hard and strong.

Eventually, it was Betaal who broke each of the contented patterns continuing between them; their gentle, walking pace, their comfortable silence, and their calm, easy affections. She stopped, drawing her hand back from where it had been entangled between Dunma’s elegant fingers and she spoke up to say, “You should go back first. I’ll follow just a bit behind.”

The violet Zora only took a few small steps before she, too, came to a halt in the knee-deep pool. The dream of romance had already begun to slip away, like any sweet dream upon waking, and she paused long enough to question— is Betaal my superior in this moment or is this a matter that can be debated? Is it out of bounds to suggest something otherwise?

But hadn’t the older Zora herself said that she couldn’t offer guidance, nor control Dunma as she would any other underling, once they became involved in this way? Until they made it back to that fort, they were still in the dream, they were still in the secret rendezvous, they were still two women, in love.

“It’s alright,” Dunma uttered, her voice calm and serious in a way that gave Betaal reason to pause. The blue Zora’s single, shining eye sought the younger woman’s own gaze and Dunma saw immediately that Betaal was listening, waiting to hear the logic behind this assertion.

“We’re ‘friends’, remember?” the younger woman reassured in the most reasonable of ways. “Everyone has already seen that much. If we make an effort to seem distant from each other, that alone will arouse more suspicion than if we keep behaving like everything is normal.”

Another moment of silence passed between them while the Sergeant considered this. It did, indeed, sound reasonable enough, and the worry she was feeling likely couldn’t be remedied, no matter how they behaved and concealed their actions from this point. She was a terrible liar, even when she was only anticipating the need to lie.

“You’re probably right,” Betaal uttered in resignation, continuing her pace at Dunma’s side.

Chapter End Notes

;END NSFW;

My sweet goodness, where do I even start? First of all, when you order the Holiday Spice Flat White drink at Starbucks, they write HSFW on your cup and it looks a damn lot like NSFW, so that drink was an appropriate treat to indulge in while writing this, haha.

Next, I should apologize for my lateness, I suppose, though for those of you who follow my tumblr, I did at least follow through with my second promised deadline. :) This chapter is obscene and obscenely longer than expected. My god. I do hope the thirsty among you are satisfied. I hope your crops are watered, your skin is clear and all that good shit, because I am fucking dead. This chapter is approximately 15K words. Just a smidge short of that, but holy cow.

Please, let me know what you thought, friends. I need to know. I really hit a bad slump right after the con and I'm super behind on nanowrimo, despite the length of this chapter. An art friend gave me back a bit of my spirit, and I don't think she's posted her
lovely work, but she knows who she is. Truly, she helped bring this chapter to the rest of you. So, I hate to be needy, but I could use the encouragement to get caught up. Tell me what you thought of this update. Cast a revival spell over my dead body, or at least poke my corpse on your way out the door. :) 

Nanowrimo wordcount: 25,800/50,000
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

While the Zoras fumbled to solve their growing list of crises, another tragedy fell upon them, waking them from their temporary peace and further shattering their hope. The Champion was crumbling on the inside, just as the city of his beloved Zoras crumbled beneath their newest disaster. Was it the waking stretch of the Calamity, reminding them that their time was short? Or was it Hylia's divine vengeance, holding all that her Hero loved hostage until he answered her call and did her bidding.

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends! So, I wanted this chapter to be released a day early to make up for running late so many times, but technically it's Saturday already, because it's after midnight. However, as you all will have the entirety of Saturday to read, perhaps it's a little bit of a treat, as opposed to waiting about and wondering when I'll finish? Well, I hope so anyway. :) This update is pretty dramatic, so I'll let you all have at it. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All was dark and silent, the sun not even a soft, glowing promise of light to come on the horizon. Sidon’s bedchamber was hardly illuminated at all, as he’d covered each of his luminous stone lamps before he crawled into bed to sleep beside his Hylian lover and held Link near in the hours granted to them.

Yet now the sway of the Zora’s water mattress felt to be a surface much too large for the slumbering Hylian, the sheets strangely cool, and Link’s naked body curled inward, tugging at the blankets while softly scooting in the direction which he unconsciously expected to locate his Prince. This lonely pursuit of warmth and comfort was ultimately fruitless, since Sidon’s gargantuan frame was mysteriously difficult for Link to find; however, it was not quite enough to stir him from his rest.

When the peaceful, sleeping silence of Zora’s Domain was disturbed, however, the Hylian jumped upright in the bed, his hands instinctively reaching for weapons that weren’t actually strapped to his back. The entirety of the bedroom trembled with a mournful, trumpeting echo that Link found all too familiar and he clamped his hands over his ears at the noise of Vah Ruta crying out from the mountaintops.

As dreaming calm was swept away, the Champion fought the images that resurfaced in his mind to no avail, his body shaking as it all rushed back; the icy chill that gnawed at him, deep in his bones, the flood that filled his lungs, his body weak and paralyzed, drifting into the abyss, and the blurred image of Sidon diving down to him, his hand outstretched, his countenance both hopeful and fretting.

“Link?” the Zora Prince uttered in the pause between one cry and another. The Hylian couldn’t hear
Sidon’s voice from underneath the protection of his palms, but stability came back to him with relative ease as he further wakened and processed his surroundings. His hands fell away from his ears, drifting instead to the plush softness of the sheets, his eyes clinging to a sliver of moonlight from the windows in order to produce a silvery image before him— the Prince’s bedchamber.

He was safe.

“Why is it crying out like that?” Link asked, turning the moonlit shine of his gaze to the Zora who hovered nearby, perched before one of the numerous windows. Sidon could not answer immediately, while another wailing trumpet resounded across the Domain like a siren, reverberating throughout the entirety of the valley. The mechanical voice of Vah Ruta had always been foreboding and painfully loud, yet now that these noises were coming in the dead of night, with no real purpose or reason, they echoed through the Hylian, carrying a sense of dread in their wake.

Sidon, too, appeared rather unnerved, unless the moonlight was playing tricks on Link. The Zora had his hands pressed to the windowsill, gripping it in concern while he attempted to ascertain the answer to Link’s own question, himself. His tail was flicking nervously, stiff and fidgeting just right at the end, and his expression was set into something much too serious for him— a serious expression on Sidon’s face always felt like an immediate sign of trouble to come.

“I can’t be quite sure,” the Zora quickly responded in the moment of silence between the Divine Beast’s cries. “Apart from our prior troubles with Vah Ruta, it has rarely called out in this way, though such cries never preceded anything pleasant.”

“Great,” Link mumbled, though his voice was lost beneath another pitchy screech. He bundled his hands together, feeling the tremble aching in his finger bones, refusing to leave him in peace. His immediate thought was that his time of peace was over and the Calamity had finally torn itself free from imprisonment. Following that was the question of what to do in response, to which his mind provided an utter blank that went much, much further than just hesitation. In that uncertainty, an unknown panic arose in him; how could he defend what he loved? How could he keep his little world safe now?

It wasn’t as though he’d ever known exactly what he needed to do, but he’d begrudgingly followed the path set before him, until he arrived in Zora’s Domain and stagnated. But now that danger was threatening at his doorstep and he actually felt that he had something in this world to lose, he was only that much more lost and overwhelmed.

He didn’t know or understand shit about his history, but Hylia be damned, suddenly his previous pain and emptiness seemed like it had, in fact, been for the best. Suddenly the awful belief was arising that those deranged scientists who had stuck him in their Sheikah oven had been right to do so.

Love? Happiness? Had it only reduced him to weakness? Incapability?

Stranger and stranger thoughts invaded him, like the question of his last actual death; it had been such a long time since he’d fallen and perhaps, as a result, he was suddenly afraid of it all over again. He considered that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he just tossed himself out a tower window or sank that beautiful dirk straight into his stomach; that would at least recondition him to the pain and trauma of dying over and over again.

“Take a breath, my love,” the Prince spoke. He’d turned and strode back to the bed, all without Link’s notice. Now, the Hylian upturned his shining eyes to find a calm expression written over the Zora’s lovely features.
“..if the Calamity breaks free,” Link started, his worries turning into stray snippets of thought, not enough to properly verbalize. He didn’t know where he was going with this, and he had a very invasive urge to leave, to run away, to go somewhere else and purge everything that had made him from a weapon into a person.

“If it does, then we fight,” Sidon stated, completely composed and confident as he did. “My people are strong and won’t perish from this world easily. Trust us.”

“I do.” With a nod, Link went silent. He swallowed, his throat parched, and just as Sidon had instructed, he took one slow, deep breath. Vah Ruta’s cries had quieted and all was still again, like nothing abnormal had occurred. Sidon clambered back into bed, nestling himself at the Hylian’s side, but he did not immediately lay back down. Instead, the Zora draped one arm delicately around his Hylian lover, only for Link to shake his head, suddenly incapable of accepting comfort or reassurance.

With a shrug that rid Link of Sidon’s touch, he spoke only the word, “Don’t,” to which the Prince complied without question. It wasn’t as though Link felt no immediate guilt at the rejection, but for reasons that had no explanation, he couldn’t allow it.

“You’re safe here with me,” came the eventual sound of Sidon’s voice, after a stint of quiet between them. He refrained from reaching out to Link, but the sound of his voice enveloped and soothed the Hylian, even so, even when he wasn’t certain he wanted be calmed at all. Maybe he didn’t deserve to be.

What he wanted to say in return was, ‘Why?’ What dangers were coming that he, alone, was responsible for facing? Why had this man decided to shelter and love him, to allow him to play at this life of happiness, when his only true purpose was to save this world so that everyone else could go on living.

He was the sacrifice, he knew that, yet Sidon was hoarding him away, keeping him from the inevitable.

Link said nothing at all, unable to allow himself to steady at his lover’s reassurances. After some time and reflection, though, his psyche at last grew exhausted and blanketed him in comfortable, thoughtless numb, which allowed him to settle back down against the Prince’s side. His fingertips unconsciously traced the tightly shut furrows where Sidon’s gills were tucked out of sight and he closed his eyes, fading slowly into a shallow, uneasy lull.

These half-awake ponderings probably couldn’t be trusted, anyway.

Or could they?

Hours later, when light at last shined upon the mountains like a soft, serene halo and the sky was painted in shades of pale violet and blue, Vah Ruta let out one final cry to alert the people of Zora’s Domain before the ground beneath them began to violently shake.

The jagged peaks that surrounded the valley trembled, loose stones quaking free and sliding. A fine dust drifted upward like a great pillar of smoke as the mountain’s face crumbled here and there and waves of shattered stone crashed down upon the formerly tranquil meadows surrounding the Zora city.

Deep cracks furrowed the mountains, the land, the ground ripping asunder with the force of the tremors, opening and closing like gaping maws drawing breath just beneath the earthen crust. The sound of shattering stone resounded throughout the city, punctuated by deafening crashes from fallen
debris, and quiet fractures crawling across the luminous, blue structures, in ominous warning.

Below, the water that filled the Undercity cavern and surrounding bodies sloshed like a beverage in the hands of a clumsy child, or the sea amidst a turbulent storm. Back and forth the waves bounced and splashed, flooding banks and soaking the lowest areas of the valley. The ground even cracked, and wept, puddling with water from somewhere out of sight.

Within Sidon’s chamber, his belongings fell free from their shelves, his work scattering across the floor and the normally comforting sway of his mattress turned into a violent jostle that more or less discarded its occupants. The Prince stretched his legs and found his feet with relative ease, while Link was left to crawl rather gracelessly until he was bucked into the waiting arms of the Zora; he never thought he’d see the day to be thrown as violently from bed as he had been from the back of his Crazy Girl, but it seemed this was the very morning for precisely that.

Fine cracks formed webs along the walls of the Prince’s quarters, the tiles of his floor folding, shattering and coming loose as his entire tower swayed.

“We have to get out of here,” Link hissed, blinking until his sleep-blurred sight turned sharp and vivid in the rush of danger that seemed suddenly overwhelming. His body was already echoing the world shaking around him, his bones quaking within while his blood rushed and his head pounded. With hurried movements, he gathered his previously discarded tunic from the breaking ground, wondering if he was going to be forced to run for safety as stark naked as the rest of the city’s occupants.

“We must, indeed,” Sidon declared with a nod, though suddenly his voice had taken on that authoritative sound, proof that at the first sign of danger he went instinctively into his role as a leader. “However, the structure of our city is more flexible than it appears. So you have time to take what you need, but be very quick, my dearest one.”

“Understood,” the Hylian said, nodding in turn. He found his articles of clothing with haste, not sparing time to buckle every little thing, and surely he would look a mess, not that it would turn any heads, nor was it even relevant. Link cast a quick glance at Sidon, too, while grabbing his Sheikah Slate and the dirk which had been gifted to him, his fingers tight around the precious items. The Prince strapped on the sword which was so often at his hip and the Hylian took that as a sign that danger beyond this quake was imminent.

He didn’t have time to wonder at it any longer. He couldn’t question if the Calamity was here, if he would be trying to hold off Guardians and other enemies, if he would watch hundreds of Zoras fight to their last breath. He didn’t know.

“Are you ready?” the Prince asked, beckoning Link to hurry and follow with one hand, while the other raised to shelter his head from pieces of crumbling stone shaken free and falling from above. Link only nodded, sure he had all he needed, or all that was presently available to him, which wasn’t much. He fell in line with Sidon, his gait clumsy and stumbling in the constant shake beneath his feet- it was like being back in Eldin while the Divine Beast was still rampaging, so much so that for a moment, Link thought he could still feel the sting of the volcano’s burn on his skin.

Sidon reached for the Hylian’s hand while they descended the tower and Link took hold with hardly a thought. That tight grasp gave him mental and physical stability that he could only hope he offered in turn.

The shouts and cries of the people below were already audible from the tower windows, and Sidon visibly lifted his head, sending a worried gaze downward, his mind attempting to measure the damage and process his response ahead of time. Link could see him planning, thinking, even in the
tiny glances he stole.

The duo burst from the gate at the bottom of the spiral tower and they were immediately faced with another Zora in distress. The very guard that had been keeping watch at the entryway to the Prince’s chamber was pinned to the ground beneath a mass of fallen stone much larger than himself.

The man was surprisingly still aware enough to call out to the Prince and the Champion before they hurried past, his entire body tucked underneath the rubble, his bloodied face just barely peaking out, as well as one arm, which was reaching and clawing at the ground like a desperate animal caught in a snare.

“Please!” His voice was muffled and weak, but enough to halt Link in his tracks. One of the Hylian’s ears had perked at the sound, whereas Sidon had nearly drifted past in his rush.

“Help,” the Zora cried beneath the crushing pressure upon his body, the air in his lungs most likely a gift granted by the armor protecting his chest. The Hylian’s boots skidded against the stone pathway beneath his feet and he pivoted on heel, hurrying toward the man calling to him.

Link hardly bothered to estimate the weight atop the other Zora before he bent down and took hold of the slab of stone, pushing with all the strength in his thighs but barely budging the fallen debris at all; it was scarcely enough to allow the injured Zora even a failed attempt to wriggle free. The Hylian was soon joined by the much larger Prince in the effort, however; Sidon ducked low enough to grab at the awful weight, every fibre of strength in him heaving so that the muscles in his arms, his chest, his shoulders all tightened with the effort, but he raised the large slab with slow, steady success.

With what space was provided, Link crawled into it, courting the dangerous possibility that his Prince could drop the stone upon him, and he grabbed at the injured Zora, dragging him out with all the swiftness provided by the adrenaline surging through him.

Remarkably, once set free, the guardsman climbed to his feet, having clearly taken a hit in the head when the stone fell onto him, yet he was otherwise unscathed.

“Take it easy, guardsman,” Sidon spoke, safely depositing the debris with a thud that shook the ground, then he pressed a dusty hand against the other man’s back once he was upright. The other Zora was muttering weak words of gratitude, and the light sound of his voice left even Link concerned that he was sure to crumple to the ground all over again. “Come, I have you,” the Prince further insisted, tucking one arm around the bleeding guard’s back to usher him along.

Link wasn’t sure where Sidon was heading, but he followed without any prompting; the red Zora appeared to have it in mind just where he needed to be and wherever that was, Link wanted to go as well.

While the now trio limped in what appeared to be the direction of the square, another piercing trumpet sounded down from the mountaintops; Link inclined his neck to gaze in the direction of where Vah Ruta remained perched, indeed spying the Beast with its trunk raised skyward and its laser aim dimmed in order to do... whatever it was doing. Had its early morning cries been those of warning? Was it now attempting to foretell further disaster, or offering reassurance that the danger had passed?

The quaking in the ground had stilled, but all about Zora’s Domain, crumbling destruction still resounded across the city alongside the harrowed voices of Zoras in both distress and alarm. A small crowd had already surrounded the fountain, huddling beneath the image of their Zora Champion as though Mipha’s spirit was there, protecting them. Among those gathered was the Guard Captain, sans his usual armor. Instead, he stood with only the silvery rings that encircled his neck and the rest
of his frame was uninterrupted black and white.

“Captain!” Sidon’s voice rang clear and sharp against the background noise all around them. “A status report, if you please?”

“Apologies, my lord,” the Guard Captain responded, his own tone much gruffer and as tired as the shadows that darkened the corners of his eyes. “I’m afraid that I was actually off-duty and only just arrived here, myself. However, the lieutenant holding my post during my off hours should report here, as per emergency protocol. A status report is precisely what I’m waiting for.”

“Ah, there you are, young lord!” another voice called from above and the entirety of the crowd couldn’t help but turn to face the source. Some of the nervous townspeople cringed at the sound, despite that it was velvet and almost musical, yet it was impossible not to be terribly jumpy after such a disastrous morning.

A rather tall Zora man leapt from the level above, his body tucking inward and rotating gracefully in the air, the inertia carrying him across the gap so that most of the distance between himself and the group was closed, then he gracefully landed on his feet, his knees bending to cushion him. The newly appeared Zora straightened with an air of elegance that was almost too calm and serene for the situation; Link hadn’t thought there was a Zora more grandiloquent than Sidon, but clearly, he stood corrected.

“Here,” muttered the Hylian, reaching out to the injured guard still clinging to the Prince’s side. He felt otherwise useless, just standing while others knew precisely what they were meant to be doing, so he helped by ushering the ailing Zora aside, to get him off of his feet.

“I’m pleased to see that you’re safe, young lord,” the tall, dark Zora said while he walked around the lingering crowd in a cat-like gait, his head held high all the while. His scales were a deep, smoky violet, which had silvered with his numerous years.

“And my father?” Sidon cut in, impatient with worry.

“Be still, young lord, for he is quite safe;” answered the other man with a gentle nod. “When I felt the first tremors, I saw to your father’s safety personally, as is my duty as the First Knight- one I take very seriously. After King Dorephan was evacuated from his own tower, however, he implored that I see to it that you were out of danger, as well.”

“It was necessary for you to come, yourself?” The Prince’s head dipped lower, his eyes narrowing in concern and perhaps something more. “Then, I take it Brivere has yet to report?”

“Most were off-duty in the early hours, young lord, and it appears that reaction times vary,” the First Knight explained, his tone taking on a sound that was almost sympathetic, but even more fake. “Do not fret for the Knight Captain. It does little good for one to be so concerned for one’s protectors. If anything, my hope is that his worry for you at least rivals that which you manage to express for him.”

“I worry for all of my people, regardless, Ser, and I invest only more concern in the lives of my friends,” said the Prince, smooth and neutral with every word. Still, he drew his lips back a bit more from his teeth when he was restraining his insult and the silent Champion took note of the minor detail before turning his attention back to Bazz.

A very small handful of armored city guardsmen had approached and the black Zora was visibly disturbed by the numbers. The tired shadow was turning into a frustrated wrinkle on his features, and his tail had begun to flick, only to go still and stiff when he noticed yet another Zora making a dash toward the group.
Gaddison, too, had been off-duty and was taking advantage of the Guard Captain’s private quarters in the barracks when the quake occurred; while Bazz hurried off, she took the time to armor herself with the intention of taking charge of those who had also been previously slumbering. In emergencies such as these, the entire force was required to ready themselves for action immediately, however, disaster today found an easy method to disarm the Zora people, or at least slow their response.

The pastel Zora was panting for breath when she arrived, but she forced the words from her roughened throat, taking deep gasps between every short sentence. “The main hallway to the rest quarters, in the barracks.. It’s collapsed, sir. The guardsmen who were off duty are trapped inside.”

“That’s most of them,” Bazz snapped, his chin lowering into one hand while he wracked his brain for a way to compensate.

“Yes sir,” the Zora woman responded, detached and professional, yet her eyes wandered quietly to the gathered crowd of civilians, at the looks of fear on their faces, and those among them who had been injured, huddled and waiting for help to come. Then, she looked back at Bazz, awaiting and expecting quick, decisive action.

“Totika.” Bazz addressed one of the other young warriors who had reported and the other, much younger black Zora straightened in attention at the sound of his name. “You were on duty guarding the communal pool, yes? What was the situation in that area?”

“Sir, the damage to that area was relatively minimal, but enough that there were a few who were injured. For the most part, everything was safe and stable when I left. My sister-uhh, guardsman Torfeau remained, to look after those who were hurt.”

“Good enough,” Bazz nodded, pointing as he issued commands. “Gather the civilians from the square and escort them to that area for safety; we need this area clear. And help Guardsman Tido make his way there, as well. See to it that he stays off his feet once he arrives.” He hardly took a breath between each order he gave, looking to another one of the few he had under his present command and he began anew. “Guardsman Meryl, swim to the Basilica and retrieve a medic. Have them report to the communal resting pool to aid with any who are injured.”

“There’s a problem with that, sir,” one of the young women in armor piped up. “An underwater rockslide has blocked off the entryway to the Basilica, as well as destroyed several Undercity homes, leaving residents trapped. It’s an awful mess, sir. Some very large structures came down.”

“Of course,” Bazz hissed, baring his sharp fangs. “Is anything not blocked by rubble at the moment?”

“Sir,” Gaddison cut in, assertive but calm and reasonable. “We need all hands available. We need to send everybody we can spare to clear the way for those trapped in the barracks.”

The Captain took the suggestion, letting it wash over him for whatever moments he had to spare while he considered it and any further options he had. At last, a relenting sigh heaved from him and he gave his hand a flick, saying, “I need all but three of you to go with Guardsman Gaddison and get the way open. The rest of you, start searching for anyone trapped or injured and get them to the communal area unless their injuries are absolutely too severe for them to be moved. Ask all other civilians to see themselves there, for their safety, at least until the Basilica engineers and Dento have had time to ascertain which structures are safe, and which need to be repaired. Start high in the private noble residences and head down from there, just to be thorough, but be as quick as you can.”

“Yes, sir!” the small trio of remaining guardsmen said in unison, while the rest followed Gaddison’s
lead and rushed off to the barracks to assist their fellows. Bazz took another deep breath, letting it slide from his aching chest like a heavy weight.

“First Knight Nautille,” the clear voice of the Prince arose in the Guard Captain’s silence. The tall, red Zora’s head snapped to one side, his gaze falling upon the Knight by his side, his forefins swaying with the force of his movement. “Do you have forces to spare, Ser? If so, it would be advisable for your ranks to lend their strength now. I will lead efforts to clear the way to the Basilica; if the destruction is as severe as indicated, they almost certainly will need my help.”

“Hmm,” the First Knight nodded in a distinguished way, the soft droop of his brow accentuating the sudden worry that crossed his features. “If entry to the Basilica is, in fact, cut off as they say, that would serve to explain the absence of the Knight Divine.” The man cleared his throat and straightened, giving a dismissive gesture to physically usher his personal feelings aside. “However, if I know her, she’s already handling any emergencies down below and rallying her Goddess Knights to the cause. When we free them, our forces will be increased exponentially. Young lord, I shall return to the King’s side and report these matters to him, then I will lend my aid to you, as well as the Guard Captain, by sending as many of my people as have reported- fear not.”

“I do not fear at all, Ser.” Sidon answered, grateful enough for the easy cooperation. “I have faith.”

“Highness, I should interject-” Bazz’s words ran together a bit as he hurried to speak up. “Forgive me but also let me remind you- the water isn’t safe to breathe at this time. If you go down, you’ll have to dry dive, or you may risk exposure to the lingering threat of the Water Blight.”

“Never you worry for me.” The Prince offered a small smile alongside his reply, yet now in this time of crisis, his face faked these expressions all the more. The steely determination in his voice, however, was genuine. “I will take caution, of course, but I will also do what I must to assist those in danger.”

With respect and trust that there was little time to show, Bazz nodded his head to the Prince’s declarations. In his mind, nothing spoke the young Prince’s greatness more than his willingness to aid others, no matter the cost.

“Please do take great care, young lord,” the First Knight’s voice came to fill the silence while he took a step away from the group. “...and know that when your Knight Captain reports, I will send him down to you post haste.”

With a bound and a leap, the First Knight away’d once more to return to his King’s side, which he knew his Knights were swarming protectively around like the army ants of the Faron region, but magically enhanced. The Prince, too, began off with the intention of setting to work on whatever relief he could offer, suddenly so hyperfocused on the task at hand that he almost forgot about the Hylian trailing at his heels. He took all of three great strides before his feet pattered to a heavy halt and he turned to face the silent Champion.

“My dearest one,” Sidon spoke, apologetic and rushed, “I’m afraid that where I’m headed, you simply cannot follow. If you wish to be of assistance, please aid Guard Captain Bazz, as I’m sure he will need it.”

“Alright,” Link answered, reaching up to grasp Sidon’s wrist for a passing moment, stealing just another second of his precious time, and the Prince offered one of his soft, beautiful smiles in turn, giving his lover’s much smaller hand a gentle squeeze. “Just be careful,” the Hylian said before he pulled away, setting the Zora free as Sidon had so often done for him.

Duty to his people came first; Link understood.
The Hylian remained absolutely still until the Zora Prince was completely out of sight, then he turned to where the Guard Captain remained. The other man looked tightly strung, with a certain tension that echoed across the uncovered surface of his lithe frame, carried in every visible muscle.

“I think I can help clear the way for the guardsmen in the barracks,” Link offered. It had occurred to him much earlier that he had a quicker means to fix this issue, but he wasn’t presumptuous enough to think he could handle the situation better than the assigned leaders of these people. The Zoras had already been left with great doubts in regards to Hylians, thanks to the spectacular failure of the Kingdom of Hyrule a hundred years prior to now; that and Link never believed himself to be some great Hero, so he wasn’t going to start pretending now. He would, instead, nonchalantly offer whatever aid he could and allow the Zoras to accept it, or not. “I have bombs that should be strong enough to break up the debris with ea-”

“Moblins!” came the panicked screams of the single sentry in charge of the main entryway to the city. He was a young recruit, inexperienced and overwhelmed, and it was written all over him as he came pattering up to where the Captain and the Champion stood. “There’s an entire pack of moblins marching up the Great Zora Bridge as we speak! They’re headed straight for the city!”

Bazz straightened, stretching his height for any extra sight it could offer him while he turned in the direction of the bridge. Just as indicated, he could see the blobby image of multiple moblins rushing toward the entryway in the distance. “Where in the Demon King’s name did they come from?” he hissed. “And where have they been hiding all this time?”

For all the effort the Zoras had put into clearing out all the monsters between their domain and rest of Lanayru, these creatures must have been holed up somewhere out of sight—probably in one of those twisted caverns concealed by dense forest, if Link had to wager a guess. “They must have gotten startled by the quake and ran aimlessly toward the city.”

“There’s no time to gather forces,” the Guard Captain hissed. “...and there’s no forces to gather.”

“Don’t worry,” the Champion intoned a little too brusquely for Bazz’s comfort. Link took a stride toward the anxious sentry, who was awaiting orders in growing fear and the much shorter Hylian easily lifted the spear from the Zora’s hands, tossing it, instead, to Bazz, who was unarmored and unarmed. “We can handle them.”

Link probably should have taken the spear for himself, as he was only otherwise armed with the gift from his Prince, but he supposed it was due time to get some use out of it. Besides, it seemed fitting to christen the weapon with the blood of enemies that had come to threaten Zora’s Domain.

And maybe, just maybe, love hadn’t disarmed the Champion so much as he’d first assumed. Suddenly he’d begun to feel that old, sulphuric fury pulsing through his veins again, begging to be unleashed in a bout of merciless, brutal combat. He greeted it gladly, fondly and with great relief, sure that it had been much too long since he last let his beast out to play.

He probably didn’t even need Bazz’s assistance, but he welcomed him along as a favor to the Zora, himself. The Guard Captain looked like a man who needed a chance to unwind also, and Link wasn’t so greedy that he couldn’t share.

Maybe people took safety for granted in a home as well-guarded as Zora’s Domain. Perhaps their people had simply shrugged off the idea of the Calamity returning; it seemed almost sure, with the way they went about their lives, not fretting, not preparing. Like most other groups of people that existed alongside the fallen Kingdom of Hyrule, the Zoras likely assumed that calamities might have
well been a mess for Hylians to clean up.

But was it really so wrong to assume safety in one’s own home? Was it so wrong to surrender one’s defenses? Well, if this particular morning was to teach Brivere anything at all, it was that the best circumstances could be hoped for, and the worst should always be expected.

He hadn’t even thought of himself as someone who’d ever let his guard down, but oh, how wrong he’d been. He hadn’t been properly awake when he felt the tremors begin to wrack Zora’s Domain and he wasn’t properly on his feet before a thundering crash came down to rend his world apart, sweeping away his awareness with it.

There was little way to know how long he’d been knocked unconscious, but it was the very first consideration that whispered in his stirring mind, frantic, fretting, pushing him to get back to his feet; how long was I out? What happened? A clawing ache in his chest forced a bout of coughing free from him, his lungs lined with dust and though he opened his eyes, there was little to see but darkness beneath the rubble.

His flesh was bruised, his scales scuffed, every inch of him captured under the weight of what he could only assume was their collapsed ceiling and he struggled against it, reaching, pushing, kicking and wriggling for any leverage he could cling to, until he burst forth from the debris, gasping for clean air with little reward.

Thin streams of water trickled in from the wreckage, the dome shape which normally enclosed their tiny dwelling now mostly absent. Everything Brivere and Estuu had owned was scattered and lost to the destruction, but personal property aside, Estuu was also missing. The golden Zora’s eyes flicked wildly about the scene, his head whipping here, then there, unable to catch even a glimpse of the boy’s rosy scales.

“Estuu?” Brivere nervously called, his voice rough yet somehow maintaining the oddest sound of calm through little else other than habit and pure muscle memory, because in this moment, he was the absolute opposite of that. He pulled himself clear of the wreckage, his chest still tightening, trying to force out the dirt he’d breathed. His body was marred by numerous scrapes and gashes, tiny cuts so far as he was concerned, and he took only one or two nervous steps across the pile of rubble, afraid that at any moment, he could be, in fact, treading upon his injured sibling.

“Estuu, I realize that you can’t speak, but you have to make some kind of sound for me to find you,” he called out insistently, something unrecognizable in his tone. Was it anger? Fear? Desperation? Was this how those things sounded?

He tried to recall where his brother was when their evening waned into time for sleep; their cistern was drained and not viable, so Brivere settled in his previously made nest of cushions, while Estuu.. He had lulled into peaceful slumber upon his window seat, where he often perched to read and sunbathe.

The golden Zora allowed himself to take just a few more light, anxious footsteps, inching toward the wreckage of what was once their window, their bookshelf; it was all gone and all he had was directional instinct to guess at. “Estuu?” he called again, screaming into the silence, then going silent and breathless, straining to listen for any response.

Brivere’s entire body went tense when he at last thought he heard the tiniest squeak from beneath the rubble; the sound was weak and hardly audible. It would have been easy to assume that it was just the overly hopeful trickery of his imagination, or an invading hot-footed frog that had made its way inside to happily play in the water, but he was much too tied up in his pursuit to write a single thing off.
He wasn’t even entirely sure where he heard the sound from, if he heard it at all, but within seconds he merely decided that his best guess at the direction it came from would have to do, and he started to dig at the pile of shattered stone and rubble with vigor that overflowed thanks to the terror and panic that was only continuing to grow.

“Estuu!” Brivere yelled again, his voice tight in his throat, shaking and bordering tearful. His hands flailed in the mess, furiously digging in a way that reminded him of something he’d seen once, when he was younger. He could recall, back when maraudo wolves still frequented the forests around Zora’s Domain, before they’d been driven out by the dominant carnivores of the area, he’d encountered a small pack.

Their numbers were too few to hunt the plentiful but much larger prey, so they cornered a grassland fox in it’s burrow, all three wolves furiously digging at the entrance, hoping to squeeze inside and drag the much smaller fox to a gruesome death. Normally, Brivere might have left nature to take its course, but at the time, he couldn’t help but find the fearful fox a kindred spirit. The Zora fired a single arrow to frighten the wolves, not wanting to slay them for his silly whims, but it was enough to chase them away, as they tended to nervously flee at the first sign of trouble.

After, Brivere warily peeked inside the burrow to find the fox tightly curled in the back, its tiny, bleeding paws still clawing at the soil for its life, its red fur muddied and brown with freshly shifted soil. He waited, that day, just to be sure that the wolves didn’t immediately come back, wanting to give the desperate fox whatever extra chance it needed to be safe, to survive.

As his fingerscales pulled free from the quicks of his fingers and his flesh was scratched up with his effort, his hands were left painful and bleeding, yet he did not slow his pace; he could not. “Come on, you have to keep making noise,” he pleaded, having not heard one more little squeak to even verify that he was digging his way toward anyone at all. “Please, Estuu.”

Brivere continued to cough, further stirring up the dust while he dug, and he perspired from the effort while slinging huge stones over his shoulder with one violent clatter after another, until at last, he was granted a tiny sign of success. A response came from underneath the mess, the smallest movement shifting the debris just before an equally small hand shot out from the pile. The elder Zora dug with increased tenacity, if such was even possible, then finally Estuu’s head bobbed up from beneath the wreckage, his mouth gaping wide and desperate for air that wasn’t ridden with dirt.

“I’m here, Estuu. It’s going to be alright,” the golden Zora blathered in his immediate relief, sure that he might have wept in gratitude, if not for the fact that his eyes had long been watering from the thick cloud he’d stirred up. He suffered one moment of hopeful thoughtlessness while he further excavated the area around his buried sibling, eventually taking hold of the boy’s freed arm so to make an attempt to pull him free.

Estuu immediately let out a screech at the contact, which startled the elder, but didn’t stop him, as it was fairly normal for the boy to react to touch in such a way. It didn’t take long, however, for Brivere to discern that Estuu’s cries were not the same, and instead from pain much more intense than his brother’s typical aversion to contact; something was wrong.

When the golden Zora’s grip loosened, the younger boy yanked his arm free, then he laid still, still whining and humming to himself from further pain that Brivere could not find the source of. All the elder could think to do was continue digging, hoping to free his brother’s body from the rubble of the collapsed ceiling.

“Try to stay calm,” Brivere uttered, his voice stretching to the very limits of his own ability to remain poised, yet he tried his best to maintain it. If he could not calm himself, if he could not hold onto his usual reserve, how could he expect Estuu to do the same or even believe him? “I’m going to get you
out, I promise, I swear."

Estuu fought to regain some kind of composure at Brivere’s prompting and reassurances, waiting in silence as requested, his tail flapping, his sharp teeth chewing at his lip while he resisted another coughing spell, every little movement just worsening his apparent pain.

Once Brivere had successfully burrowed deeper into the pile of debris, his bleeding hands finally struck something much more solid and he attempted to dig around it, finding it to be a heavy piece of stone, no, a large, solid pillar. He easily recognized it; it was one from a line of numerous pillars that held up the archways and walkways surrounding the entire collection of elevated residences, which belonged to the noble class. It must have toppled during the quake, and fallen directly onto their roof, causing the cave in. The structure had landed just short of where Estuu had been, so he barely avoided being crushed entirely; that might have seemed lucky, if not for the fact that it was still close enough that the boy’s arm had been captured underneath.

Brivere pushed at the pillar, hoping that he could roll it enough to give his brother room to pull free, but Estuu only cried out as the stone structure was jostled, beating his free hand against the ground and clawing at the rubble that lay before him.

“Tucked aside, near the entryway of their home and just out of the destruction’s wake, was Brivere’s Silver Longsword. The blade almost appeared to shine in acknowledgment as he considered it, all while the crushing weight upon Estuu’s arm began to visibly puddle with blood. The young Zora had quieted and stilled in a way that heightened Brivere’s fearful fretting that much more, allowing it to evolve into an aching terror in his chest.

He couldn’t let this happen. He couldn’t.

Brivere straightened, hurrying over to where his sword was placed aside and he took it in hand. The grip of the handle was a familiar feeling in his palms, softened from years of use and still furrowed from where the golden Zora’s mother had once wielded the very same weapon, fighting during the Calamity.

The sword was of great sentimental value and irreplaceable.

..but it wasn’t as irreplaceable as Estuu.

“Stay with me, little brother,” Brivere commanded, his voice loud enough to get the weakening boy’s attention. He spoke in that familiar, almost parental sound, a habit from years and years of raising his younger sibling, yet now he only hoped that it served to coax some obedience out of the other Zora.

Estuu flapped his tail softly in response, to let Brivere know that he was still listening, despite his waning awareness, and satisfied with that little reassurance, Brivere went to work once more in his
attempts to set his brother free. The golden Zora flicked one long forefin over his shoulder before he jammed the end of his sword underneath the pillar, and bent into a crouch, preparing to try and lift the destroyed structure with whatever leverage his sword offered.

A trickle of water from the shattered ceiling poured down over the golden Zora, pattering and beading against his back and shoulders where he sat, lowered near the ground, his hands tight around the handle of his sword while he hoped and prayed that this plan worked. The water rippled across him, dripping down his face and neck, causing the sword to slip in his grasp, only for him to tighten his webbed fingers before he began to lift, straining to raise the hideous weight, his chest rapidly expanding and contracting as every muscle tightened, pushing and pulling, pleading and desperate.

The pillar began to budge, raising upward inch by awful inch, yet as it did the steel of the blade also began to give way, bending under the strain and threatening to snap almost as quickly as the golden Zora’s strength started to drain from his struggling frame.

“Estuu,” he uttered, his voice tight and gruff with effort. “Try to pull free now.”

The tiny boy’s scales had already turned from their usual rosy orange to a more peachy pale hue from the loss of blood, and only that much more trickled forth and flowed away like murky ribbons into the filthy water puddling the floor when the pillar was lifted even just a bit. Nevertheless, he gave a weak attempt to tug his badly injured arm free; he couldn’t even feel enough to distinguish between his hand, his fingers, his forearm, or his fins. It was all a garble of pain that worsened with the tiniest of movements.

As the young Zora tugged and kicked, his voice raised once again in a screech of pain, the cry itself stealing all the strength he had left, leaving him to fall still with a pained and exhausted shudder; he couldn’t do it.

The steel of the blade let out a soft, metallic groan while it continued to bend, serving to further the elder Zora’s desperation. The power held in his shoulders had been developed from slinging around this very sword, and it grew tenfold under the threat to his sibling’s survival. His arms drew the handle of the blade tighter to his chest, the strength of his core aligning and pushing further upward, trying to give the younger boy any extra space, any extra hope of escape.

“Yes,” Brivere gasped. “Estuu.”

Yet no matter how the Knight plead, the boy was too weak and overstimulated from the struggle he’d already given, his mind drifting toward shutdown as quickly as his body plummeted toward unconsciousness. Again, a groan came from the blade and it creaked, cracking while the golden Zora’s body trembled just to keep it up. In a final move of desperation, Brivere ducked his own body into the space he’d created, using all he had left- the solid surface his flesh could provide to keep the pillar from falling once more.

The weight beared down against the golden Zora and he let out a sharp hiss of pain, ignoring it as much as he could, sure that it was hardly a fraction of what his brother was feeling. He reached for Estuu’s hand, grabbing at the boy and pulling, ripping another awful scream free from Estuu’s lungs when he jarred the injured boy and yanked at his grievously shattered arm with what seemed like little concern for his immediate suffering.

“I’m sorry,” Brivere apologized, wincing at the weight threatening to crush him beneath it next. He could feel his brother’s small frame finally budging, and that little bit of hope allowed him to excuse the cruelty of it as he pulled harder, so forcefully that Estuu lost the ability to scream any further, his chest tightening and breathless, his mouth open and gasping, yet he was unable to inhale. “I know this hurts, but.. You have to endure it, to survive.”
With one final tug, Estuu at last slid free; it was without another second to spare, as the weight of the pillar finally snapped the blade holding it up, likely all because Estuu’s arm was no longer there, providing a cushion. When the weapon broke, the force being unexpectedly removed from the golden Zora’s shoulders sent him toppling aside with a sudden, violent crash. The pillar slammed back down from the almost foot of height which it had been lifted to, even that enough to shake the entire residence.

Brivere crawled to his knees, an aching pain flaring in one shoulder, but it was utterly irrelevant while he bundled his weakened brother in his arms, his eyes taking stock of the damage with panic that was much too thick for him to swallow. Estuu was squirming in suffering that was quickly threatening to overwhelm him. The arm which had been trapped now dangling and limp, the skin crinkling like pinched fabric, while the flesh exposed from beneath was pulverized like some kind of ripened fruit, weeping blood as steadily as the water pouring into the destroyed ceiling.

“Estuu, stay with me. Listen carefully,” Brivere uttered, his voice stern and demanding, but tremulous, his strict tone a veneer to hide his fear, his utter denial. “You have to heal this.”

Cradling the boy in one arm, Brivere reached for his brother’s uninjured hand and he moved it to be placed against the grievous wound. “I know you can do it,” he persisted, hoping his voice gave Estuu something to latch onto, to believe in. “You’ve mended your own broken limbs before and you can do it now.”

There was a fading light, still hanging on in the golden depths of the young Zora’s eyes and Brivere focused there, feeling that this was perhaps the very first time he’d seen his brother’s eyes at all. Estuu didn’t appear to see or notice his sibling’s gaze, but he heard his instruction. The boy’s breathing was quick and shallow, but there was still a tiny shred of fight lingering in him. The fingers of his hand flexed while he attempted to push even the faintest shine of his healing ability out, to save himself...yet nothing came.

It hurt too much for him to focus and whatever strength he’d clung to all this time began to wane against his consent, leaving him weak, leaving him empty, leaving him. The last of the light in his eyes burned out, like golden embers going black as he fell utterly still in his brother’s arms.

There was a distinctive mixture of scents in the air; dust and dirt from the quake’s destruction, water sodden earth, and most prominently, the blood and deathly stink of slain moblins.

The once vibrant, pristine blue of the Great Zora Bridge had been painted in a nasty, new shade of murky red and scattered with heaping piles of corpses which were tattered, torn, and eviscerated in various creative ways. Bazz and Link had fallen into a pattern that almost grew comfortable while combating the lumbering beasts which just kept coming.

The Hylian darted about, drawing the attention of the monsters and dodging their strikes with nimble ease, allowing Bazz to make the majority of the killing blows. Sure, he sliced the backs of several ankles and calves, and he even managed to slip his dirk deftly between the ribs of a few particularly inattentive enemies, but he was getting a serious case of envy regarding the Guard Captain’s technique with that Silverscale Spear.

Bazz’s strikes were so beautiful and precise; they did not shake, they did not wobble, they always went exactly where he intended for them to go, and they did so powerfully, despite being utterly controlled. Link had initially thought that the crescent spear head design was less pleasing, until he witnessed Bazz’s artful use of it. He supposed he shouldn’t have judged any Zora weapon, without seeing it in use in the hands of a Zora warrior and Link found himself pausing in awe as the black
Zora removed a moblin’s entire head with a single, well-placed jab to its neck; it was literally a brilliant execution.

Yet now, when the duo had already put to death a veritable tribe of the creatures and they were stooped, bent, panting for breath, a trio of black moblins newly appeared at the end of the bridge, coming to take advantage of their enemies’ exhaustion. They must have been the leaders of the hoard- the strongest, most clever, and opportunistic of them all. They certainly proved themselves on the opportunistic front, anyway.

“You good?” Link huffed, climbing from his knees and back to his feet, his blood-stained blade held at the ready. He turned his head ever so slightly to one side, glancing between the approaching beasts and the Zora at his back.

“Uhgg,” the Zora groaned, clutching at one side of his chest. He’d taken a strike with a club to his sensitive gills which had also succeeded in knocking the air out of him as well. It didn’t appear to be a debilitating injury outside of the water, but it had certainly slowed him down. Upon seeing the moblins rushing toward them, he, too, dragged himself back to his feet, wiping one bloodied palm against his knee before he straightened and shifted into a fighting stance. “I just wish I’d been wearing my armor.”

“You should go,” the Hylian Champion suggested, his voice nonchalant over the entire matter; after all, he couldn’t die. Maybe it was reckless, but sometimes that knowledge offered some mysterious increase in skill; if he had to consider somebody else’s life, however, it wasn’t quite as effective. “I can handle the rest.”

“You must think I’m a real pushover, Master Link,” Bazz chuckled, though the sound was rough in his throat. “I’m not going to abandon you.”

The bridge itself trembled as the moblins closed in and Link found himself wondering if the quake was soon to recur, or if the bridge was cracked or damaged, sinking beneath their feet, because suddenly the ground felt to be shaking much, much more intensely than even three moblins should have been able to produce. Then, suddenly, a deep, booming voice called out to them, the sound vibrating thin air with its powerful intensity.

“Stand aside!”

The Guard Captain and the Champion glanced back to see a small band of knights and the First Knight from before, all led by King Dorephan, himself. He wasn’t so elaborately adorned as he so often was when he sat upon the throne, and he carried with him a weapon of purest magnificence; a trident crafted to match his colossal size.

As ordered, Bazz stepped back to allow his King to pass, lowering the butt of his spear to the surface beneath him before he lowered himself as well, down to one knee in respect, one hand pressed to his chest. The expression on his face was a mixture of shock and amazement, and maybe even moderate concern; Link didn’t fail to catch that little detail as he, too, backed off to let the massive Zora pass him.

“Shall I handle them for you, your Majesty?” asked First Knight Nautille, his voice a calm, even sound while his own weapon lit with magical, blue flame and twirled in his hands, dancing around him with softly flowing embers. Sure, the fire was impressive, but Link got a bit caught up examining the man’s weapon as he walked by; it appeared to be a Sheikah Naginata, a rare, old weapon which was scarcely produced any longer.

“Nonsense,” Dorephan growled in response, striding toward the opposition like he was craving this
chance to make his enemies suffer his own displeasure and his people’s pain.

The moblins visibly puffed at this suddenly insurmountable opposition, their ears folding back, their long, dripping maws curling to expose their tusks. Despite the intimidation, instead of fleeing as they should have, they spread apart in a move to surround the much more sizable Zora and the King took on a fighting stance as naturally as any other seasoned warrior. The First Knight lingered nearby, but kept enough distance to allow the fight to play out.

The bravest of the group took the first swing at the Zora King, which he parried with a powerful blow of his own, the strike of his trident splintering the moblin’s weapon with a single hit. The King’s trident flicked to one side, his left hand coming free from the shaft as he lunged to grab the disarmed beast by its neck, then he raised it high, baring his teeth at the dangling creature for a threatening, carnal instant. The massive Zora’s fingers tightened, squeezing the flailing creature so that it gurgled in his grasp until its neckbones audibly snapped and it fell deathly still in the King’s fist hand.

The moblin from behind Dorephan lunged to attack, maybe to save its fellow, or avenge it, but either way, the moment its foot made the first patter of movement, a simple swing of the King’s powerful tail sent the beast aloft and toppling from the bridge. He then mercilessly swung the body of the slain moblin in his grasp as though as it were a weapon, into the one which remained.

The unsuspecting creature was slammed to the ground and disoriented by the force of the impact and before it could recover, the Zora raised the limp enemy’s body again and again, beating the floored beast with the corpse of its fellow.

When there was little question left that both beasts were thoroughly deceased, Dorephan tossed the weaponized body clear of the bridge, letting out an aggressive puff, then he dusted off his hands, turning back to his Knight and saying, “Riff raff.”

“Zo ra ra ra!” cheered the group of Knights who had paid witness to the mesmerizing spectacle that was their King in action, but as he turned and made his way back toward the city, he raised one hand to quiet them.

“I’m afraid today isn’t the day for merriment, even in our victories,” the King stated, his voice a solemn sound. He bypassed the group of Knights, but paused before the quietly watching Hylian, his height an even more impossible thing to comprehend now that he was standing.

“How are you faring, Champion? Guard Captain?” Dorephan asked, genuinely concerned for their well-being.

“That was probably the single most magnificent, yet terrifying thing I have ever witnessed,” Link spoke up without thought, the words rolling off his tongue with unusual freedom. He caught sight of Bazz’s head snapping to one side in order to cast a surprised and baffled look down upon him, then his eyes scrunched shut and he offered some other string of words, in hopeful recovery. “I mean, thank you for coming to our rescue.”

“Thank you for defending the city until I arrived here. We are ever in your debt, as always.” The giant Zora spoke his gratitude in a dignified fashion, his eyes downcast to peer at the Hylian below, or perhaps in the melancholy mood overwhelming him while his people were devastated again and again. “...but I fear there is still much work to be done.”

“I’m here to help,” Link attempted to reassure. In a way, it was suddenly easy for him to see the gloom written all over the King, despite how well he concealed it with the mask of strength and perseverance he wore; it was the same reaction so often visible on Sidon’s own features.
Link wasn’t sure that he was any kind of hero, but at least before the Zora people, he was a Champion; he would play the role they believed was his for now, because he truly cared to do so.

“Bazz,” he said, shifting his upturned gaze back to the Guard Captain. He wanted to keep moving, to do all he could. “Should we check on the progress at the barracks now that the threat of monster invasion is over?”

“That’s precisely what I was thinking, Master Link,” the black Zora stated, his voice serious, but his stance newly strengthened with determination. “Follow me.”

The Zora people were dutiful, moving about with such purpose in this trying time. As Link understood, both the Basilica and the barracks had been cleared. The bombs from his Sheikah Slate had been as helpful as he’d expected, even if in the end, they caused a bit more damage to the structures which would need to be repaired. Still, the guardsmen were freed from their predicament and that was more immediately important.

Link hadn’t stopped there; he’d joined rescue teams all about the Uppercity, excavating wreckage, searching for victims, sometimes even helping to carry injured Zoras to the communal rest area, which quickly turned into a massive Uppercity infirmary. He persisted, as did all of the Zora people, as well as his Zora lover.

He hadn’t seen Sidon since earlier that morning, but as the day went on, Bazz began to recognize the look of concern on the Hylian’s face. Any time Link turned distant, or his attention became difficult to hold, the Guard Captain prodded him, eventually discerning that it was worry gnawing at the Champion.

“You must be very close to Prince Sidon, Master Link,” the black Zora had commented, no judgement in his tone, instead merely observation. “He and I were working together on the evening of the Blood Moon and he rushed off to aid you, as well.”

Bazz said little else, giving nothing of his opinions away, if he had opinions, which he surely must have; Link wasn’t sure whether or not he was glad that the Guard Captain kept from being transparent on the issue, but he was satisfied enough that Bazz offered some tiny piece of consolation.

“I should get a better idea of how things are progressing, down below,” the black Zora had said at the time. “I’ll send one of my guardsmen to locate the Prince, for updates. I’ll be sure to ask them to reassure Prince Sidon that you’re safe, also.”

It turned out that Sidon had gone straight from efforts to clear the blocked path to the Basilica, to leading Undercity rescue efforts. The damage to Uppercity residences was bad enough, and those belonged to aristocracy; Link could only imagine that it was a hundred times worse for people who weren’t viewed as being more important than everyone else. He was doing his best just to get a good mental image of what the Undercity even looked like. Were there any structures as in the Uppercity, or was it just.. caves?

Link took a deep breath, trying to still his mind while he gave his exhausted body a much needed break, sitting idly near the tiny statue of Hylia, before the palace. He’d tucked himself out of the way to rest now that the majority of the Uppercity rescue efforts were complete and forces had shifted to the Undercity, where aid was still gravely needed. There was little else he could do to assist without the ability to breathe underwater, anyway.
He hadn’t exactly eaten, and he suspected that this state of hunger was relatively common across the city, so he wouldn’t complain. There had been at least one or two members of the city guard who went about distributing safe drinking water collected from downstream, and that much was relieving, but it didn’t do much to replace the massive amount of energy that everyone had expended in bouncing back from this disaster.

It might have been safe for Link to consume the otherwise tainted fish that was now off-limits to everyone else in Zora’s Domain, because he had a very strong suspicion that he couldn’t be infected by the awful Water Blight which had killed so many others. Even so, he figured it was equally true that he couldn’t stay dead from starvation and even considering starvation after only a single day without food was a bit overly dramatic anyway. Regardless of his immunity, it would be cruel and unfair for him to chow down on fish while everyone around him was hungry, so he would just endure the emptiness, for now.

Decidedly facing the statue of Hylia, Link folded his legs before the tiny pool, his arms dangling overtop of his knees. His hands were battered and dirty, his arms and shoulders aching from all the work he’d done, and yes, it did ultimately confirm that he hadn’t climbed nearly enough mountains as of late, for him to feel so tired. There was a tremor that couldn’t be quieted, moving through every inch of him and he didn’t know if that was the fatigue or the fear.

“I don’t know if this means that the Calamity’s escape is growing closer, or if it was just the feeling of the beast flailing against its restraints,” Link thoughtlessly mumbled, his voice so utterly hollow, it was terrifying. He recognized that sound. It was all too familiar, and even knowing that he was still capable of producing it made it crystal clear just how easy it would be for him to regress. If something happened to the Prince, he would go right back to where he was, no, he would sink so much further than that.

The dull, starless blue of the Hylian’s gaze stared upon the ever-unchanging countenance of the Goddess, the stone form of her face most likely meaning to be serene and benevolent, yet Link felt that, as he focused, there was something else to be found. Something about her empty eyes, the withered crease that was once a softly smiling mouth, now eroded to the point that she appeared to have no mouth at all- there was something ominous there, Link knew it. She was a quiet presence with the ghost of a clever smile, marveling in her own magnificence, content in her rise to absolute power- something for mere mortals to not just acknowledge, but worship. And this was all while her eyes refused to regard you, her mouth uttered no guidance at all, and the upturned palms before her were not outstretched in offering, but waiting in expectation.

“I don’t know,” Link began again, his tired hands moving in idle expression. “I can guess that the Calamity is most likely to blame, but sometimes I have to ask..what if it’s actually you? How would I know, right? Sure, the Calamity is bad and evil, I suppose. Maybe that’s all just assumption, but with everything that’s happened, now and a hundred years ago, it should be really easy to say that the Calamity was responsible for all this suffering and therefor, it’s evil and should be destroyed.”

The Hylian shrugged, his frame so spent that it really did feel like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He allowed himself to ramble, letting his thoughts come out unfiltered, in their raw, ugly, natural form. “..but honestly, what proof do I have that this was all the fault of some Calamity? What proof do I have that it wasn’t you all along? Of the memories I’ve recalled, it isn’t like you ever made an attempt to reassure anyone otherwise. You ignored the Princess when she was desperate and I personally think that it should have been easy for a deity to do something as minimal as making an effort to answer your own servant, your incarnation, whatever. But you didn’t and because of that, people died. The Kingdom of Hyrule fell.”

“Well, maybe there’s some reason why you can’t, and I’m just expecting too much, here. Or maybe
you’re just like me, and can’t be bothered to help people who won’t help themselves. Again, I don’t know.” Sighing, Link’s head drooped low so that his forehead bumped his knees. He was probably looking for someone else on which to place the blame, as a means to comfort himself. While attempting to steady his thoughts in the hopes of producing anything relatively likened to a sensible idea, he spoke up once more.

“My real point here is.. What reason do I have to blindly act in your service- past or present? What reason have you given me or anyone to truly believe that you’re the good, benevolent Goddess people seem to think you are? If the Calamity happened ten-thousand years ago and now it’s happening again, well, evidently ‘defeating’ it isn’t actually a real solution and obviously there is just more to all this than sealing it away and hoping for the best, right?” Dragging his head upright, the troubled Hylian peered across at the silent, expressionless statue, almost as though he expected something in return. If the damn Goddess actually offered any response at all, it wouldn’t even be the notion of hearing voices from inanimate objects that surprised him, but the very fact that the absent deity decided to make one single, fucking effort.

“So I’m just thinking out loud here,” he said after a slight pause, “..what if the Calamity isn’t the problem? How do I know that you aren’t truly behind all of this destruction and suffering? How do I know that you’re not trying to punish me, or push me until I do what you want? The Calamity isn’t here and it’s not free, so it feels almost pointless to try and blame what happened on it.”

Narrowing his eyes in suspicion, Link unfolded his legs so that his feet dropped into the water of the pool before the statue and he leaned in closer. “Will you ever let me be happy?” he hissed, his pointed ears folding backward. “..or will you just go on hurting the people I care about, until I fulfil your plans for me?”

“Master Link..?” came the sound of a very tired voice to interrupt Link’s very unusual interrogation of a fucking rock. The Hylian jumped back almost immediately, somewhat startled, but even more embarrassed and he turned a wide-eyed look to the Zora who had snuck up on him, probably looking like a child caught trying to sneak sweets.

It was, of course, the Guard Captain, and despite being exhausted to a degree that could rival the Hylian Champion, he offered a small smile of amusement at having caught Link doing.. something. “Service to the Goddess is stressful as ever, I see,” he said with a tiny chuckle before closing what distance remained between them.

It was normal for Link to respond with silence, so when he did exactly that, it totally wasn’t because he was pouting over being caught behaving strangely, then verbally roasted for it. No sir. While the suddenly less chatty Hylian faced forward and stared into space, the black Zora took a seat next to him, trying very hard to regain his attention because Bazz did have an actual purpose for showing up, other than verbally roasting the Hylian.

“I’m sure that Prince Sidon normally makes sure that you don’t neglect your own needs, but since he’s busy, I thought I would make that effort, in his stead,” Bazz explained, holding an edible peace offering out to Link like he was a timid, little animal that wouldn’t come around otherwise. “Service to the Goddess is stressful as ever, I see,” he said with a tiny chuckle before closing what distance remained between them.

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Link was hesitant to accept, his reach slow and questioning, but nevertheless he took the plate of food into hand and began examining it. He was definitely hungry, so while it was impossible to say no, there was a small pang of guilt somewhere inside, insisting that he refuse.

“It’s egg and rice,” the Zora reassured, sounding like he’d expected a more overjoyed reaction. No- it was something else, and Link’s ears twitched in curiosity at the sound of Bazz’s voice when he spoke up again. “..it should be palatable for a Hylian such as yourself.”
The Guard Captain’s attention drifted to his own serving of food, which the Hylian didn’t fail to notice was drastically different in preparation; while Link had a soft bed of rice crested by a steamed egg that was thoroughly cooked, Bazz’s egg looked almost entirely raw and he started to mix it into the steaming rice, until it turned yellow and frothy like some kind of custard.

“Seeing you around so often had me craving it, actually,” Bazz uttered with a half-hearted titter that somehow managed to sound more sad than happy. Link poked at his own egg, deciding it was best to eat it while it was hot, and he, too, stirred it into the rice. His hands moved almost unconsciously, his stomach grumbling at the sight and smell of food as he easily resigned himself to accepting the offer. After he’d taken the first few, desperate bites, he finally looked up at the Zora eating right next to him, a certain questioning on his features that Bazz’s sharp gaze saw with ease.

“Oh,” he mumbled, swallowing his first bite before he continued, “you actually taught me how to make this dish, a long time ago. And indirectly, several others who picked it up from me in the barracks. Most Zoras don’t really eat these sorts of things, outside of necessity, but since I used to eat it all the time with you, I get a craving every now and again, usually when I’ve been thinking of you.”

“But..” At last, Link spoke up to address the Zora in his company. “..I can remember eating something just like this, back at the fort.”

“Yeah.” Again, Bazz almost laughed over it, the sound of his voice a bit tired and weak. To him, it was indeed pretty amusing. People in the city guard swapped information all the time and over the last hundred years, he’d exposed several others to the recipe he learned from the Hylian Champion so long ago. Then, upon the Champion’s bizarre return, a century later, he’d been served a dish which he was personally responsible for Zoras knowing about. “It was your own handiwork, and you didn’t even know it. Funny how that worked out.”

“I had been assuming that it was a Zora recipe,” he stated, absolutely dumbfounded, then he laughed, too. “I even tried to reproduce it later and gave up because I figured there was no way I could match something perfected by your people.”

While he listened, Bazz began to shake with soft laughter, baring his shining fangs in a smile while he giggled over what he was hearing. Egg and rice? Zora cuisine? Sidon really must have been sheltering his Hylian companion from true Zora food culture, though if Bazz remembered correctly, Mipha always did the same thing. Though, given what he’d heard of the Prince’s speech during the Champion Festival, and how the Raindrop Cakes had been inspired by some Hylian sweet, which Lady Mipha had apparently enjoyed, maybe she just didn’t enjoy the food of her own people.

“If they served this to Prince Sidon, I’ll bet he turned it down,” the Guard Captain commented, only to receive a quick nod of the Hylian’s head in response, which drew another chuckle out of him. “We do have our own recipes that make use of rice and eggs, sure, but rice is more of a filler than anything, since we don’t get much real nutrition out of it. For now, it’s comforting enough, being able to fill the emptiness with something. It’s good for you, though, so I don’t mind sharing.”

Link cleared his throat, almost choking and not just because he’d entered food inhalation mode. “Sharing?”

“Ah, yes,” Bazz paused, taking another bite and chewing it unusually slow for someone with very sharp teeth. Maybe Link was just impatient. “..the supplies used to make the food were from my own personal rations.”

“Wha- Bazz-” the Hylian hissed, sure that he felt the guilt from before growing tenfold and punching him directly in the gut; either that or he’d eaten much too fast and his previously very empty stomach
“No, please, don’t think anything of it, Master Link,” the black Zora cut in before Link had a chance to say anything further. He even put one hand up at the Hylian beside him, refusing to hear a single word of complaint, or remorse, or some sort of condemnation of his generosity; whatever the Champion was planning to say in rebuttal to his offering, it simply was unnecessary. “I said that I don’t mind. You may not be a Zora, but you’re here with us, doing equal work to restore peace and safety. You care for us like we’re your own, so we should treat you as one of ours, in turn. I believe so, anyway.”

“Thank you,” Link piped up quietly. It actually meant a lot to know that somebody approved of his presence, especially when it was somebody who surely knew about his relationship with the Prince. “Bazz, can I ask- what other sorts of things do you remember about me, from a hundred years ago? Do you think I’ve changed a lot or am I the same?”

“Hmm, I suppose that’s a bit difficult for me to say,” the black Zora observed aloud, pausing in thought as he chewed his food. “My opinions at the time were the naive kind you’d expect from a child. I liked you very much, so I only saw the best. I still do that, honestly. But, let me think about it for a moment-”

There was a comfortable silence that fell between them as Bazz reflected, considering his memories from so long ago while trying to make more adult conclusions about what he remembered. He would just skip over the part where he didn’t, in fact, like Link at first and called him ‘skinny’ until the very next summer when the Hylian returned, an entire foot taller than he had been before. Bazz hated that, because he’d been reveling in being the tallest boy in his age group; then the skinny twerp somehow shot up in size, leaving ‘Big Bad Bazz’ feeling incredibly sheepish. His outrage over that was even more laughable now, all things considered.

“I suppose you seemed a great deal less broody back then, though that’s an understandable change, with the things you’ve been through and the state our world is in,” he began, remembering his friend’s easy laughter and sunny smiles. “You were a lot more sociable, and though you could be reserved and quiet at times, it does seem like that trait has become more dominant.”

After another momentary pause of contemplation, Bazz continued, “Your intensity is much the same as it once was. You really put a lot of effort into proving yourself back then, though a lot of the time you also seemed like you didn’t care what people thought, either way. You were generally very forgiving, though. As soon as somebody made an effort to be more understanding, or less..uh, mouthy, you were immediately friendly.”

The Guard Captain chuckled a bit nervously over that last tidbit, then cleared his throat and moved past it. “You were also always very brave and even more reckless. Lady Mipha had to get you out of all kinds of trouble.. or get into trouble with you. I think, though, I mostly remember how easy happiness and joy came to you; really simple, little things gave you so much contentment back then. You only ever looked truly sad when you left, at the end of the summer. I um.. I eventually got to the point where I tried to convince you to stay. I would say that you’d like winter in Zora’s Domain, because unlike other Hylians, you didn’t mind getting wet. Mipha, on the other hand, never tried to make you stay. She would turn quiet and melancholy, the same as you, but she understood that your home life was important, too. It was hard for me to even conceive of you having a life outside of the one you had with us, because once I warmed up to you, I accepted you completely and totally. I believed you belonged with us.”

Through every word that Bazz spoke, Link found himself thinking, ‘That doesn’t sound like me at all,’ but he didn’t have the heart to say so. He was glad enough that somebody took the time to offer
their insight. So, instead, he tried to wear a smile on his face, hoping it matched the real, genuine gratitude he felt on the inside.

“Do you still feel that way?” Link asked.

In return, Bazz gasped softly, his mouth falling open in disbelief, then he said, “I haven’t made that clear yet?”

“Oh.” He hadn’t known. He hadn’t thought anybody truly cared and that the friendliness he did encounter in Zora’s Domain was all somewhat forced, an obligation they all shared thanks to the assistance he offered in dealing with Vah Ruta. After all, knowing somebody when they were a kid doesn’t automatically make you their friend. That held true, even with Hylians. “I hadn’t been sure, but I’m getting there.”

“Then I’m glad to have made it more clear,” Bazz joked, sounding a bit offended that the Hylian could have been so doubtful, but in jest. “I should get back to work, Master Link, but if you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to come to me, alright?”

Chapter End Notes

I know I always say this, but how was it? :D I'm really excited about Link and Bazz bonding a bit more in this chapter and I hope you all were too. Bazz is such a great character and in-game he's so kind and supportive to Link, so I have been really waiting for a chance to explore him a bit more.

Okay, so I need to really throw down the shout outs for this update. I have some people who have been so sweet and helpful for me this week, helping me keep my motivation up, because it had been seriously dwindling last week. Brokenheartedfestivities has been an utter champ, sending me art and songs and I super appreciate her presence.

Also, happy news, NanoWrimo is back on track! I'm amazed at myself for bringing that wordcount back from the dead, though again, I owe my supporters a lot for that! I'm proud to inform you all that my count is currently at: 41,300/50,000!
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

As always, the fallen Champion found himself revived by his Prince’s comfort. However, in the wake of all that was going wrong, even Sidon was hard pressed to offer softness to his stressed lover. The Zora Prince was more deeply engulfed in his own new dilemma: was it best for him to take his Spirit Potion, or could he be of better assistance to his ailing people with his awareness intact?

Chapter Notes

Surprise! Hey, who among you expected to get the new chapter a day early? I’m super excited and I hope you all are as well. I won’t say much until my A/N at the end of the chapter, but let me just issue a warning for some slightly icky descriptions. I suspect that those of you who have made it this far don’t have too much trouble with descriptive violence and body horror, but for those that do like time to prepare mentally, this is your warning.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The world had been swallowed into the void and was now solid black, so far as Link knew.

As much as his body had appreciated the food energy so generously granted by the Guard Captain, once his stomach was full, the remainder of his exhausted frame began to cry for rest. He wasn’t sure where he could go, because the Seabed Inn was beyond capacity with all the displaced Zoras and Sidon’s chamber had suffered enough damage that Link was unsure if it was safe.

So fuck it. He’d increased peoples’ opinions of him enough to justify sleeping right in the streets and he honestly wouldn’t doubt if there were other desperate Zoras doing the exact same. He’d laid over on his side, having not moved from his perch before the Goddess statue, though he certainly had no delusions in his mind that she would offer him any protection. It was a fair bit unsettling, actually, knowing that she was watching him in some kind of physical form, but he only planned to take a short nap, to stave off some of the fatigue.

“No, no, please Laflat, don’t try to beautify reality for my consumption.” The Hylian curled tighter in his sleep, his ears unconsciously flattening at the sound of voices. “Just read the reports.”

Actually, now that he was thinking about it, he maybe had a vague recollection of Bazz coming to him at some point and leading him elsewhere? Was that a dream or..? No, no, he definitely could recall the black Zora’s gently coaxing voice and soft hand resting upon his shoulder, giving him a careful shake to rouse him; Link then clambered to his feet and followed Bazz back to the barracks, and to a bed? He must have been as dead to the world as a stalfos, unaware, shambling, but somehow still functioning.
“I will tell you precisely what you want to know if you’d stop making it so very difficult, your Highness,” came a frustrated, feminine voice, pitching a bit higher in impatience; Link’s ears twitched all the more. Sidon’s voice was a deep hum, smooth and comforting, but this one only served to stir the Hylian ever closer to awareness.

“What do the casualties look like?” the Prince questioned with a sigh, doing his very best to maintain some semblance of calm through the mounting stress.

“You really wish to begin there?” Laflat asked warily.

“Laflat.”

“Yes, Highness.”

What bed had the Guard Captain so mercifully led the Hylian to? Though the entire process of reaching it had essentially been sleepwalking, Link still had his eyes open in order to visually perceive his surroundings. The relatively plain construction within the barracks, damaged as it was, was something he recalled with enough ease, given that he’d spent a large portion of his day there. But now he was getting these strange mental images of a bedroom that he’d never seen prior to apparently sleeping in it.

“Thirty people are confirmed to be dead,” the secretary uttered grimly, pausing to let the rather emotionally troubled Prince process the information before she continued. “Nearly a hundred have suffered injuries, though at the very least a large percentage of those are only minor. Also, there are several people who’ve been reported as still missing, mostly in the Undercity.”

“I see..” Sidon answered, his own tone turning soft and doleful, his previous edge filed away by these very heavy facts. The sound of his desk chair sliding against the stone tiles cried out in the silence that stood unchallenged between the two Zoras for a few tense moments. The chair creaked softly under Sidon’s weight, but there was something else- a bunch of oddly polite tapping- tap, tap, tap. It was subtle, but it was there and Link squirmed, blindly seeking whatever blankets were available to be tugged over his head.

“Did the Guard Captain report any further progress on other important matters?” inquired the Prince, almost hopeful that there was some good news to outweigh all of the bad. “The gathering parties? The search for the source of the Water Blight? The.. the refugee pilgrimage to Hateno Village?”

“I don’t think he’s had time yet, Highness,” Laflat responded, attempting to do so cautiously, despite also being utterly confounded that Sidon could even assume there had been any room for such progress. “I’ve only seen the drafts of his rosters for each task so far, and at the moment, all of the guardsmen he has assigned to these various tasks are still occupied with rescue and cleanup efforts, as well as the continued distribution of rations.”

“I thought rations were completely distributed?” the Prince blurted with a jolt of renewed energy in his outrage. The chair squeaked across the floor again when he shot out of it, then he set straight to pacing back and forth, his feet making rapid patters across the uneven floor. As if the concern over his people being injured, having their homes destroyed, and suffering from an incurable Water Blight wasn’t enough- finding out that they could be starving as well? It was too much.

The sound of Sidon’s feet making soft, steady raps as he walked served to remind Link of something else- after he spent some uncounted span of time quiet and undisturbed in the barracks, the Prince’s voice had caused him to stir back to near consciousness, much as it was doing now. He heard the Guard Captain exchanging a few quick words with the Prince, then Link must have been gathered up in his arms and carried elsewhere, because now he could remember hearing the patter of his gait,
all the way to where they were presently. Of course, where he was exactly was bound to be his next question, and it was one he would need to wake up in order to receive the answers to.

“We’ve distributed all the food there is, but there are a large number of people who haven’t received any at all,” Laflat was saying while the Hylian finally sat upright in the bed. “The people from the Undercity are still lining the halls of the Basilica. The guardsmen are needed to keep the peace, because it’s very tense, Highness. And with this disaster, I can’t see it getting calmer anytime soon.”

The Hylian blinked to regain his vision, peering about his surroundings in a manner most confused; he was back in Sidon’s quarters and it was just another morning like any other. The first rays of golden light were peeking over the mountains, just enough to fill the tower windows, but not enough that it shined across all of Zora’s Domain yet. The Prince was already up and about, but they were far from alone, as not only Laflat had come along to update Sidon on the situation below, but one of Dento’s young apprentices was diligently working on repairs.

“Uhh..” Link’s voice came free from his throat like the whisper of his soul trying to wring itself from his terribly sleepy body. His eyes were slowly tracing the lengthy crack that crawled along the floor, then up the wall nearest the bed, measuring the danger it presented as though it took some very complex thought processes to come to a proper conclusion. Then, nonchalant as anything, Link posed the obvious question. “Is it safe to be up here?”

His gaze moved from the fissure that effectively halved the room, to where the Zora Prince stood, newly turned to face him; Sidon’s worry-pinched features softened the moment he looked upon his lover, though not enough to completely remove the aching sadness which was most apparent.

“It is safe, my dearest one,” he answered softly, his voice weaker than Link had ever heard it. The Hylian wasn’t sure he knew what it meant to feel truly sad, but that sound alone brought him as close as it was possible to be to it. “The tower was thoroughly inspected and it seems that the damage was only superficial in nature.”

“Oh, that reminds me-” Laflat began again, patting her own forehead like even her thorough organizational skills had been thrown in chaos and she was only barely keeping everything in order, now. “Council Member Dento has put in a request for supplies for all of the repairs, but as you know, our stores of luminous stone are-”

“Yes, yes,” Sidon swatted his hand at the young woman, his teeth flashing in frustration that she was mercilessly prodding at, “..completely drained, I know.” The Prince heaved another sigh, each one sounding like it carried away another piece of his beautiful, happy spirit with it. “What of the new mines that were under construction?”

“Oh, Highness.” Hugging her documents to her chest, not even needing to look into them, Laflat hung her head low while her tail gave a soft, anxious flick. “I’m sorry to say, so far reports are that many of them have collapsed.”

“Damn it,” the Prince hissed, the rate of his pacing only increasing, his hands folding behind his back as it did.

Laflat’s shining, yellow eyes followed Sidon from one end of the room to the other, her lips setting into a pouting frown, then she outstretched one hand, attempting to mutter a simple suggestion. “Sir, maybe you should just try to res-”

“I can’t, Laflat.” Sidon snapped, throwing up his hands, his fingers hooked like grasping talons. His eyes squeezed shut and the pink skin beneath the point of his brow wrinkled, every inch of him holding more tension than a bow strung far too tightly. “..not with everything that is going on.”
“Then what about your potion, Highness?” The secretary gestured to the Prince’s desk and Link’s gaze immediately followed; indeed, the tiny vial still waited there, looking as though the quake hadn’t sent it elsewhere and shattered the delicate-looking glass into a thousand little shards.

“I’m going to have to postpone it,” Sidon answered, not even needing to think on this conclusion. He shook his head, his eyes distant as his hands bundled together and drew up near his chin, one finger extending toward his lips like he intended to nip at it in rebuke for his own perceived incompetency. “I simply can’t be out of commission with all that’s happening. More than ever, my efforts as a leader are going to be required.”

“If I may, my Lord,” a deep, steady voice spoke up, interrupting the exchange. At the sound, the Prince, the secretary and the Hylian Champion all turned in silence to face the source, and there stood the golden knight in the doorway of Sidon’s chamber. He had arrived in a manner so quiet, so stealthy, not one person present even realized he was there until he made his voice heard.

Link had seen him only days prior, and he’d been as he always was; overly calm and unconcerned, despite having that constantly pinched expression. Today, however, something was quite different, though the Hylian was certain that he didn’t possess the proper skill at reading into these sorts of subtleties to actually discern what it was or what it meant.

The yellow Zora normally held himself with tall, straight poise, the width of his shoulders an impenetrable fortress, his gaze cold and sharp, ever-searching, always thinking. But on this morning he stood at the threshold of his Prince’s quarters, not stepping one toeclaw over that boundary, his stance not quite as straight, and instead visibly cowed, while his eyes were downcast and distant.

The only part of the Knight which held some semblance of his former steeliness was the smooth sound of his voice, which continued without further prompting. “..between the King, his council, the Basilica, the two Knight Orders, and the City Guard, I believe there is leadership and hands to go around. I realize that it is your wish to always be at the forefront in every situation, but our people do possess the strength and fortitude to survive a mere week without you. Unless this is a matter of ego, which I know it isn’t, that fact should give you some peace.”

When Brivere quieted, his eyes drew upward by a few careful inches, like his insides itched to look upon the Prince’s reaction, but he didn’t possess the proper nerve to fully do so. Sidon, on the other hand, set a hard gaze upon him and did not break it, nor the uncomfortably long silence which accompanied it.

Link didn’t need to be particularly perceptive to tell this much- it was awkward.

“Laflat,” Sidon spoke up, his tone oddly much sunnier than it had been amidst the entirety of their former discussion. It was that pretense of friendliness that the Hylian, personally, recognized with ease, the sound of it saccharine and forced. “Thank you for your diligent work in updating me on the situation. You’re dismissed for now.”

“Uhh,” the woman blurted, her body tense while her eyes went between the lingering Knight and the Prince. Okay, good, it wasn’t just Link who could tell that this situation was uncomfortable. “Right, of course, your Highness.”

While Laflat double-checked her documents, making certain that she had everything in order, Brivere’s head dropped even lower than it was before, his chest visibly tightening with a very deep breath.

“Ledo,” said the Prince at the same time Laflat finally pattered past Brivere, who was waiting in apprehensive silence. Ledo had been so busied by his work, he hardly noticed anything was amiss
until Sidon uttered his name, then his head perked upward in attention. Gesturing in a way that was overly expressive, Sidon offered the Zora man a polite smile, and continued, “You’ve been bent over those repairs for a rather long time. The job you’ve done so far is excellent, but why don’t you take a short break?”

“Oh, thank you, your Highness,” the green Zora chuckled, standing and stretching, still not catching on to why he was suddenly being asked to leave, apart from the exact reason given. “That sounds lovely. Shall I return in fifteen minutes, then, Highness?”

“That would be splendid.” Sidon nodded his head, then once more went absolutely quiet when Dento’s apprentice showed himself out as asked, stiffly stretching all the while.

Yet before either of the remaining Zoras had a chance to say anything at all, Link cleared his throat in a way that was maybe a bit too loud, just to make sure he got Sidon’s attention. “Do you..uh,” he mumbled, part of him wanting to give his lover respectful space, while another part of him was actually beginning to find this side of the Prince maybe a tad intimidating; he never would have thought so, but it was so funny how things changed. “Do you want me to step out, too?”

“No, my dearest one, of course not,” the Prince purred, ever so sweet and gentle and audibly sincere, as opposed to the false friendliness he had turned on everyone else in order to politely rush them off. It really was slightly terrifying how fluidly he could switch between these behaviors. “You may remain right where you are, if it suits you to do so.”

“Alright,” the Hylian answered quietly, nodding his mussed head and lazily dragging himself out of the bed with the intention of getting dressed. He figured that if he stayed busy through whatever was about to happen between Sidon and Brivere, maybe he would fade into the background. Link might have thought to watch in interest, all with a petty, shit-eating grin spread across his face and the occasional chuckle of amusement while he watched Brivere squirm, but.. for some darned reason, he couldn’t manage.

“My lord, may I speak?” The Knight’s voice was hesitant, yet even so he snagged what small chance might have existed for the purpose of making amends. His previous steeliness fell away, every word aching and heavy and pleading, so that he only fell short of groveling by refusing to go down onto his knees, trying desperately to maintain some shred of dignity.

“You may not,” Sidon answered sharply, his tongue forming a razor edge as deadly as his gleaming teeth. Link was busily pulling his trousers on and idly searching for whatever belts and other items had gotten lost, but at the harsh sound of the Zora Prince’s tone, he could not help but glance over, catching sight of the cold way his lover was regarding the bending, breaking Knight.

Link could not bear to make light of this, even at Brivere’s expense, because despite how aloof Sidon had turned, he knew well that this was only yet another mask hiding his true feelings. The Hylian remembered well the trembling, wounded man he came home to. He remembered what the golden Zora had reduced Sidon to with a few thoughtless words; he knew that, underneath this attempt to show nothing at all, the Prince was hurting just as much as the man before him.

“Furthermore,” Sidon continued, forcing the other Zora to acknowledge that he had no control in this situation. Even if Brivere had hoped for such a thing, the firm voice of the Prince disarmed him and forced him to relinquish any of those illusions. “..let it be known that if you ever speak to me the way you did the very last time we saw one another, you will very quickly find yourself removed from this position. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my lord,” Brivere breathed, so timid that he had to second-guess whether he was truly meant to answer the question posed.
And just like that, Link understood his own sudden lack of nerve. He purposely turned his back on the other two, pretending to still be diligently searching for something or another while the epiphany washed over him; Hylia help him if Sidon ever discovered the true depths of the wrongs he’d had committed against him. He could see it, he felt it, playing out before him in a way he could only sympathize with thanks to his own selfish fears. He knew if Sidon learned the truth, just like that, all trust between them would be discarded and all the comfort and kindness and love that Link had come to depend on would be harshly, coldly stripped away.

..and he’d be just the same as that pitiful golden Zora, broken and desperate, utterly small and helpless before the judgement of the Prince.

“Good,” the Prince gave a nod, his tail held taut, his head raised high, then he spoke further to permit the other Zora a response, making it absolutely clear that it was only by his apparent generosity that such a thing was even allowed. “Now, what is it you wish to say?”

“I..” The Knight began to speak, but quieted in hesitation while Link made his way over to the Prince’s desk to retrieve the weapon gifted to him. When the Hylian turned to strap the beautiful sheathed blade to his hip, he momentarily caught the other Zora’s eye, or at least he believed he noticed, for a short second, that Brivere’s yellow gaze had flickered in his direction and away again.

The Knight cleared his throat and started again, pushing through the humiliation of being forced to bare his heart and plead for forgiveness in front of the very Hylian who had stolen away the man he loved. “..I only wished to offer my sincerest apologies for the inappropriate way I behaved, the appalling things I said to you, and the overall dreadful way I treated you. It certainly was no way for a Knight to regard his Prince, and no way for any person to treat a friend.”

“Oh,” Sidon chuckled. “So we are, in fact, friends now, are we?”

That comment was unnecessary, and if it was possible for somebody to both cringe and stand absolutely still at the exact same time, that’s precisely what Brivere did. “I suppose it is as you said, my lord,” said the Knight with a sigh of grave disappointment. “..we were.”

“Brivere..” It was the Prince who sighed now, beyond tired, beyond stressed and twisted on the inside from a hundred other sources of pain and suffering outside his chambers. His mental barriers had become exhausted from an excess of effort and as much as he wanted to be his usual understanding, forgiving self, he didn’t have the strength to carry on that way, not today. He didn’t have the energy needed to make amends, no matter how he wanted to. Sidon allowed himself a pause, to think, to bolster his crumbling defenses, then he continued. “There is plenty that should be discussed between you and I. There are a hundred things I would like to say, but I’ve yet to conclude what I think is truly best and what is truly right, apart from what I’ve already said. For now, I simply can’t spare the emotional energy to address the issue of what occurred between us and I apologize for that, but given the circumstances, I’m sure you understand. All I need from you right now, is for you to do your job. Are you able to do that?”

“Yes, my lord,” Brivere answered without hesitation and without much fortitude left, but with dedication that had never, ever waned.

Nodding, Sidon offered a small, forced smile, saying, “Excellent,” and leaving it at that.

Her transfer was going to come a day late, but she wouldn’t utter a single complaint about that. In times of crisis, her protective instincts flared and she often found herself instinctively taking charge. She didn’t fear the responsibility of leadership; every inch of her body and soul was dedicated in
duty to her people. Such had always been true of her, and if it could be said that certain people were born for specific things, then Gaddison was born to be a heroine.

She even claimed responsibility for being the very person to turn ‘Big Bad Bazz’ into such a do-gooder. Once upon a time, she made herself not-so-affectionately into his rival, one single brave, strong youth to stand up to his habit of strong-arming every situation in his own favor, for better or worse. Soon after, they became begrudging allies, all because Bazz had, apparently, grown a healthy respect for Gaddison’s plucky nature.

So no, she wouldn’t complain that she had been delayed by the plights of her people; she would, however, complain that her acquisition of a spermicide tablet had been put behind schedule by an entire day.

Everything else was packed and ready for her migration to the fort downstream, and this particular item was now the very last thing on her list, despite that it had actually been the first. She walked the halls of the Basilica, weaving her way through the utter chaos that had overtaken their most sacred temple. Every now and again, she caught some dirty look from a passing Undercity Zora, but she paid it little regard. Not only was she much too damn tired, but sparing time to be offended would imply that she cared, which she didn’t.

It seemed just like some Undercity scum to cast pointless glares at people they didn’t know for the awful crime of daring to exist above them, like anybody was actually forcing them to subsist and scrounge as they did. Then again, maybe they did recognize the pastel Zora as a member of the City Guard. There was an equally high likelihood of that, given that she was of an uncommon complexion and all Undercity Zoras seemed to hate the Guard on some misguided principle alone.

Gaddison tapped one toeclaw in impatience while she waited for the shifting water level of the temple to unlock the particular doorway she needed access to, then once it finally did, she gave a puff of annoyance and continued down the newly unveiled corridor. She realized that the movement of water through the temple served an important purpose, but some days she cursed the overly complex architectural styles of her ancient ancestors because they absolutely lacked in practicality.

At last, the exhausted and borderline-irritable woman found herself before the open nook of the Basilica apothecary. The scent of swift violets permeated the entire area, thanks to the way the tenacious plants were housed in the crevices between the masonry walls, encircling a small stretch of hallway like some perfumed grove.

The shelves of the apothecary were lined with blue, fish-shaped jars, though many were overturned and empty, yet another sign of the chaotic times. When Gaddison approached, grabbing at the rupee pouch that dangled from the silver belt at her hip, a rather tall Apostle adorned in the typical Basilica shawl and the crest of Naydra turned to politely greet her.

“Good morning,” the Apostle spoke simply, a look of concern poorly hidden on her features. “Do you require assistance?”

“I’m just looking for spermicide tablets, Wise One,” the lavender Zora softly responded, her voice an effort to produce. She probably should have asked for something to boost her energy levels, but from the look of things, she wasn’t about to get her hopes up.

“Oh dear,” the Apostle uttered, folding her hands in a somewhat timid way; Gaddison really did not like the way it looked. “I’m sorry to say, but because of how low supplies are, they’re out of stock at the moment. We don’t even have rock salt presently.”

The exhausted woman didn’t immediately say anything, because the Apostle wasn’t at fault for her
inconvenience and therefore she wasn’t about to unleash the resulting anger upon her. The deep sigh that came from Gaddison, however, must have been enough to have the Apostle fretting the eventual response to come, and she uttered another apology along with further explanation of the situation. “It’s the Water Blight. Everything we had was poured into attempts to treat it, so the ingredients used to produce the item you’re looking for aren’t available.”

As if the disappointment and inconvenience weren’t enough, the metallic clink of armor quickly drew Gaddison’s attention away from the Apostle and to the figure striding up the otherwise vacant corridor; the Guard Captain. He had been walking with haste and purpose until he noticed the lavender Zora, their gazes drawing haplessly to one another. Hurriedly, she averted her eyes, somewhat wishing that Bazz was still making it a point to ignore her, because his newly softened demeanor only added to Gaddison’s present inconvenience.

“Is there a similar apothecary at the fort downstream?” she asked, her words suddenly coming out sharp and quick, as opposed to her typical slow, unhurried manner of speaking. “Do you know?”

“I... think so.” The Apostle’s answer was utterly unsure and she dawdled about speaking the details. “I don’t think they would have anything more extensive than we do here, but they do have some vital supplies. There’s a chance that they have the product you’re looking for, as it would surely be considered important for soldiers away from home, yes?”

“Alright, alright,” Gaddison nodded, somewhat rushing the Apostle to stop talking while Bazz drew near enough to overhear. “Thank you for your help, Wise One.”

“Right,” the Apostle nodded in return. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“What’s wrong?” Bazz’s steady voice addressed the pastel-scaled Zora just as the Apostle was backing away and going back to work, and Gaddison silently thanked the Goddess that she didn’t linger.

“Nothing,” Gaddison piped up, her own tone returning to the unworried, honey-smooth sound that so often came from her, in the hopes of throwing off the Zora man’s busy-bodied snooping. “I asked her some questions about the fort. I shouldn’t have expected that somebody who rarely even ventures to the surface would know anything about a place downstream.”

“Ah,” the sleek, black Zora glanced aside, visibly downtrodden by just the reminder that his flighty lover was officially done pining for him and moving on to a place out of his immediate reach. “Right.”

“Don’t be like that, Bazz,” Gaddison purred, her words reprimanding ever so sweetly. Realistically, the fort wasn’t such an awful distance, but the Guard Captain’s mountain of duties certainly kept him far too occupied for any visits. Space was probably better for him, in the end, even if he didn’t think so. It was definitely better for Gaddison, anyway.

With all need to utter falsehoods seemingly past, Gaddison’s gaze connected with that of her dismal lover and her eyes traced his features in moderate concern; he looked even more exhausted than she must have. “Did you sleep at all?” she asked.

“I’ll sleep when I’m not needed to keep everything running smoothly,” he answered dully, and the Zora woman couldn’t discern whether it was the fatigue that left his tone so flat, or the heartache he nursed so fervently.

“You won’t be of any help if you’re exhausted,” she uttered with a disapproving shake of her head. For one very quick, passing moment, she almost felt a pang of guilt for leaving, if only because she
knew that absolutely nobody seemed to invest themselves in the Guard Captain’s actual welfare. He was a grown man, though, and she wasn’t his nurturer.

“Get some rest,” Gaddison reiterated, offering a small smile and reaching up to press her palm to his cheek for a quick, affectionate instant. “Goodbye, Bazz.”

The tall, dark Zora said not a single word in return, but even in the lingering silence, Gaddison turned and walked away.

Link couldn’t be exactly sure, but if he had to judge, he would say that Sidon was actively attempting to work up the nerve needed to go about taking the Spirit Potion. The Hylian watched, quiet and trying not to fuss while the Prince stood before his desk, one hand folded into the other, his tail anxiously flicking, his gaze warily focused on the small, softly shining vial.

He had clearly resolved to proceed with his previous plan to offer magical assistance and comfort to the ailing among his people, but for reasons Link was unaware of, that resolve wasn’t quite enough to allow the Zora to begin the process with casual ease. Finally, in curiosity and concern, Link tucked himself nearer, enough that he could place one careful, reassuring hand upon Sidon’s hip.

“Is everything okay?” Link asked, his neck curved so that he could peer up at the impossible tower of Zora by his side.

“Nothing is okay,” Sidon answered, sighing over that dismal bit of honesty. “Also, let it be known that I hate doing this.”

Despite his proclaimed hatred and his very obvious hesitation, however, Sidon at last reached out to take the glass bottle in hand; it was even tinier in the grasp of his large fingers, but he successfully uncorked it with a careful, precise movement, the sharp of his fingerscales hooking into the soft stopper.

It almost appeared that the Zora counted down from three before he upturned the potion and swallowed it, the muscles of his throat straining in the effort it took. His chest tightened, the liquid stealing away his ability to draw breath as it slid down, an awful, burning weight that settled not-so-gently into the pit of his stomach. Sidon’s tail flapped from side to side, his body unable to refrain from this violent expression of displeasure, though the Prince did fight off his immediate urge to vomit, knowing that if he did so, the rare ingredients and careful preparation that went into this potion would be thanklessly wasted.

One hand pressed against the stone surface of the desk and the Prince bent himself into it for momentary support. Link, though he had no hope of holding the massive Zora upright, instinctively placed an arm around behind him, only for Sidon to extend his other hand to his fretting lover, patting his shoulder in the hopes of lessening his sudden worry.

The Prince’s breath came in soft, careful pants, every little movement utterly slow and gentle, to stave off the nausea, then at last he carefully straightened himself. Brivere lurked just beyond arm’s reach, having committed himself to acting as a quiet sentry, though Link did not fail to notice the way his attention upon Sidon sharpened the very instant he swallowed that potion.

“My dearest one,” Sidon uttered, his voice uncharacteristically quiet and weak, and Link’s gaze drifted from the islander hawk’s stare which the Knight had cast over one shoulder, back to the speaking Prince. “If you have matters of import to see to, you’re perfectly free to go. There’s no need for you to be bothered with looking after me.”
There was a tremble in Sidon’s voice, as well as in the entirety of his frame, a certain anxiousness making itself apparent alongside the physical weakness, and something in the Hylian’s gut was insisting that regardless of how the Prince reassured and dismissed, there was more reason for concern than he was letting on.

“Are you sure?” Link asked, rather unsure, himself. His eyes were wandering, lost, his gaze a reflection of his blind search for the actual source of his uncertainty. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Oh, well…” the Prince appeared to have some difficulty in summoning his typically smooth, crisp speech, though it was not entirely clear whether the cause was physical or a question of his concentration being muddled. His scales had deepened to a lush, deep red color, shining and dewy, and his pale features had flushed with color, yet he still persisted in his attempt to answer. “Do you recall how adamant you were about being alone on the evening of the Blood Moon? It is perhaps accurate to say that this process is provoking some similar feelings in myself.. especially in regards to being utterly helpless before somebody I greatly admire and adore..”

Link, for a second, was almost taken aback, even with how clearly he understood the notion of wanting to escape the doting and pity, even with how his own actions had been the example for him to process. Like him, Sidon squirmed at the idea of being a burden, at being weak, and the Hylian fully comprehended that, yet still found it to be something of a blow that he wasn’t trusted enough... and then he was forced to feel guilty over hurting his lover in the same way time and time again, but he would save that for later.

Clearly, Sidon either saw or felt the effects of his words, possibly on the blanking expression left behind on the Hylian’s face, or in the echo of guilt and disappointment bouncing about the vast cavern of Link’s empty insides.

“More than anything, my dear friend,” the Prince backpedaled, gesturing vaguely while trying very hard to process actual language. “I don’t wish to cause you more worry than what is needed, but if you’re here spectating, it’s likely that this very thing will occur.”

Before Link had a chance to respond, the formerly quiet Knight found himself obliged to interrupt, stepping over to get the Prince’s attention. “My lord, it is probably best if you make your way to the bed and continue this conversation from there.”

“Oh.. Yes,” the red Zora answered, giving a weak nod of his head. It was strange how his tail now hung rather limply, just flopping against the back of his shoulders and he peered in the direction of his water mattress, focusing on it like it was an oasis across a vast desert, a blurry mirage of a goal that he could scarcely get a proper view of. When he began to walk, the reason for his measuring gaze became much more obvious, as his legs hardly lifted at all, his feet somewhat dragging in a slow, aching stagger.

Brivere hovered protectively, following closely behind the weakened Prince, his hands looking like they were resisting the urge to extend outward, to brace and steady the other, or maybe like he was expecting Sidon to collapse before he reached his goal. Something about this only made Link all the more nervous, but he, too, followed at a short distance like some opportunistic predator.

It was a slow, uncertain process, but Sidon did eventually make it to his bed; he bent into the surface, bracing against it with his hands while he rotated his body in order to sit. He certainly hadn’t exaggerated about being weakened because his every movement was likened to that of a frail elder. More than anything, Link wanted to shelter and comfort the Prince as Sidon had so often done for him, but he could feel the stone barrier in his chest, blocking any attempt he made to soften himself. Maybe it was just a ridiculous amount of self-doubt, but nevertheless, it mercilessly sheared away the
numb, broken parts of him, so that he couldn’t even hold them in his hand and consider repairing them.

Link took a breath, raising metaphorical fists in an attempt to bash through his emotional blockade, likely only to find himself bloody-knuckled and no better off, but.. He tried.

The Hylian clambered up, onto the edge of the mattress, making his intention to linger clear enough, even if his reasons were maybe obscure. He spoke up to remedy that. “No matter what, I’m going to worry because.. even when you’re out of sight, you’re never out of mind. I’m just going to have to weather that.”

“And..” Link tried to find the words in his mind to speak his heart, his tongue a clumsy thing as it blurted the first words that poised themselves on the very tip of it. “Whenever I’ve been weak or vulnerable before you, you’ve never asserted that these moments defined me. You protected me, you healed me, you brought me back from the depths whenever I sank and you never judged me.” That was perhaps more literal than Link was willing to explain, but the metaphorical context worked just as well. “..so I would never think anything less of you, either.”

“Mm,” the Zora Prince let out a soft sound of acknowledgment, though a questioning look fell upon his features, something he hadn’t the strength to ask lingering beneath the surface.

“I said I would be here for you,” the Hylian added, referring to his blathered, clumsy declaration of love. “I meant it. I’ll be here for you now, and as ‘the first loving heart you’ll feel when you awaken.’”

Despite the suffering twisting through every miserable inch of the Prince, a titter of laughter came free on the soft sound of his breath and he nodded his head, his lips drawing upward so that a vibrantly shining smile was forced to his face, a gift for the one who loved them so dearly and a grateful acceptance of the Hylian’s expressions of kindness and affection.

Though Brivere lingered, he’d turned his back to the bed, acting as though he were not a participant in this moment, as per Sidon’s wishes each time previous to now, and even more so on this particular day. He recognized that his concern was not wanted, not desired at all beyond his duty to protect the weakened royal with his life, but still, his own discomfort with the extensive suffering of somebody he cared for always managed to filter through. In the past, he’d made the occasional effort to soothe the other; gentle, unassuming touches and words of encouragement. This process was an awful, despicable thing and he’d always been mixed between admiration of Sidon’s bravery and complete pity that the other Zora was required to endure this nonsense.

Now, though he made the effort to cut himself off from those feelings, to exist as a guard and nothing else, he feared it was only more apparent how right his mother had been about him so long ago; he was absolutely soft and didn’t possess the proper resolve to be anything but.

“It’s probably best if you don’t fight it so much, my lord,” the golden Zora uttered, glancing over his shoulder while he did, uncertain if the Prince would even hear his softened tone. He was equally uncertain as to whether Sidon could really, truly help it, or if it even was a matter of the mental struggle he put up to resist the inevitable effects. It had always seemed, to him, that the Prince indeed made some feeble attempt to fend off the power of the potion and today he was all the more obligated to resist, thanks to the presence of... Well, what did Brivere know, anyway?

The Knight’s disparaging gaze was met and captured suddenly by the stark, begrudgingly ignorant blue of the Hylian nearby; Link regarded him, measured him, seemingly considering him for a quiet moment before relenting and turning to Brivere for further answers he was forced to accept that Sidon could not give.
“I thought this potion was just going to put him to sleep?” Link posed his inquiry, his tone steadied but still laden with concern that was apparent enough, unless Brivere was misreading it.

A quiet, thoughtful gaze went from the Hylian, to the Prince in careful contemplation; Sidon had bent himself forward, bundling the sheets in trembling fists, his fingerscales likely making tiny pinpricks in the blankets. It wasn’t in very good taste to talk about him like he wasn’t present, just because he could not answer- Brivere had Estuu to thank for that revelation.

“My lord, I’m sure you had reasons for not being more forthcoming about the process,” Brivere addressed the Prince but for the sake of answering the question of the Hylian, warily turning to face the bedridden royal as he did. He was, indeed, sure that Sidon had his reasons and what the Prince had already confessed about merely being self-conscious was likely the long and short of it. Also, the process itself was fairly grotesque and difficult to witness; he clearly hadn’t expected the Hylian to stick around for it, or maybe he’d even hoped that he would leave. “...however, it was perhaps a bit cruel on your part not to be more clear, especially if you didn’t intend to simply ask the Hylian to go.”

Link could not help the way his ears pressed back, flattening at the other Zora’s implication that Sidon had wanted him to become scarce; it stung even worse, because despite the gentle way the Prince explained himself, he had requested precisely that.

But that blow was minor, by comparison, to the actual feeling of watching the potion slowly take its awful toll on the Prince. It was little wonder that Sidon couldn’t utter a single word and another horrid sound filled the silence between the muffled cries he struggled not to set free. A creak from under the Zora’s skin began, quiet at first, until it was grossly audible and rendered Sidon completely unable to restrain his cries; it was the sound of cartilaginous skeleton stretching beyond its own limits, breaking, snapping apart to make room for new growth. One by one, his joints popped out of place, from the vertebra of his tail and spine, going neatly in order, to the junctures of his limbs, shoulders, elbows, hips, not even the knuckles between his finger bones spared.

And then, Sidon went slack, gasping but unable to scream, no longer possessing enough control over his breaking body to do as much. When Link only sat there, still and bewildered, Brivere stepped forward to assist, gently pressing the Prince back from his forward-folded position and into a more safe, reclined one. He had ascertained that if Sidon’s posture put too much strain on his organs while his skeleton was in pieces, he could suffer internal injury; the potion healed the damage, but it was better to prevent it. It was much safer for the Prince to endure this awful process in the water where he was weightless, but unfortunately, that wasn’t an option at this time.

Sidon’s pupils were wide when he was lain back, his gaze utterly distant but still faintly aware; the wrinkle of pain on his face spoke that most visibly. His teeth were clenched so tightly that his gums had begun to bleed, then his eyes scrunched shut as all new pain enveloped him, his body audibly ripping around him like tattered fabric, his muscles tearing in rapid growth, leaving welts and bruises under his scales and furrowing his flesh until he was streaked with blood.

Link wanted badly to touch his love, to offer some gentleness to obscure his suffering, but he could only sit frozen in place, fearful that even the lightest contact could only make things worse; he knew that shattered bodily state, of only existing as a bag of flesh that conveniently contained a slosh of disjointed pieces. When Link experienced that level of pain and physical torment, he usually prayed that death came swiftly after and generally, it always did. Resurrection left behind the ghosts of injury, still whispering like memories in his nervous system, but this? Sidon just.. endured it?

One last soft grunt came from the broken Zora before the inevitable shock stole his awareness as promised, and his trembling body stilled completely. By this time, the golden Zora’s hands were
clenched at the edge of bed, his face mostly impassive, apart from a faint shadow of concern that gave him away. It was as though he’d held his breath while he paid witness to this gruesome tradition yet again, letting it out only once relief came to his Prince in the form of sweet oblivion.

That breath came out in a sigh of regret, then at last he fully addressed the Hylian perched just within arm’s reach of the sleeping Prince. “It’s the pain of the process that renders him unconscious. He’ll remain like this until his mind stabilizes, waking in periods only for the unfinished effects to inevitably steal his awareness again. The potion doesn’t simply put him to sleep for a week, it causes a physical evolution that takes a full week to complete, but is so physically painful, he becomes unable to maintain consciousness at all.”

Brivere shook his head, his long forefins swaying with the movement. “He doesn’t like to be seen like this. Your presence doesn’t change a thing and there’s nothing you can do make the ordeal easier. There is no uplifting, healing, or soothing; it is what it is.”

It ached because these words rang true, but the fighting spirit inside the Hylian which always hurled him thoughtlessly into battle wouldn’t just take the blows as they came. Link often gave his rebuttals in the form of silence, choosing not to acknowledge the taunts of others, though in this case he could not still his tongue, if only because of how troubling this entire situation was, so he decidedly turned Brivere’s own words back at him.

“Then why do you need to be here? You could just as easily stand guard outside,” he snapped.

“You think I only meant you?” the golden Zora replied, his steely voice softened by the perplexity which was evident in his tone. He quickly scoffed, however, supposing that he shouldn’t have been surprised that this selfish brat thought everything was about him. “You think I didn’t come to this conclusion myself, while feeling as helpless as you do right now?”

Brivere could, in fact, still remember being asked to stand outside time and time again. He was a few years into his duty to the Prince before Sidon ever offered to allow him to stay, and even then, the Knight usually kept his back turned as much as necessary, for Sidon’s comfort and his own. As he’d stated, it was regrettable that his Prince had not further discussed the reality of the potion’s effects with this Hylian that he apparently trusted, but it was also in Sidon’s nature to be so dismissive about such things.

“How does this make him stronger?” Link asked with a relenting sigh; it wasn’t even Brivere that he was frustrated with so much as the very fact that somebody he cared for was being made to suffer. And for what? While still gazing upon the fainted Prince with sympathy, Link drifted in his mind, reflecting on the events of the day previous. He considered the awesome show of power he’d witnessed from the current King, who was easily capable of pummeling enemies to death with little else but his bare hands; a weapon was overkill. “...and how can it possibly enhance his magic? How can something he needs such mental focus to control work better while his mind is in a state of pain?”

“I’m not certain how it works,” the golden Zora readily confessed. He would not pretend to understand something that he didn’t and couldn’t. “Maybe that is another effect of the potion or the strength inherent in him. But as it isn’t within my personal area of expertise, I can only surmise.”

“I know that you’re just going to say that I’m being presumptuous,” Link began, his every word hesitant and not because he feared judgement, but because he feared the answer. “...but does he really have to do this? Is this necessary?”

The answer was a dreadful thing, and Link knew that much before even hearing it. He could already see exactly why it was important and that, in some way, it did make sense. The Zoras valued having
a powerful royal family that could not easily be dispatched, and that could lead their people from the front, protecting the overall population, rather than what the Hyrulean Royal family did - the exact opposite.

“It is a long-standing tradition, and a part of our culture,” Brivere droned, the explanation like a script written for him in advance, an act which his heart absolutely was not in. “Regardless of how he suffers, it will, in fact, make him more powerful and extend his life - our people believe that strengthening our leaders in this way is a matter of great import. The strength of our leaders ultimately enhances the stability of our entire existence, therefore, yes, this is thought of as necessary and his responsibility.”

“And what do you think?” asked the Hylian, the words like an accusation, a call to action. His sharp, blue gaze set upon Brivere, cold and demanding. If this man could proclaim that he was in love with the Prince as well, then could he really stand to see Sidon suffer for the sake of tradition? “Do you believe this is necessary for him to be a proper King?”

Brivere’s answer did not come easily, and rarely did it ever. Much as his heart strained to provide a response which was true, his head worked over those feelings in an attempt to dissuade him from being so emotionally driven. The Hylian would probably assume it was for the sake of disagreement, but it was not. At last, he let out a quiet, woeful sigh and said, “If I’ve learned anything in all my interactions with him, it’s that my opinions in regards to his choices are irrelevant and unwanted.”

The Knight’s own stare met the challenging gaze of the Hylian - oh good, he caught the underlying implications of Brivere’s statement. “But speaking of responsibilities, Champion, surely that title of yours comes with a great deal of them.”

“You’re not very subtle about trying to run me off, are you?” Link intoned, not even slightly impressed. He supposed it was a pointless endeavor to hope for an ally of principle in Brivere.

“We’ve established a clear dislike for one another,” the Knight uttered, not even angry or bitter, but tired and resigned. He’d lost all faith, all expectation of positive change. In the end, what he cared about most of all was Sidon’s happiness, and as long as this Hylian consistently proved himself to be thoughtless and selfish, Brivere could never approve. “.what good would it do to pretend otherwise?”

“Well, you’re just going to have to deal with it, then,” the Hylian immediately hissed, starting to get a cramp from how constantly he held his ears back in the presence of this arrogant Knight. “.because I’m going to stay for a bit.”

“Hm.” came the soft noise of displeasure from the golden Zora. Oddly enough, however, he had expected Sidon’s stubborn, little guest to leave soon after the Prince lost consciousness, but he supposed this refusal to leave as a means of defiance was equally predictable. “.as you wish, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, friends. Did you all enjoy the update? I’m super happy to have finished a day early, AND I also finished NanoWrimo successfully. Pop open a bottle of Fleet Lotus Seed champagne, because it is time to celebrate! :D

As it stands, I have finished with 50,300/50,000! I’m gonna post all of my winner screenshots and my stats everywhere, haha. Thanks to all of you who commented, who
chatted with me about the story, who made nice art for me, who sent me music and random asks on tumblr! I have you all to thank for this success. I'll continue to remain diligent writing this beast of a story, so long as somebody out there is happily enjoying it.)

For those of you who want to continue supporting me and poking me from the shadows, you can follow me on Tumblr; BanishedOne is my personal account and BanishFics is my art/fiction account, where I also reblog fanart of the story. I do have a Facebook page and also a Twitter; I'm essentially BanishedOne across all platforms.

Thank you, to all of you! <3
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Thanks to their assistance on the night of the Blood Moon, the neighbors of Fort Boko had been offered greater leniency and the opportunity to enter during the day, to sell and trade. It was because of this that the Sergeant of the fort found herself in the company of an intriguing new acquaintance.

In Zora's Domain, the Hylian Champion made an unexpected discovery of his own. The deep dive necessary to reach the Basilica hadn't been pleasing in the least, but when he stumbled upon the answers to mysteries left to him by his sparse memory, it held the potential to render all previous inconvenience worthwhile.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. All I really want to say was that while my update day is still meant to be Saturday, I did finish this chapter early and so I am delivering it on Friday. I hope you're all doing well! Please enjoy the story! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The repairs needed were minimal and already well under way; Betaal wasn’t surprised at all, because she’d already seen the beating her fort could endure. Work required to fix up damage to the walls during the Blood Moon just melded into the additional maintenance necessary. Life at the fort went on.

The Zoras had finally established themselves to the point that things were no longer in chaos. They’d walled off part of the inner moat to function as a communal sleeping chamber, and had even established beneficial aquatic life within it; fleet lotus plants to improve the quality and sneaky river snails to clean up and help keep the roughened scales of the guardsmen properly moisturized.

The rest tents had been rearranged and better organized, and the fort medic finally had a proper tent to act as a medical bay. The inner expanse was no longer randomly scattered with various campfires and instead, there was a single area designated for food preparation and consumption; this time, it was actually near the supply storeroom, which lurked inside one of the various stone towers.

Near the gates, a bazaar of sorts had been established and Betaal was actually obligated to assign hands to oversee it. It was run independently by the Mercay Islanders who ventured between their own camp and the fort each day to sell goods. It also attracted numerous other merchants and travelers looking to make trade, but it was most useful to the Zora people because in allowed them to create more convenient commerce with the other races of Hyrule. At this point, the Sergeant was receiving incredible lists, requests for goods from back home, which she passed off to underlings, essentially sending them on scavenger hunts, which counted as very official duty.

Betaal had even sent forces to Mercay Island after the bizarre rumble that shook their entire world, but for the most part, the Islanders had gotten through the event with ease. Her guardsmen reported
back to her, to inform her that their tent city had begun to shift, in favor of permanent dwellings, which she was all too glad to hear about. Where she was concerned, Mercay Islanders were friends and allies.

It seemed the only thing that hadn’t much changed were the pyre cycles—the black ash had been lightened with rains which came and went, but the round stones which encircled and honored the dead still cast a familiar light each and every night. A statue of Hylia had been commissioned and added, but otherwise nobody dared to disturb the tranquility of the area.

And as much as Betaal had been worried about somebody discovering her ‘inappropriate’ relationship with her immediate underling and newly assigned Corporal, it actually appeared that few took notice or even cared. As far as she could see, other relationships were blooming between various members of her team and nobody thought anything of it. She and the violet Zora still did what they could to keep a safe distance, while maintaining the casual friendliness that they had before; sure, they were probably both itching for the closeness denied to them each day, but.. well, it helped that they both also tended to stay busy.

The Sergeant had been so very busy, she’d completed guard rotations in advance and had set to work micro-managing some of the other duties she’d assigned. She began in the sparring area, pleased enough by the progress of the soldiers who had been trainees not so long ago. She took a peek inside the armory, to make sure that weapons had been sharpened and the armor had been maintained, then she began over to the bazaar, just to oversee progress.

It was wild with hustle and bustle, so different from the organization and discipline everywhere otherwise. Whereas the Mercay Islanders had been regarded with suspicion before and had their weapons confiscated for safety, they now were allowed to carry them freely. Merchants with carts, donkeys and horses flooded through the gates. Some set up booths, and tables, while others sat upon mats with their wares displayed.

Yet others walked about with heaping sacks upon their shoulders. One such traveler happened to cross Betaal’s path, their back bent beneath the weight, their legs straining to maintain balance with each step. The Zora paused to allow them to pass, taking care not to bump them, as they appeared incredibly unsteady. Even so, the merchant’s foot still struck a particularly rough patch of cobbled stone, which sent them toppling to the ground, and they landed directly upon their face, underneath the weight they carried.

As comical as it was to see two legs flailing beneath a pile of bags, Betaal didn’t let out even a minute titter. Instead, she rushed in to assist, like the kind-hearted soldier she was. She heaved one bag after another off of the merchant’s back and set them aside, doing all she could to relieve the fallen person without damaging the merchandise they’d worked so hard to lug here. Unfortunately, at least one bag had come open and the goods from inside scattered across the stone; piles of mighty banana bunches rolled awkwardly ahead, forming sweetly fragrant, yellow mountains.

“Curses!” the young merchant hissed when Betaal set them free from their predicament. “Now these are sure to get bruised.”

The blue Zora blinked almost awkwardly as the overly encumbered traveler fretted and rushed to gently place their goods back into the bag, checking over every few bunches with a worried expression. They were undoubtedly a Sheikah, given their rich, brown complexion and the dampened strands of pale hair that clung to their sweat-beaded forehead. They even had the intense, deep red eyes of the more pure-blooded tribesmen.

“Uhh,” Betaal mumbled, bending down to assist the fallen Sheikah. They were a bit scuffed up from their fall, and appeared to be near exhaustion from their burden. “Let me help you.”
The Sergeant gathered up the bunches with care, handing them off to the merchant to be returned to the bag and as she helped, the other person’s previously frustrated behavior calmed significantly. “Thank you,” they uttered once the mess was cleared and their goods were back in order. One hand was raised to swipe across their forehead, brushing back the errant, white locks and they took a breath to steady themselves before offering the helpful Zora a small, almost timid smile.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many mighty bananas,” Betaal laughed quietly, not even bothering to ask before she clambered to her feet and picked up a few of the struggling traveler’s bags, to help them to their destination. “Just let me walk with you- it’s easier this way.”

“Oh, thank you, again,” the Sheikah answered, dipping their head low in gratitude, then they gathered what was left of their goods. “I came here from the Faron region. I have something of a deal with the farmers in that area, so I make good trade, but.. Well, I suppose I’m still not the best equipped for this means of self-sufficiency.”

“So, what? You just carried all this here, from Faron?” the blue Zora questioned, a dubious tone to her voice while she turned her head to take another quick glance at the person walking by her side; they appeared to be reasonably fit, but Betaal would have imagined it taking a much more muscular person to have accomplished such a feat. “You must be pretty strong; I’m sure that’s useful, considering how full our world is of monsters.”

“I don’t know about strong,” the Sheikah humbly shook their head, adjusting the bags on their shoulders. “I don’t believe I’m very strong, or even terribly brave, despite how dangerous the journeys are. Each time I embark, I’m convinced that it will be my last and that the monsters will finally close in on me. It’s terrifying.”

Maybe it was her inexperience, but as Betaal quietly simmered the notion of traveling, she couldn’t help but idealize the images her mind conjured; seeing the world, boldly facing the dangers, conquering nature’s challenges and sleeping under the stars. Running the fort was so far the most adventurous part of her life, and she couldn’t help but envy the merchant’s experience. However, since the young Sheikah seemed a bit meek for the life they led, the blue Zora wouldn’t openly comment.

The goods were easy enough for the Sheikah to sell off, and they lightened their load considerably, replacing it with a bulging rupee pouch instead. Betaal stuck by their side, until all of their dealings were done, both wanting to be helpful and hoping that perhaps her new acquaintance would tell her more about the world outside.

“So, speaking of monsters,” the Sheikah broke the silence, their voice rich in tone but quiet in volume. Smoldering crimson eyes turned to Betaal in interest only further reflected upon the soft upward curve of the Sheikah’s mouth. “The last time I was in this area, this fort was overrun with bokoblins and moblins. Did your people really get rid of them all?”

“We did,” Betaal declared, her red fins puffing with pride, a gleaming smile finding its way to her countenance. “Zoras have a lot more mettle than some people assume. You always hear about how tough the Gorons are, and how ferocious Gerudo warriors are. You hear how the people from your tribe move as quick and quiet as shadows, and about the flying archers of the Rito people, but.. what do you hear about us?”

“Hmm,” the merchant pondered the question, taking it sincerely into account. “That you build spectacular, elegant cities. And that you’re mysterious and reclusive.”

“Ugg,” the Sergeant heaved a frustrated sigh; these things were true, of course, but they weren’t the only things that were true of her people. Worst of all, everything known about Zoras was mostly
only true of the Uppercity people. Her scales itched with fury, knowing that her entire race was defined by them, despite that when it came to population, the Uppercity Zoras were actually the minorities. “Everything about us seems to revolve around grace and elegance, being mannerly and refined while also ever so slightly aloof, building aesthetically pleasing cities that also happen to be utterly impractical thanks to the complexity. But sometimes we just like to kick ass, too. Nobody ever mentions that!”

The Sheikah’s voice pitched even lower with their laughter, one hand raising to cover the grin that spread over their face. Betaal immediately let out a chuckle of embarrassment, taking a breath after her long rant to utter an apology.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m a proud Zora, just a frustrated one.”

“I think the willingness to critique the actions of your own people speaks a purer form of pride than blatantly denying any fault at all,” the traveler reassured. “I suppose this could apply to most of the tribes across Hyrule, but the Sheikah especially- if we hadn’t so easily bowed to the rule of Hylians, the Calamity might not have been as disastrous as it was. That aside, it’s good to see more Zoras outside of Zora’s Domain. More Zoras and less monsters.”

“Personally, I’m glad for the chance to interact with people outside of my own, as well,” the blue Zora nodded; she was also happy enough to speak with someone that was roughly the same height, for a change. “It can be stifling, sometimes.”

“It was certainly my pleasure and I thank you for your assistance and overall kindness,” spoke the Sheikah, their neck inclining so that their gaze was wistfully cast upward. “Though, it would be rather exciting to get a look at the fort from the upper perimeters.”

In Betaal’s quiet hesitance, the young traveler shook their head, returning their gaze rather dejectedly to the cobbled stone before their feet. “I’m sorry,” they apologized with haste. “That’s asking too much. I’m not even sure if you have the authority to allow such a thing.”

“Typically we don’t allow anyone other than the guardsmen up there,” Betaal said slowly, inwardly questioning whether or not there was any real reason that she couldn’t allow this kind merchant, who had brought supply and trade to her people, a chance to admire the setting. Zoras typically counted on tourists being fascinated by their architecture, so while the fort wasn’t built by them, it wasn’t out of character for them to attract people in this way. Actually, as soon as those pretentious Apostles settled on what sorts of modifications they wanted to make to the fort, Betaal expected an increase in tourist traffic.“.. I may, in fact, have the authority to escort you up there for a look. I’m actually the fort Sergeant- Sergeant Betaal- so you’re in luck.”

“And so I am in luck,” the Sheikah purred, unable to hide the grateful smile that shined upon their features. “My name is Sheik, by the way- I’m certainly pleased to make your acquaintance, Sergeant Betaal.”

“Sheik the Sheikah?” the blue Zora questioned, guiding her new friend past the line of patrol held by her guardsmen, which Mercay Islanders typically respected and did not cross.

“I know, I know,” the young traveler laughed sheepishly, batting one hand at the Zora. “The founder our tribe, many hundreds of thousands of years ago, was named ‘Sheik’, making it not only a common name among tribesmen, but also the name of the tribe, itself.”

“That makes perfect sense, now that you’ve explained it,” the Zora woman’s shoulders moved in a shrug, but she offered a nod of understanding. She also failed to hide the way her fins flared in excitement at this rare chance to discuss historical matters; typically the exchange of letters between
herself and Loreen was her only true source of scholarly discussion. “Our founder was named ‘Zorana’ - well, her tribe was already called ‘Zora’ during the period of history when she was alive, so our people aren’t necessarily named after her, because we were already ‘Zoras’, just not the same Zoras mentioned throughout more ancient history. I’m sorry. I really enjoyed learning about history, I’ll stop rambling.”

“No, you’re alright,” Sheik raised their voice in volume ever so slightly, but it seemed enough to count as enthusiasm from a soft-spoken person. They walked only closer at Betaal’s side while they spoke. “The history of our world is incredibly interesting. It’s full of terrible events and tragedies, but it’s rewarding to know and understand the things that lie behind us. It really helps one to put current motivations into perspective, when you have history to reflect upon - it’s another reason why I wanted to check out the perimeters. This fort, itself, is a historical site.”

“Right, that’s true,” Betaal nodded, flashing a toothy smile, only to quickly remember that it was especially terrifying for non-Zoras and she hurriedly shifted to a much less threatening expression. “Come on, the stairs are this way.”

He was both excited and terrified; he shouldn’t have been, because hello, death wasn’t exactly permanent where he was concerned, but that didn’t mean he’d ever acclimated to the experience. Also, despite his attachment to the Zora people and one Zora in particular, he was still a bit edgy about the water. He just wanted to avoid having to add drowning to his oddly literal bucket list.

“Okay,” Link called out as he was securely tucked inside the dive bell he’d seen the Zoras use to send another Hylian captive to the impossible depths, where their temple lurked. He’d decided to go about having the stitches from his Blood Moon injury looked at and possibly removed, and according to the Guard Captain, the medics would be much too busy to come to the surface to specifically treat him. The makeshift infirmary that had developed just the day previous was already gone, with all minor injuries treated and those with major ails transferred to the Basilica for additional care.

The guardsman who Bazz had sent to aid Link tightly shut the grate beneath the Hylian’s feet, locking it for security. “It will take a few minutes for you to reach the Basilica, so just hang tight when you feel the bell stop,” he explained. “I’ll swim down to release you once the chain is extended.”

“Got it,” Link hummed, thankful enough for the assistance, but regardless, his tone fell flat thanks to his sudden bout of nervousness. His little vacation in Zora’s Domain really was making him soft, but at least he could beat himself up until he toughened back into a state of emotionless, brash, emptiness.

The sounds of the metallic locks clicking into place slowly left him more and more disconcerted and he took a deep breath, telling himself that it definitely wasn’t going to be one of his last before his lungs were forced full of water. The bell tipped upright, jostling him slightly while the slow tinkle of chains and the turning crank sent the giant, iron structure toward the water. There were bars on the inside for the Hylian to cling to and his fingers tightened around them when the water rose up to lap at the bottoms of his boots, which were braced against the grate.

He understood how the device worked; the air inside the bell kept the water from rising so long as the mouth of the bell was turned downward. It made perfect sense, and that awareness should have kept him from allowing his taut nerves to snap completely, leaving him with naut but absolute fear. However, it only took a few moments of descent for him to find out otherwise.
The tight space inside the iron device quickly began to seem as though it were shrinking, or that perhaps the air inside wasn’t sufficient. The Hylian took deeper breaths, his eyes flickering across the grate at his feet, trying to make sure and double sure and triple sure that the water wasn’t actually rising any further. For a passing second he was certain that it actually was flooding the bell, and the stuffy air within the isolating chamber couldn’t relieve his need to catch his breath, no matter how he gasped for it.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Link breathed between hurried pants, then he began to kick at the gate beneath his feet, just the same as the Hylian prisoner he’d seen stuffed into this same device. She had failed utterly to break free, from what he had witnessed, but that didn’t mean he would, nor would it stifle his attempts. His sense of danger was suddenly beyond tolerable and his instinct to fight his own circumstances to the death kicked in as violently as he flailed to free himself. If he could get free quickly enough, he could still make it back to the surface by swimming.

“Damn it!” he hissed, his breathless body tiring from the struggle almost immediately. His eyes shut, his head falling against where one hand was clutching a leather-wrapped handle for dear life. He could see much more than darkness when he closed his eyes, however; images flashed behind his lids like secrets that his mind was trying and trying to tell him.

His head was beneath the water, a bright light hovering above, wavering on the surface. Bubbles rose from him, his chest heaving in desperation, his body flailing against the hands restraining him, fingers tight around his neck, choking him until everything faded to black and he was gone.

In the bleak, blackness of that deathly void, Link took a breath, focusing on the steady clink clink clink of the chain sending his vessel to the fathomless depths. He allowed the sound to be the metronome which timed each inhale and exhale, the tremble of his hands fading as he calmed and came back to himself.

What did this shit mean? This wasn’t the first time he’d seen these images, though it was perhaps one of the first occasions that they had come to haunt him while he was awake, or that he’d had a chance to really contemplate them. There were plenty of fucked up things in his head that he wanted badly to forget, but these recurring flashes? The drowning, the choking? It wasn’t as though such a thing had ever happened to him, that he could recall.

Maybe it was more accurate to say that nothing of that nature had happened to him since he awakened from his hundred-year nap; anything before that was an obscure mystery that his mixed up head left him little hope of deciphering.

The bell at last came to a stop with a soft jerk and a worrying creak. Link took another long, slow breath before he lifted his head, his ears twitching in curiosity about the sounds all around him. There was a heavy, gritty vibration that shook the inside of the iron device, rumbling and ringing to the point that the Hylian could feel the tremors on his skin and he rubbed at his arms to rid himself of the sensation.

It didn’t take very long for the rumbling to cease, and the sound of water draining brought Bazz’s helpful guardsman to assist with aiding the Hylian’s escape, as promised. The locks were unfastened with quick, nimble ease from the outside and Link popped out of the dive bell like a common sparrow set free to flight.

“Ah, Champion, are you alright?” the guardsman asked, getting only a quick glance at Link’s appearance and perturbed demeanor in order to make the assumption that he was not, in fact, alright. The Zora man looked like he could have been in Bazz’s family, like a younger brother or cousin, maybe. For some reason, that offered Link the tiniest, illogical shred of comfort.
“I’m fine,” Link asserted, the back of his hand brushing against his cheeks to find them wet; he must have splashed himself somewhere along the way.

“Would you like for me to lead you to the infirmary?” the young guardsman asked, looking a bit nervous that the Captain might have his scaly hide if he let any harm come to the Champion.

“No thanks,” came Link’s answer with a wave of one hand, though he’d set off even more quickly than he spoke up. Now that he was done with the business of being dropped underwater in a tiny prison that he had no hope of escaping, his sense of calm was renewed. There was also the tiny detail that he was perfectly used to exploring complicated shrines on his own; this one wouldn’t be much different.

The only difference that mattered at all was the fact that this particular temple was of the utmost importance to Sidon’s people and populated with many a busy Zora, bustling here and there, even in the narrow, twisting halls where Link started his exploration.

Every inch of the magnificent construction seemed to shine, as vibrant as the stars in the sky, in shades of the palest blue and lovely violet. Every turn the Hylian took led him to another looping corridor with walls painstakingly carved into ornate designs.

The Apostles, as Link had come to understand, were Zoras who lived down below, rarely ever leaving the Basilica halls. He was vaguely aware that only a certain branch were considered to be scholars, whereas others were lawmakers, and yet others were warriors. As a Hylian, Link definitely noticed that the members of the three branches were adorned in various differing ways, but he was clueless as to what these styles signified.

The Zoras of the Basilica were not only a new sight for him, but he clearly was for them, as well, as he drew the attention of many golden gazes while he meandered. He did his best to keep to himself, not wanting to cause a terrible disruption or accidentally disrespect the wrong person; yeah, if he did, Sidon would be waking up to a disappointment or a mess to clean up.

Otherwise, the temple was a marvel to explore; Link eventually found that the twisting hallways led to other grander corridors and offshoots, some with circular chambers where Zoras entered and exited through round openings in the floor. Occasionally the entire construction would tremble, and parallel pathways would flood with water that controlled interlocking mechanisms, shifting hallways and doors to alter the destination they led to.

Link was walking about for a couple of hours before he felt that maybe he was in over his head in more than just the literal sense. He supposed even his shrine navigating instincts were a bit on the rusty side, but before he had a chance to wound his own pride by asking for directions, he located one of the main corridors, which apparently led to the inner sanctum.

It was most apparent that he was somewhere new when he heard the voices of a great crowd, all echoing and resounding in the vast chambered heart of the inner Basilica. He turned a corner to find himself within a rather opalescent hallway, which was lined with people he now knew to be Undercity; they were queued along the walls, most of them sitting, some in groups, some alone, but not one single soul looked happy. They looked weak, drained, perhaps even a bit pale and gaunt, but Link did his best not to stare at them with pity or anything otherwise.

As he traipsed this Undercity Zora filled cavern, he eventually was stopped by another person who was very clearly in the city guard. Typically Bazz’s people greeted Link and treated him with respect, but that was either a privilege he no longer had below the surface, or this particular guard was on the ornery side.
“Halt, Hylian,” he hissed, putting his arm out to block Link’s path. “State your business.”

Link would have liked to have made a fool of this poor guy, just like he had that newbie sentry back at the fort a while ago, but he was getting a much different vibe from this Zora, if vibes were a thing he got. This person was absolutely no nonsense and probably wouldn’t hesitate to lock Link up. It would only take a matter of days for Sidon to figure out where he’d disappeared to, or even for Bazz to locate him, but he was trying to actively avoid being a complete pest.

“I’m looking for the infirmary,” he explained, and with that statement, the guard moved aside.

“Continue down this hall, past the first grand chamber,” the guardsman spoke dryly, while pointing. “The first grand chamber is where the Water Blight is being treated. That’s not where you want to go. There’s a smaller chamber just beyond that- that’s the infirmary.”

“Right, thanks.” Link shoved his hands into his pockets when he passed by; something about being able to walk by the guard with ease, however, caught the attention of the waiting Undercity Zora and they all stared in his direction with regard that was visibly less than friendly. Still, the Hylian kept to his relaxed pace, eventually locating the infirmary after a bit more tourism than he’d planned.

Because of Link’s lack of familiarity with any form of medical science, given his people’s seeming loss of any real practitioner, apart from a few mad, Sheikah scientists, he found himself hovering in the doorway a bit dumbly, unsure of what he was meant to do. The large room was lined with various beds, all comfortably separated by sliding divider walls and hanging curtains, which the busied medics slipped through with haste, like Hyrule hares through warren burrows.

It was fascinating how diligent and organized these Zoras were. Link was sure that if they extended the service of their medical expertise to the other people of Hyrule, they’d almost certainly attract Hylians by the hundreds. The Hylian mastery of potions and other naturalistic medicine was impressive in its own way, but it was often tedious and dependent on very rare, dangerous to acquire ingredients.

Link couldn’t help but notice, however, that there wasn’t a single Undercity Zora present within the entire infirmary; if they didn’t offer care to all of their own people, they definitely weren’t ready for the rest of Hyrule. Even the young Apostle who eventually approached Link regarded him with moderate confusion apparent on her features.

“Pardon me?” she spoke up, her head high, but her hands politely folded. “Were you visiting or seeking care?”

“Seeking care, I suppose,” Link answered, brushing his errant fringe back from his face while he explained his situation a bit further. He prayed to the void that she wasn’t assuming he was some kind of Hylian prisoner. “I received assistance from a medic recently. I needed to have my stitches looked at and hopefully removed so that I don’t have to come back-”

Shit. Did he always have to say the first thing that came to mind when he spoke?

“I mean- your Basilica is lovely and very impressive. I’ve never seen anything like it.” At least his praise was honest enough and he hadn’t gone to the level of performative mannerliness, also know as ‘bullshitting’, that so often came from the Prince. “The trip here was just terrifying, given that I can’t breathe underwater.”

“Fair enough, Hylian,” the Apostle responded in a manner that was far too calm and neutral for Link to decide if it was forgiving. Also, clearly these Basilica Zoras didn’t recognize him the way those in the Uppercity did, which intensified the constant perception that he was a stranger. “If you’ll come
“this way, I’ll show you to a bed.”

“Nice, I could use a nap.” He was only half joking. That was probably a good thing, because the
Zora absolutely didn’t find him to be funny. As she’d said, she led him deeper into the medical bay,
coming to a doorway formed by an open curtain. With a gesture, she ushered Link into the squared
off space and tugged the curtain shut behind him.

The service was sadly a bit too prompt to allow the Champion any time to nap. He’d only just gotten
comfortable on top of what he discovered was a wool-lined bed, rather than the more fancy water
mattress, when the curtain was brushed momentarily aside and a different medic showed herself into
his tiny room.

“If it isn’t the Hylian Champion,” she muttered, partly confused and partly amused with this turn of
events. He sat upright at the recognition, thinking perhaps he’d concluded that he was stranger down
here a bit too quickly. The Apostle was an elder, which Link felt almost immediately didn’t bode
well, yet while her demeanor was serious, she didn’t appear to be regarding him with the kind of
bitterness that many Uppercity elders had when he first arrived.

“I didn’t recognize you, at first, the night I stitched you up,” her roughed voice rose again in his
silence and she made her way over to his bedside. “You were quite a mess that night and there’s the
fact that.. Well, I wouldn’t have expected a Hylian I knew a hundred years ago to still be alive and so
young in appearance.”

“Right,” Link let out a sigh, having thought he was done with explaining his bizarre situation to these
very long-lived people. “I fell during the Calamity, but I was placed into the Shrine of Resurrection
by some Sheikah scientists. I was revived, but I also lost most of my memories.. So, I’m sorry to say,
I don’t actually remember you.”

“Hmm, loss of memory, you say? That’s a curious side effect,” she tutted, her tone sounding like
something between a disappointed scholar and a protective grandmother. “Let’s have a look at you,
then.”

While the Hylian unfastened his belts and straps, and pulled his tunic over his head, the pinkish elder
continued to comment on his claim, filling the silence with her ponderings. “I studied Hylian
medicine and physiology years and years ago, back when Castle Town was still standing. Sheikah
medicine was always as shrouded in mystery as the Sheikah people, however. It seems strange,
though, that this shrine had such costly secondary effects, given that Hylians have long been capable
of creating potions to knit physical damage and amend blood loss, sans loss of memory and hundred
year healing periods.”

With Link’s flesh revealed from beneath his clothes, the elderly medic took a closer look, her golden
eyes a bit silvered, just as much as her dull, pink scales. She ‘hmm’ed’ quietly as she observed the
tattered tapestry of the Hylian’s skin and he folded his arms against himself, not in self-consciousness
as much as cold, but perhaps still a bit out of embarrassment.

“You do appear as though you went through an ordeal, indeed. I would expect as much from
anybody who fought in the Calamity,” the Zora’s gruff voice, tough as it was, held a touch of
melancholy and she shook her head, as though to dislodge the memories that lurked there. “One
can’t help but wonder, though, why this healing process left scars behind in the first place, apart from
those that predate your fall in battle.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, honestly,” Link said, his shoulders raising in a shrug. There were
plenty of things in this world that he did question, but he’d spared his physicality a bit of mercy.
“It’s fascinating, to be sure,” the medic observed, then she straightened, folding her hands behind her back, her features turning pinched for a moment before she decided to go to work on what she’d been summoned for. She turned aside, gathering up a small handful of tools and gestured for Link to turn around so she could have a better look at his stitched wound.

He rotated atop the bed, folding his legs as he did. When the medic came near again to examine her work, she only grew more impressed and astounded by what she found, letting out a hum of intrigue. “This wound healed miraculously well. Mind you, my work is near flawless, but that aside, the healing process is much more complete than I would have expected. In fact, your body has nearly pushed the stitches out, all on its own.”

“That must be why it itches like mad,” Link commented, though something else was bothering him. “So, you met me a hundred years ago? I would’ve thought that my relationship with Mipha would have prevented me from having any need to personally know a Zora medic.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s true, for the most part,” the elder replied, her hands idly setting to the task of taking up her tools and removing what remained of the sutures, snipping the knotted threads and carefully dislodging them. “But if my memory serves me correctly, you became particularly interested in having certain procedures done a hundred years ago. It’s a mystery to me why you didn’t ask Lady Mipha to heal the surgical wounds in order to prevent scarring, but you very obviously didn’t, because some of the scars you carry are my handy work- I’d recognize them anywhere. We should still have your medical record on file in the archives. I was adamant about rules and keeping strict documentation back then.”

“You’re kidding,” Link mumbled, barely able to conceive that any information existed on him from a hundred years ago, save for the guess-work Purah had in her personal files, which seemed unreliable and strangely ambiguous.

“No, not at all,” the medic tittered, her voice otherwise quiet and steady in her concentration. “Hasn’t anybody told you how strict we are about carefully documenting and retaining information? And speaking of that- I’ll send one of medical trainees to escort you to the archive storeroom, if you promise me one thing. If you get your hands on any solid information about Sheikah medical practices and procedures during your travels, or even how this Shrine of Resurrection works at all, send that down to me.”

“You got it,” Link agreed with ease. He wasn’t entirely sure if he would ever find anything of note, because he’d found little in the actual shrine to go on, and Purah was impossible to shake down for answers of any kind. Again, he considered that maybe his best chance of real, meaningful discovery rested with Robbie, who he’d yet to visit at all. Maybe he could even arrange some kind of correspondence between the man and this Zora medical scholar; if anything, she’d have a better eye for spotting bullshit than Link.

“Excellent,” she purred, sounding very much like a fussing grandmother again. She removed the last stitch, then straightened, saying, “You’re all finished here, Champion. Please refrain from getting yourself into such terrible trouble again, will you?”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” Honestly, this medic would probably shit herself if he tried to explain that he had the ability to revive himself after death. Maybe he’d actually consider that for the future, but not today.

“You know what I miss?” The Sheikah merchant had taken the Sergeant’s comfort as an excuse to relax and ramble freely, as well. Even their state of enthusiastic banter came in a manner that was soft
and smooth, the words sliding off their tongue like blood across a well-oiled blade. “The bookstores of Hyrule Castle Town. Well, I miss the idea of them, anyway, because I’ve never seen such a thing. But I’ve heard enough about their grandeur that I can imagine them well enough to miss them with such a real intensity.”

While Sheik spoke, Betaal’s single, golden eye carefully, politely flickered over her company, especially while the young merchant peered over the fort walls, completely oblivious to the Zora’s curiosity in their apparent awe. She studied the movement of the Sheikah’s lips, the shape of their cheekbones, the short crop of their pale hair, the strong curve of their chest and the otherwise strict lines of their frame, hidden beneath their layered garments.

“I’m sorry,” Betaal apologized, letting out a sigh of subtle frustration. She was awkward enough at social interaction without having to tiptoe around something that was escaping her, in regards to her new acquaintance. “I realize that this is an unusual question, but considering that we Zoras get it all the time from other races, mostly Hylians, I hope it’s excusable.”

“Hm?” With a blink of questioning, the deep, enchanting crimson of Sheik’s eyes set upon the awkward Zora in attention. “Yes, what is it, Sergeant Betaal?”

“Should I- uhh- should I call you ‘he’ or ‘she’?” The Zora’s fins flattened in her absolute embarrassment. She shouldn’t have been so flustered, especially considering that her ability to carry on in social situations typically only faltered in the presence of pretty women; it was especially bizarre when she went about this mode of fumbling around someone she was not only clueless about, but who also wasn’t even the same species. “Again, I’m really sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry,” the young Sheikah reassured, their lips forming a soft curve while a quiet sound of amusement purred from them. “In a way, it’s interesting that you actually decided to ask, rather than guessing at it.”

“Normally the sexual dimorphism of warm-blooded races is more clear to me,” the blue Zora gruffly explained, still unable to really meet the intense gaze of the Sheikah in her shame. Zoras lacked the features which the warm-blooded races associated with femininity; breasts and the wide hip structure required for live birth. In fact, Zora women even tended to be similar in size and strength to the men, which caused other races a heap of confusion. She never thought she’d be on the opposite end of that mixup, however.

“Sexual dimorphism- my, you are well-read,” Sheik laughed, unbothered and calm. “Yes, well I’m afraid that as a highly sentient being, I transcend the simple assertion of sexual dimorphism in regards to how I am defined.”

“Excuse me?” Fumbling, the Sergeant gave a quiet laugh when Sheik did, then she shook her head, feeling suddenly quite sure that her new acquaintance was taking advantage of her confusion for the sake of amusement. “I’m afraid that I don’t follow.”

“I’m an ever reincarnating, immortal spirit lodged into one impermanent meat husk in an innumerable series of bodies that preceded this one, and will follow it. As such, I have been a man, I have been a woman, and am therefor no longer able to exist as one or the other.” The way the Sheikah explained this was matter-of-fact, unflinchingly clear and pure, like it was the utmost gospel truth, which left the Zora without any further evidence for suspicions. “So to answer you, you may refer to me as ‘they’.”

“I see,” Betaal muttered, a bit flabbergasted that it was even still possible for her to be so impressed. Every word the other spoke was smooth across her scales, intriguing and enigmatic, yet making perfect sense in it’s own way. “Not many people really tend to think of their existence beyond their
current one, despite our dedication to the idea of ourselves as forever reincarnating. It’s an interesting perspective- one that I’ll have to keep in mind.”

With the ease that the other took and accepted the Sheikah’s explanation, it left them pleasantly surprised in turn. Most of the time, people guessed at Sheik’s designation and Sheik generally tended to allow assumptions to go unquestioned. In their life, true individuality was a matter to be discarded, in favor of serving as the silent hand which guided and acted upon matters of principle. As such, when they were offered some tiny hint of acceptance, in regards to their very personal existence, as an individual, it was something special.

“Well, thank you for that, Sergeant Betaal,” Sheik said with a polite smile, their tone sincerely grateful. “Your outlook is a most refreshing one.”

“You’re very welcome,” the blue Zora shrugged, still perhaps a bit sheepish over the situation, no matter how smoothly it had been resolved. Her single-eyed gaze wandered, however, and she caught sight of someone of interest approaching the fort from the river, below. She’d received news of a transfer from the city and her best guess was that the single, new hand had arrived.

“Ah- well, back to work I must go, I’m afraid,” Betaal said with a gesture to indicate the Zora swimming upstream.

“It was kind of you to allow me to look around,” Sheik batted one hand, falling in line with the busy Zora as they began back toward the lower level of the fort. “Thank you, again.”

Of course the old medic sent Link off with the same wary, young Apostle who had greeted him in the entryway of the infirmary. She was quiet and almost begrudgingly polite all the while, despite how the Hylian quickly attempted to excuse her, in favor of getting lost, then finding the archive himself. She was very pale in coloration, but thanks to the white shawl she wore, it was very apparent that she was actually yellow, or perhaps even a cream color? Or maybe peach? Either way, Link found himself awkwardly wondering why it was that Zoras of any shade of yellow were such stuck up pricks.

Alright, maybe he was being a bit unfair to the peachy Apostle, and she was just shy or naturally introverted. Or she was busy. Link couldn’t judge too harshly, given that he wasn’t exactly the warmest summerwing butterfly, either. He was probably just looking to scapegoat his frustrations toward a certain other yellow Zora.

“I’m sorry it was such a long walk,” the Apostle broke the long silence between them, her voice as wary as her demeanor. “The archive is through this door. Sorry again,“

“Oh- why are you sorry?” Link upturned his gaze to regard the peach-scaled Zora and though she appeared quite calm, she averted her own eyes at the sight of his sharp, blue ones.

“I’m sorry- it’s just that you look rather upset or angry,” she explained. “I’m sorry for saying so.”

“What, no, I’m not.” Well, maybe he was. Slightly? Not really. He hadn’t thought he was making any kind of expression at all, regardless, other than a neutral one.

“Ah- I’m sorry,” the Apostle apologized yet again. “Maybe I’m very poor at reading Hylian faces; I don’t often interact with Hylians, you see. My mistake. Sorry.”

“It’s.. fine.” Link shrugged, utterly confused. “Thank you for, uhh, showing me to where I needed to go.”
The Apostle nodded and even offered a soft dip of her head before she spun on heel and began back in the direction of the infirmary. Link, too, turned to venture through the door to the archive, drifting on his feet like he was a softly floating cloud, carried by the whims of the wind. A strange, confounding question was attempting to press itself through a tiny rift in the Hylian’s mixed up psyche, and he was forced to listen closely, like his own thoughts were secrets whispered through a cracked doorway.

Did he.. Did he have a resting bitchy face? Hylia help him.

The moment he finally came back to his actual senses, he found himself pointlessly invoking Hylia’s aid yet again, because not only were the Basilica archives never-fucking-ending, he wasn’t sure where to even begin. He meandered up and down the rows of various stored documents, overwhelmed by the shelves full of printed information; leather-bound books and cylindrical tubes that held parchment scrolls. He walked and walked, until he found himself in a maze of shelves which housed innumerable amounts of thin, stone tablets, apparent failsafes in the case of the Basilica being flooded; that was his best guess, anyway. He felt that it made sense.

“Do you need help, young Hylian?” A scholarly Apostle came to walk near the Champion’s side and at his offer, Link chiseled away another chunk of his massive pride and set it free, resigning himself to accepting the assistance.

“I’m looking for a hundred-year-old medical record,” he intoned, not even slightly impressed with himself, so he wouldn’t doubt if this Zora assumed he was a bumbling buffoon for even assuming he had any hope of finding this shit on his own.

“If it hasn’t been altered in the last hundred years, it would have been stored by now,” the Apostle explained, his voice gentle enough. “We don’t transfer medical records to stone, but we do store them in waterproof tubes for safe keeping. Follow me and I’ll show you where they are located. Do you have the name on the file that you’re searching for?”

A sigh of frustration came from the Hylian at the question- sometimes not knowing oneself made it all the more difficult to learn about oneself. “Only a given name,” he replied, sure it sounded hopeless. “Link.”

“Well, that does make it a bit more complicated,” the Apostle shrugged, but maintained his good-humored tone. “However, it’s an uncommon name among Zoras, so that will greatly narrow down the search, I’m sure. If this is your record, or the record of another Hylian like yourself, that detail will also be indicated within the record itself, further narrowing the options. Here we are.”

The pair stopped before an impossibly long stretch of shelves, which were lined with labeled tubes. Link’s first thought was that his incredibly small height was going to make his life even more of a living hell than usual. His second thought was that there better have damn well been a spirit orb in his tube, when he found it.

“Thanks,” he breathed, his pointed ears tilted downward in expectation of just how long this was going to take him. But, he wasn’t in the habit of backing down from ridiculously difficult challenges, so he couldn’t bear to walk away now.

After some hours, and with not even half of the shelf space fully searched, Link began to lose the mental capacity to even comprehend the names he was reading over. Letters were running together and his bored mind was utterly rejecting the task at hand, in favor of much better things. Getting distracted by pointless shit was every one of those better things, because there were so many distractions, such as the conversations of passers-by, the assortment of different draping styles sported by the Apostles, and most of all, how many funny names existed within Zora’s Domain.
Link was keeping a mental list of the ridiculous names Zoras had given their children over the years. So far there was Klud, Salmo, Cadfi, Algii, and drumroll- Gill.

Seriously? Gill? Gill’s parents must have thought they were really fucking funny. They were probably the kind of people who make those sorts of jokes that were not just lame, but really, really old. They were probably the kind of people who walked into marketplaces and claimed that unpriced merchandise ‘must be free!’

Gill probably hated himself.

“Hylian Champion, is that you?” an oddly familiar voice called out, interrupting Link’s snickering. His ears twitched first at the sound, then he turned to face the source another second later, finding the Zora who had called to him to be as familiar.

Observant, blue eyes traced the elegant form of the pinkish Zora, her soft, girlish features always offset by her strict, serious attitude, and her arms which were constantly occupied with a stack of books or documents. Laflat- Sidon’s errand girl, err, Royal Secretary.

“Nah,” Link answered after peering down at himself, just to reaffirm that he was still, in fact, wearing his Champion tunic. “I’m a Hylian Champion-shaped Zora.”

“Hmm, very funny,” she hummed, setting her current burden temporarily aside. All Link could think was that if she found that funny, somebody should have told her about ‘Gill.’ The Zora woman dusted herself off and let out a little huff of effort from the heavy stack of books she’d been carrying about, then she regarded Link once more. “Of course, it was meant more as a, ‘What are you doing here?’”

“Searching for a hundred year old medical record,” he answered simply, though his words held the weight of his burden- an impossible task, an ache upon his very soul- finding this shit.

“Did anybody even ask what authority cleared you to look at confidential records?” Laflat skeptically inquired, narrowing her eyes and shifting her weight onto one foot, to better emphasize the displeased way she placed a hand upon her hip.

“Nope,” the Hylian answered, guiltless.

“You can’t look at these records,” Laflat stated, unapologetic in a way that could ferociously rival Link’s own devil-may-care attitude.

Taking a deep breath, Link slowly let it out, turning his fiercest, coldest stare up to meet the Zora woman’s own, only to have his intensity returned in the form of the golden flame which was the secretary’s glare.

“Look,” he began, drawing both hands before himself, his fingers stiffly held together, “I have been asleep for the last hundred years. Everyone and everything I once knew is dead, destroyed, and gone. Not only do I not remember even half of it, I also know exactly zilch about myself and since your people apparently possess a medical file on me, I challenge you to try and stop me from finding it. That file will probably only offer me a tiny morsel of truth about my life and the person I was before all this, but I swear to you, I will have it.”

To Link’s surprise, instead of apologizing and backing off, Laflat burst into laughter at his weird hybrid of an impassioned plea and an attempt at intimidation. It wasn’t just a little laugh either, it was a bout of hysterical giggling that bent the Zora woman in half for several long, awkward minutes that only soured the Hylian’s expression more and more as it went on.
“Really now?” she eventually managed to breathe through her laughter. “I don’t even need to stop you. You’d be here for the rest of your life looking for it, and that’s not including the upper shelves which you clearly can’t reach.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Link puffed his chest, crossing his arms over it. He probably deserved those comments, given how much he’d laughed about ‘Gill’ in his head, but that didn’t mean he was gonna take them. “You won’t be laughing when I punch you in the knees and knock you la-flat on your back.”

He, apparently, wasn’t going to need to go through with his threats, though, because he was doing a very efficient job of knocking her flat with his comments, alone. Her giggles intensified all over again, until the point that she was leaned into the shelf for support; Link could hardly believe she was actually so rude underneath that act she put on for Sidon.

“I think I can see why Prince Sidon likes you, now,” Laflat spoke as she straightened, her voice rough from all the laughing. She cleared her throat and brushed away the tears which were blurring her vision, then she said, “I’ll oversee your search, to make sure that you don’t look at any records that you’re not authorized to see. Also, you may be the Hylian Champion, but when it comes to searching the archives, I’m the champion and you’re just an amateur.”

At first, Link couldn’t help but feel a bit indignant, but he came to the conclusion that he should have expected such resilience from a woman who had to deal with Sidon’s little bouts of sass. Also, it had long been evident to Link that the Prince was the fastest, most nimble Zora when it came to swimming. It could be said, however, that Laflat possessed a comparable level of speed and skill when it came to searching through records and Link couldn’t help but imagine himself swimming through a sea of records upon her back, firing arrows at a very imaginative version of Vah Ruta made of endlessly high shelves full of file tubes.

Boredom did funny things to his head.

In less time than Link had already spent searching, Laflat actually located the wayward file; she even found it despite something incredibly unusual.

“This file doesn’t actually have your name on it,” she explained, handing the tube off to Link, who was waiting in both excitement and confusion. The confusion rapidly grew, overwhelming all other relief and happiness, writing itself into the furrowed skin between his brows.

“The name was uncommon, though, and sounded Hylian, so I pulled the record out to double-check it,” Laflat elaborated while Link opened the tube and unfurled the documents, leaning into the shelving at his back. “Your current name is mentioned in the notes, however. You must have changed it at some point.”

“Thanks,” the Hylian uttered, completely sincere in his gratitude. He absolutely would have never thought to pull out a record with a totally different name on it. As he read over the file, his confusion faded away and certain things began to make more sense to him. Other details served to amuse him.

“I’m twenty-six years old!” he smiled brightly, beyond gleeful at having a previous suspicion confirmed. “Purah’s estimations of my age were way off! She put down that I was sixteen, but I knew there was no chance in hell a sixteen year old could have become the Captain of a Princess’s Guard– it would have been irresponsible and ridiculous.”

Laflat let out a sigh, but it was one of contented amusement, then she folded her arms over her chest, rather satisfied with the results of her work– she was such a people pleaser. “You can’t leave with the record,” she explained, “but if you want, I can copy it for you.”
Like lightning flickering across the gently rolling horizon over Hyrule Field, Link’s eyes shot upward, giving the overworked secretary a wary, yet hopeful expression. “Really?” he muttered. “I already owe you my life, how deep into debt are you trying to drive me?”

“Very,” she said with an impish smile. “From now on, I expect you to back me up against Prince Sidon.”

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

How was it everyone? I know it's a bummer that Sidon is slightly removed from the story for now, but hopefully Link's antics still offer some intrigue? I hope so, anyway. Also, how about all the business going on at Fort Boko? Was anybody happy for the insight there? Gotta let me know these things, friends! ^^
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

While tensions between the Uppercity and Undercity Zoras were steadily rising thanks to the food shortage, Link and the Captain of the Guard snagged a rare chance to unwind, strengthening their friendship. Their evening, however, would not be free of all serious discussion, as Bazz certainly always had duty in mind. As such, he had a favor to ask of his Hylian friend.

Bazz wasn’t the only Zora with his mind determinedly set on a task. The Heroine, Gaddison, had at last received the transfer she fought so hard for, and she set to work immediately upon her arrival. Well, almost immediately, anyway.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends! Here is this weeks chapter, not quite late, but not exactly the most timely, either. It's basically a midnight release, haha. So, just a quick warning, there are some rough subjects in this chapter. I'm sure it's nothing the lot of you can't handle, but just so you're aware and prepared..

Read on and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“But we have no food!” the dark-scaled Zora hissed, her clear fins puffing at the guard who stood towering over her.

“There is no more room. The line is capped,” came the unapologetic tone of the guardsman. He stood straight and tall, the image of authority and control, clad in armor and a weapon in hand, even against a smaller, unarmed civilian. “You may return at a later date. For now, please vacate the halls of the Basilica.”

“Why isn’t the line moving?” she asked, a desperate demand- she knew the answer, she had no need to ask at all, yet she persisted. “How is it that all of these people had food before it was taken, yet now there isn’t enough for even half of them? What makes you think we can just keep waiting for things like food and clean water?”

The pleading woman’s voice was weak with hunger, only enough strength left through force of will, alone, but even so, her words were enough of a threat to push the guardsman to violence. He raised his weapon above the smaller Undercity woman, striking a harsh blow with the butt of his spear and knocking her aside with trained ease.

“Stay down!” he growled, thumping his weapon against the ground in warning, forcing the woman’s compliance with the threat of further assault; even despite the demands, it wasn’t as though she had any other option but to lay still, as her head was reeling from the force of the strike, a thin trickle of blood tracing the clear membranes of her forefins.
“Because of your refusal to vacate when ordered to do so, you’ll stand trial before the courts of the Zorana Sovereign for your attempts to incite civil unrest,” the guardsman spoke while he returned his weapon to his back and drew a pair of shackles from a hook on his belt. “If you move or resist in any way, I am authorized to use lethal force. Do you understand?”

“Sir,” came the voice of another Zora, a different Undercity woman stepping clear of the line of onlookers and approaching the guardsman. His yellow eyes raised to regard her, his glare sharp in warning and vacant of remorse. She, on the other hand, held her slight frame bent in submission, her hands raised before herself, her voice calm and gentle. “Sir, please, just allow me to take her home. I’ll make sure she doesn’t cause any more trouble. There’s no need for arrests or any further violence.”

“Clear out or you’ll be placed under arrest, too, bottom feeder!” The guardsman stood over the bleeding Zora, his toeclaws clicking in impatience near where the injured woman’s head rested.

“Guardsman-” called the sharp, commanding voice of yet another onlooker- the Guard Captain. He strode over, looking to take control of the unraveling situation, his observant, golden eyes peering from the neutral, respectful expression that the armored Zora offered when he noticed the presence of his superior, then to the hopeful, fretting features of the Undercity woman who had stepped in to intervene, and to the trembling woman bleeding at the guardsman’s feet. “What is the situation?”

“Sir- these Undercities were causing a scene, even after I explained the situation to them,” the guardsman answered. “I’m placing them under arrest.”

“No, Captain-” the Undercity woman cut in, her hands still drawn before herself, “I was just taking her home, I swear! She asked too many silly questions, but she wasn’t trying to make a scene. Please, we’ll leave right now, sir.”

“Leave, then,” Bazz said with a gesture, though he did not move from where he stood until the intervening woman successfully helped the other Zora back to her feet and limped away with her in tow. While he waited, the Knight Divine, who had been tailing him from a slight distance, came to stand within earshot, her head shaking in casual disapproval. The black Zora did not allow her hovering to sway him and he issued his orders to the guardsman once the Undercity women were out of sight, his voice both stern and achingly tired. “Guardsman- as you were.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the guard, returning to his post without any fuss.

“You’re much too forgiving, Guard Captain,” tutted the Knight Divine, her fine adornments making quiet clinks against the steel of her armor and the soft fabric of her shawl. “You should make examples of any Undercity refuse that attempt to make waves amidst these trying times. Their violent ways must be curtailed, or else you’ll only be encouraging this behavior.”

“Forgive me, Knight Divine, but I believe they got the point.” Bazz brushed off her concerns, turning to face her now that the situation was de-escalated and no longer required his attention. “...and personally, I like to hope that this can remain peaceful until it is resolved, which I also hope will be soon.”

“Hm,” the older Zora woman made a soft noise that was somewhere between a chuckle and a scoff, though it was utterly bereft of any amusement. “How in the world did a boy of pure, noble blood grow up to be so soft? You’re certainly not your father.”

“And never have I aimed to be, Most Courageous One,” Bazz responded, somehow managing to sound gracious through the creeping exhaustion and insult. These comments were nothing he wasn’t used to, however; he’d paid the price for refusing to follow in the footsteps of his nobleman, war-
The fort Sergeant had enough time to see her guest off before her newest recruit— not a recruit at all— stepped across the bridge and into the fort. The newly arrived woman slowly observed the fort’s rough-edged splendor; she could have easily passed for another merchant, with packs strapped over one shoulder and weapons hanging upon her back, but Betaal not only recognized the roughened scales of an armor-clad soldier, but the rare hue of those very scales.

“You’re Guardsman Gaddison, aren’t you?” the blue Zora greeted the other gladly, her first consideration being Dunma, of course. Betaal was sure that the young woman would welcome familiar company and that such a thing would also be good for her. “I recognize you from the evening of the Blood Moon.”

Gaddison gave only a curt nod of her head, golden eyes seeming to absorb not just every little detail of her surroundings, but as they were turned to the shorter, Undercity Sergeant, they were cool and reserved, peering into and through the other woman.

“Welcome to Fort Boko— or the Elegy Spire as its officially called— though the guardsmen do still refer to it as Fort Boko.” Betaal failed to notice any tension that might have been present, lost instead in the pride and joy that was her fort, and welcoming someone who she was glad enough to have in her ranks. “I doubt that habit will be broken any time soon.”

“Thank you, sir,” the lavender Zora purred, a smile masking her features while her eyes wandered again to the bustle going on around them. It was very different from Zora’s Domain, and personally, Gaddison did appreciate the change of pace, much as she loathed to admit that Bazz had been right about that. However, she had other, more important goals to keep in mind. “I’m happy to be back, though it took quite the struggle to have my transfer approved.”

“That’s unfortunate. We certainly could use a few more experienced guardsmen, to set good examples for the newer recruits.” At times, keeping so many newly trained soldiers in line, alone, felt like an impossible amount of work. Though, young as Dunma was, she toed the line whenever she was on duty and she was an absolutely prime example of what every guardsman should have aspired to be. Betaal certainly couldn’t feel as though she unfairly favored the younger woman, with how excellent she was.

“Why ever was it so difficult to receive the transfer, anyway?” the Sergeant inquired, her one, golden
eye narrowing in confusion. If she recalled correctly, Dunma had mentioned that Gaddison had long been friends with Bazz- that should have offered the lavender Zora the same easy avenue for the transfer as it had Dunma.

“Hmm..” Gaddison made a sound of wariness, her posture shifting with her feigned uncertainty, then her gaze fell upon the Sergeant once more, seemingly searching for any sign that true trust was available. “Since I’m not officially on duty as of yet, would you like for me to speak freely?”

“Yes, of course,” Betaal’s gruff voice softened to a gentle tone and she nodded, oblivious to the deception.

“The truth is,” the guardsman began, straightening while she did, “..my former relationship with Bazz is precisely the thing that has caused me so very much heartache. You see, it’s simply impossible to remain objective, as a superior, once emotions are involved. Once disagreements began to occur between the two of us, for instance, the Guard Captain used his position to make my life very difficult, and to make my job unenjoyable.” Gaddison’s eyes settled upon Betaal’s face as she spoke, each word more sharp than the last. “I wouldn’t have thought somebody I’d known since childhood could be so bitter and impossible, but that is sadly just what results from relationships between people at two different levels of power.”

“Oh, I..” the Sergeant hesitantly uttered, her awkwardness suddenly bubbling up, and not just because Gaddison was a beautiful woman, but for more troubling reasons. She cleared her throat, puffing her vivid, red fins in an attempt to appear less guilty and more like the commanding officer that she was. “I understand. And I’m very sorry to hear that you’ve had these troubles. If you’d like, I can show you to the various fort facilities.”

“An apothecary-” the pastel-scaled Zora cut in, needing hardly a second to consider her answer. “You have a stocked apothecary, yes?”

“We do, in fact.” Betaal confirmed, completely professional and newly reserved, though it was something artificial and automatic. Her fighting instincts at last filtered through when she sensed the promise of danger, a blatant warning that fell from the smiling lips of the other warrior woman. “It’s nothing as fancy as back home, but all of the necessities are in stock.”

“Thank the Goddess and all of the great spirits for that,” the taller woman cooed, her voice deep and rich, her eyes like those of a predator, shining under the cover of darkness. She heaved a sigh of relief, content enough to see to herself, for now; she would save further investigations for later.


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Thankfully, the trip back to the surface wasn’t going to spoil the high which Link was still riding from the success of finding his medical record. It might have been a small victory, but for someone who was constantly on the edge of existential panic, it was incredibly meaningful. From now on, whenever that dreadful question drifted to the forefront of his psyche to threaten him, he had an answer for it.

‘Am I still myself?’

Not only was he still himself, but he was also 26 years old. The record hadn’t contained his date of birth, though he supposed that this day could be marked to represent a makeshift birthday. It was his day of rediscovery, and that was certainly more worthy of celebration than the day he awakened in the Shrine of Resurrection. It was just too bad that Sidon was asleep for it, though Link supposed if he hadn’t been, he wouldn’t have been able to tear himself off of the Prince long enough to make these discoveries.
Maybe he needed a little time to become self-sufficient again? He’d been so concerned that his affections for the Zora Prince were softening his sharp edge, or that he’d allowed himself to become otherwise swept up and deluded by this single, precious thing, but perhaps it was still possible to have both and he simply hadn’t considered it yet.

Prior to Sidon, Link had absolutely nothing in the whole of this wide world that made him happy, or gave him any real reason to cherish his own existence; it was no wonder he turned so spiteful over Mipha, all things considered. He had been utterly alone, devoid of ties to people who still existed, or even a clear definition of who he was, outside of a duty to the Hyrulean Royal family and the Goddess Hylia. Now, he had one person who he dearly cared for and who also seemed to love him in return, and because of his previous isolation, he’d found himself clinging desperately to this one beautiful connection.

That probably wasn’t a very good look and he definitely needed to work on it. He’d felt the onset of this illogical, desperate addiction long before he was even willing to admit that he liked Sidon, so there was little doubt any longer that he’d finally succumbed to it.

He was in love. He’d said as much. Okay. But where did he mean to go from there? It was pretty funny how his listlessness, stagnance and a general desire to cease to be made him completely unable to plan for the future. Did he say funny? He meant frustrating.

Sidon was a busy man, yet he still found plenty of time for his own personal responsibilities. All Link really needed to do was learn how to emulate that, just a bit. He’d never reach the Prince’s same level of multitasking, but he would also never ask that much of himself. At this point, carrying on in Sidon’s absence was his main goal, and his short term goal for this particular night was to enjoy the metaphorical concept of his rebirth.

An even shorter term goal was to evacuate the dive bell he was presently trapped in, because if he was forced to psychoanalyze himself for very much longer, he would probably make some kind of real, positive change in himself and who had time for that?

The water quietly lapped at the mouth of the bell beneath the tread of Link’s boots, then at last he surfaced with a rush, a temporary waterfall cascading off the curved surface of the iron device. Even above the water, the light was gone, the lengthy summer days fading slowly on the horizon and bringing a renewed chill in the night.

Link tapped his shoes impatiently at the steel of the tightly locked gate, until the guardsman who had been turning the crank came over to set the Hylian free. Black and white hands were all Link could see from inside the bell, and he assumed that it was the same younger version of Bazz who he’d met earlier in the day; it made sense to him that the same guardsman would return to assist him with the same task, anyway.

To his surprise, when he slid free from the tiny prison and took a deep, relieved breath, he was indeed greeted by a familiar face, but not that of the guardsman from earlier. Instead of the baby-faced version of Bazz, Link found himself peering up to regard the genuine article.

“Hello there, Master Link!” He greeted the Hylian rather cheerily, something of a violet flush staining the pale of his cheeks.

“Guard Captain.” Link spoke Bazz’s title like an accusation, already entirely suspicious of his apparently chipper mood, because with all the shit that was going on, should that have been possible? “Aren’t you a bit busy to be helping me with something as menial as my comings and goings?”
“My three-day-long shift is done in another couple of hours,” the black Zora heaved a sigh, maintaining the smile on his face which seemed an even heavier burden than all of his duties and responsibilities combined. “I can certainly spend the last of it assisting you, Master Link.”

“Oh, well that’s um..” If Bazz’s strangely pleasant mood and the warm hue upon his otherwise pale scales weren’t good enough indicators that something was off about him, the subtle scent of alcohol woven in somewhere between the smell of pine-oiled armor served as the final hint. “Bazz, are you drunk?”

“Well on duty? Certainly not,” the Zora man laughed, batting a single hand dismissively at the Hylian, to which Link folded his arms against his chest while he gave the sleek Zora a look of clear disbelief. He’d rarely seen Bazz gesticulate in such an animated way; in fact, normally one might have believed that the Guard Captain’s roughened hands were heavy weights by his sides, just hanging onto him and awaiting use, the same as the weapons strapped to his back.

“I might not mind getting to that state sometime tonight, though,” the Captain relented at his friend’s scrutiny, uttering these words with a quiet titter, a coy secret. With the same impish grin on his face, he straightened and folded his arms behind his back like a vigilant sentry. “However, I do have to oversee an important matter that just came up beforehand. Would you be interested in joining me, Master Link? There may be something in it for you.”

Something about the very sly twinkle in the armored Zora’s yellow eyes poked and prodded Link in his own mischievous side, rousing his curiosity. He supposed that whatever was up the Zora’s metaphorical sleeve could have counted toward his own personal celebration of self-discovery; at the very least, spending time with a friend definitely met the qualifications.

“Count me as interested,” Link answered Bazz’s invitation like it was a challenge, his pointed ears twitching upward with his growing intrigue.

“I knew I could count on you!” the black Zora damn near cheered, reaching out to pat Link’s shoulder in further encouragement. The Hylian tipped to one side but quickly righted himself, already snickering over newly meeting this easy-going and cheerful version of Bazz, which lurked underneath his typically serious exterior.

“Well then, follow me,” Bazz gestured for his newly recruited guest to come along and Link was only surprised that he wasn’t quite so drunk that he forgot that his Hylian friend couldn’t just swim up waterfalls. No, instead, the Guard Captain sauntered toward the stairways, which were tucked aside, and Link let out a relieved sigh to see he wasn’t so absent of mind.

“Go ahead, lead on,” Link coaxed after a moment, when Bazz paused to glance back, checking to be sure Link was still following; it seemed he almost expected the Hylian to vanish while he wasn’t looking, or maybe Link’s lack of continuous speech and light footsteps had the Zora second-guessing if he was still present.

With that one tiny reassurance, the Zora man gave a nod and didn’t fret any further. Link remained in his wake, quietly observing not just Bazz’s behavior, but their surroundings all the while. Bazz quickly understood and accepted that the lingering silence was merely his friend’s normal, comfortable behavior; it was evident in the way he didn’t prompt Link for small talk while they made their way back toward the Uppercity.

Well, either that, or he had put his serious face back on for the sake of maintaining appearances; that was particularly interesting for Link to acknowledge. He personally knew that the Guard Captain was Big Bad Buzzed Bazz at the moment, but the Zora was obviously quite good at pretending otherwise.
The pair ventured further upward, ascending the twisting walkways of the district where the nobles lived. It was normally a lovely area to explore at night, as it was well-lit by etchings of pure luminous stone and dotted with planters which were alive and overflowing with swift violets and softly glowing blue nightshade. Now, however, the remnants of the quake’s destruction left many areas closed off, while others were visibly damaged but holding together just enough for safe passage.

They eventually tucked inside one of the numerous corridors which Link knew would lead to the various open doorways of private residences. Every one of these sheltered passages were scouted constantly by the city guard, and the Hylian found himself wondering what it was Zoras had against doors? Wouldn’t it have been easier to have doors to protect one’s privacy and belongings, rather than requiring a guard force to perform the same job? He was sure it was some sort of cultural difference that he failed to understand, so he refrained from outwardly questioning it.

“Here we are,” Bazz announced, a certain hint of his previous glee still present in his tone of voice, though it remained just a bit concealed, or perhaps softened from before.

Link wasn’t actually given adequate time to badly analyze the inflections of his friend’s voice and the meanings behind them because the very moment they began into the curved entryway of their destination, an assault on his senses stole away his concentration.

“Ohh,” he grunted, his voice barely forcing its way through the suddenly tight space of his throat. He came to an immediate halt, his body stiffening in response to a thick, festering stench carried on the lurking humidity of these Zora homes. “There is a uhh,” Link coughed, his hands twitching in an attempt to resist being placed over his face. “..a smell, isn’t there?”

“Oh, yes, there is,” the Guard Captain stated plainly. “Drat, I should have given you something to drink beforehand. It helps to pleasantly numb the senses just enough to make that rank stench tolerable.”

“So you have been drinking,” Link spoke up, mildly triumphant for all of a single second in his success at catching the Guard Captain in an apparent verbal blunder and he even wagged one finger at the taller Zora before his good humor was stolen away again by utter disgust.

“Master Link, you asked if I was drunk,” the black Zora explained, his words smooth and curt, his tongue moving across each one with precision, as though this were some minor teaching moment. “You didn’t ask whether or not I had been drinking- because yes, I have.”

Clearly, once Bazz accepted you as a friend, he moved past all the warm, cuddly shit and skipped right to being a cheeky bastard. A joyless grin spread across the Hylian’s features, his lids heavy over top of his sharp, blue eyes in a plain, cynical, lack of amusement. “Thanks for making the distinction,” he replied, his voice turning unwavering and deadpan.

“You’re very welcome,” Bazz chuckled, pleased with himself. “Come in, hurry. I’ll pour you something to take your mind off of the offensive odor.”

“What is that smell, exactly?” Link spat, his words garbled while he attempted to inhale and exhale as slowly and shallowly as possible. The air was heavy and wet to the point that it left a dew on one’s skin and every drop of drifting moisture was flavored with something putrid and grotesque, so the scent lined one’s lungs and sat directly atop the tongue. In his time, Link had endured some of the most disgusting things imaginable; prying parts from filthy monsters, the squalor of bokoblin camps, heaps of disemboweled enemies left behind in his own wake, and from time to time, he even became one of the more offensively pungent scent experiences across Hyrule, second only to hinoxes, which tended to roll about in their own shit and hoard festering meat for later consumption.
“Yeah,” Bazz hummed, the sympathetic parts of him drowned out beneath an alcoholic veil, so that dismal apathy remained to paint the sound of his words. “It’s a rotting, Blighted corpse.”

“What?” the Hylian choked out, swallowing with thick difficulty, as though he were eating the smell- it reminded him of this time when he found a sunken chest poking up from the murk of a dying pond. He’d tried to wring it free of the sludge with magnesis, but it had apparently been tangled in some nasty debris, which forced him to tread into the muddy water to pry it out. Treasure aside, this particular pond was in the beginning stages of becoming a malice bog; it was still watery enough but also so toxic that everything which had been living in it was dead. The remains of fish and frogs drifted at the surface, creating a nasty soup of decay. Piles of tiny animal bodies laid scattered at the shore, picked apart and strewn by mountain crows. In short, it was unpleasant.

As it was, Zoras smelled sort of like a hot-footed frog’s ass when they perspired, so it made sense that they smelled like a whole pile of dead ones when they, well, died.

“Yeaah,” the Guard Captain dragged his words a bit as he spoke, swatting his hand again so it was easy enough to imagine him shooing the gathering flies. He led Link into the residence while he explained, moving casually past a small handful of guardsmen who were working, though at this point it looked more like common pillaging. Amidst it all, there laid the sunken frame of a dead Zora, the flesh of their abdomen a bloated but thinning, delicate container for a slosh of black, viscous muck. They were tangled in rot-stained sheets, their posture frozen into the contorted shape they must have taken in their death throes. Handfuls of scales had fallen free from their flesh; it looked like they were a yellow Zora when they were alive, though that was supposition, given that they were now ashen and murky pale.

“.apparently this nobleman passed away after contracting the Water Blight and he died quietly, alone in his home. It’s a real pity, because he owned an Undercity bar that I frequented, and now the damn thing has been ‘temporarily’ closed down,” Bazz continued, venturing past the body without giving it much regard. Like most Zora homes, this one was modest in size, but it had two chambers and the black Zora led his Hylian guest into the back of the home, away from where the corpse lay so it was, thankfully, out of sight. “The manager of the establishment came by today to discuss plans for how handle the business during the food shortage, because drinks are in short supply, too, of course. Then, the manager noticed that awful stink upon his arrival, as well as the corpse, and he quickly informed us of the situation.”

Link followed quietly, preferring to listen while Bazz freely spoke. The room toward the back of the house was where the now dead noble’s cistern chamber was tucked out of sight from the rest of the living area; it was still brimming with water that looked relatively clean and the glassy surface vibrantly reflected ripples of blue light from the stone lamps, onto the ceiling and walls. There were also wide windows opened to the outside, which let in a fresher smell- that much was a relief.

To one side of the room, there was a bar made of the same blue stone the entire home was constructed from; it erupted from the wall just beneath one window and curved to form a flat, polished table top, with offshoots that flowed into the floor, supporting the weight of the structure and offering enough room for legs to slide underneath. Bazz sauntered behind the mini bar, fiddling with what appeared to Link as a plain wall, albeit one that reeked of Zora aesthetic, with the glowing etchings and numerous, looping designs. To his surprise, a hidden cabinet lurked behind the structure, and he gave the Guard Captain a mild but impressed look when he slid it open.

“The good news is this,” Bazz uttered, his tone newly slathered in simple delight, “he had some nice stuff tucked away.” Indeed, behind the hidden door, there were a few small chests lined with various different kinds of drinks, from simple ales and wines, to distilled spirits. The Guard Captain automatically went right for the hard stuff, drawing out a lovely glass bottle which was more than
half-full with a rich, amber liquid.

“Yes, indeed, they didn’t call him the Prince of Drinks for nothing,” the black Zora chuckled darkly, drawing out a couple of glasses from the hidden cabinet and setting them on the bar before himself. Link clambered up onto one of the stools and folded his legs up under himself to compensate for his small height and structures which were built for Zora bodies. When Bazz had filled one of the glasses to half capacity, he gently slid it over to his Hylian company with a wry smile. “Here you go Master Link, bottoms up.”

Roughened fingers smoothed around the cold, crystalline surface, idly sloshing the liquid around the glass in gentle circles while Link hesitated to actually accept the drink. His gaze moved from the warm honey of the beverage to regard Bazz across the counter; he had a placid, distant look on his face, not even needing much focus to pour himself a drink, as well.

“You’re not going to get in any trouble for this, are you?” Link asked, his concern a casual, muted thing, these questions something to double-check while he brought the glass near his lips and waited.

“Nah. Hey, don’t worry about me,” Bazz flashed his sharp fangs, his lips drawing back in something of an expression, but not quite a true smile. Something in the gold of his eyes had a confident steeliness to it, though, and he peered back at his Hylian friend, the look alone oddly reassuring.

“Enjoy yourself. Things have been stressful lately.”

“So it’s really okay to steal a dead guy’s stuff?” Link commented, glancing toward the doorway where Bazz’s own men were casually turning the entire place upside down in plain sight of their boss, who was drinking, no questions asked. All he could think as he shrugged his shoulders and finally upturned the glass to slug the liquid down, was that he was going to have more than one ghostly Zora following him around after this.

Link’s ears pressed back when he swallowed and set the glass down on the table, the skin of his nose wrinkling from the burn in his throat. The drink greeted the tongue with vibrant sweetness, turning rapidly astringent in the back of the mouth and hot against every soft, sensitive part all the way down. It even left a warm glow as it settled in the stomach.

“Courser rum,” Bazz purred, taking a gulp from his own glass, savoring the bitter burn. “Sweet as their honey, stings like their venom. Good, right?”

“I don’t notice the smell as much any more.” The Hylian couldn’t help but agree to the helpful nature of it, with the way it permeated his mouth, throat and nose with the acrid-sweet tang. That and he was always up for putting his ability to resist alcohol to the test.

Taking another quick sip, the black Zora settled in, placing the bottle just within reach and folding his arms against the counter, then he gestured to the next room and spoke up to answer the previous question. “Since the guy was still fairly young, he didn’t have a will and all of his possessions now belong to the state. We’ll probably ration out anything we find hidden that’s edible, but everything else will end up being handled by the courts. They’ll try to find out who the rightful recipient is according to the law, but other than that.. his estate will be picked apart by his fellow nobles.” Bazz reached for the bottle, generously refilling both glasses as if to say, ‘So enjoy this,’ then he grinned, his sharp teeth glistening, even in the shadows that fell across his features. “...It’s gonna be like a newly hatched babe cannibalizing its unhatched siblings.”

A casual slurp turned into something of a cough as Link processed those words and all the Zora across from him could do was laugh over it, the sound quiet and empty to his ears. Once he properly swallowed and cleared his throat, he posed the most immediate question which naturally came to mind. “...is that something that really happens or is it some kind of metaphor?”
“It does happen, or well, it used to.” The iridescent shine on Bazz’s smooth, black scales shimmered all the more while he shrugged, taking a quick sip from his glass, his golden eyes looking down on Link like he’d just remembered that he wasn’t actually a Zora. “We usually don’t talk about it with, you know.. Hylians.”

A single one of Link’s brows raised and he leaned his face into one palm, shifting his glass slightly back and forth upon the counter. The funny thing was that he didn’t actually know if Zoras understood the subtle differences in expressions which involved eyebrows. The silence apparently lent Bazz the proper initiative to further elaborate, however.

“There was this big hubbub about it some years after the Calamity,” the Zora man began again, his gaze distant while he rambled. Link stole observant glances at Bazz’s face while he wasn’t looking back at him, and he thought for a moment he could almost see some of the tension leave the Zora’s countenance. Like assumingly many people, not that Link really knew since he wasn’t actually a social drinker, the stern and serious Guard Captain’s locks loosened under the influence. “So, our population had been knocked pretty low at that time and it became common for us to separate our eggs, rearing them separately to prevent the clutch cannibalism. Normally Zora families raise one child at a time, but rearing three, or a full clutch, became pretty common for a couple of decades. Then, we had an incredible boom in population as a result of that, and the discussion about clutch restrictions became renewed.”

Link raised his glass once more, taking a quick swig and nodding along while Bazz spoke. He figured that if he just kept quietly nodding, he could acquire a full history lesson, laden in sordid details that Prince Sidon would probably never dare to utter. The black Zora, too, paused long enough to take another drink, then he went on.

“..The government decided that we needed to restrict our hatchling numbers once more, because the city definitely has a defined capacity for how many Zoras it can house. Two really strong opinions emerged at that time, in opposition to one another.” One of Bazz’s hands gestured flatly, as though he were actually pointing out some solid entity. “There were those who believed the ‘natural’ means of population control was best. They claimed that the dominant child should always be allowed to carry out its natural instinct. The logic behind this was that because it was a naturally occurring function, it was automatically the correct choice. The dominant child was supposed to be the healthiest, and best of the clutch, natural selection, yadda yadda. Also, apparently, by eating its unhatched siblings, it gained really important nutrition that couldn’t be otherwise replaced, thereby bolstering its overall health and well-being.”

The Hylian blinked in wide-eyed astonishment, combing one hand through the fringe of his hair while letting his facial expression fade back to neutrality; he didn’t want to risk the trust he’d apparently earned by rudely commenting, even with his face. Again, he nodded, interacting enough to keep the conversation moving.

“And what was the other opinion?”

“The other opinion on the matter was that we should restrict clutches in the most humane way possible.” The Zora man’s hand shifted now to regard an alternate, invisible entity. “..and the humane option is to randomly select one egg and rear it, destroying the others before they have a chance to develop. When the eggs are laid, they are still undeveloped, so they don’t have fully functioning brains or nervous systems. They’re not actually people yet that can think or feel. Whereas, in the case of one hatchling eating its siblings, its siblings haven’t hatched, but they are developed and alive, therefor, it’s a cruel process, even if its only a product of natural instinct, not active malice. There was also the thought that by giving parents and physicians the ultimate choice of which egg to raise, the instinct, itself, may one day be weeded out of our bloodlines altogether.”
Link was beginning to feel the ache in his neck and shoulders that always came about when he drank and he was sure that the tips of his pointed ears had a reddish flush; that was about as far as the effects ever got, however, so of course he made his best attempt to challenge it. He threw the glass back, finishing the beverage off in a few quick gulps, then he slid it across the table and back to the man in control of the drinks.

Now it was Bazz who blinked in subtle amazement, because he probably figured these drinks would have somebody as small as Link knocked on his ass, easy peasy. He gave a momentary look of concern, to which the Hylian just batted one hand in silent dismissal and with that, the black Zora refilled the glass.

“So which opinion do you agree with?” Link asked as the cup was pushed back into his grasp. He was actually genuinely curious to learn more, whereas normally he carried on these social dances only when absolutely necessary. “What do you think is the right thing to do?”

“The idea of preventing cruelty strikes me as far more important than some misguided notion of ‘superior young’,” Bazz snapped, his tongue moving so quickly, it was like he’d known the question was coming. Then, he also threw his drink back and finished it off, looking rather like he was feeling challenged by the fact that Link was faster. The Hylian couldn’t help the quiet laugh that came out, more of a breathy sigh, really; Big Bad Bazz was apparently still trying to live up to the example set by his tutor, even if only unconsciously.

“But hey, this got a bit too dark, yeah?” Bazz waved one hand after swallowing down the bitter liquid, chuckling somewhat awkwardly and shaking his head before a jaded look stole the happiness from his face. “Gaddison always said I rambled about depressive nonsense when I drink, so I guess that was right.”

“Gaddison..” Link repeated this name, trying to recall through the subtle haze over his awareness exactly who that was. She was the pastel-scaled woman in the Guard, right? He remembered that she also greeted him at some point, referring to him as ‘Master Link’ and recounting that they used to swim together. She was a bit more reserved and mysterious in her behavior, maybe even more serious than Bazz tried hard to be. Link couldn’t help but notice, with twitching ears, that the black Zora referred to her in past tense, though. Had she gotten the Water Blight, too? That would have been a pity, because she was truly a beautiful Zora.

“Anyway—” the Zora man cut in a bit sharply, not giving Link much room to ask anything more. “..there’s this kind of offensive joke among us, about eating our siblings,” he chuckled darkly once again while he refilled his glass. “Whenever a youngster hatched post-Calamity is particularly badly behaved, their parents might say something like ‘I should have let your siblings eat you.’ It’s a terrible joke.”

“So, Zoras born, err,” Link shook his head, his face scrunching with his minor verbal blunder, “Zoras hatched before the Calamity all..?”

“Ate their siblings?” Bazz filled in when his Hylian drinking partner trailed off, his cup hovering at his lips. “Yeah.”

“Even you?” The glass in the Hylian’s hand was pointed in Bazz’s direction.

“It’s not like I remember it, Master Link!” the Zora laughed, almost choking as he did. His smile died down rather quickly and the steel of his armor clinked softly in a shrug. “..but yes, I suppose. My father was a big supporter of that whole ‘natural selection’ business. Actually, a lot of nobles were, so it’s amazing that the law didn’t swing in their direction on it.”
“I didn’t even know that you were a noble,” Link commented, the skin between his brows softly furrowing. Now that he was actually considering it, though, it should have been obvious. He knew precisely which Zora elder was Bazz’s father, and he knew the man was on the King’s Council as well as being a retired Knight of the Royal Order.

“Ahh, yeah,” Bazz hummed, his gaze falling upon the drink resting between his palms, then he raised it back to his mouth for another taste when the silence hovered.

Link wasn’t the best at reading people, but he was starting to catch on to what it looked like when Bazz was uncomfortable. So, the Hylian took a quick sip of his drink, then cleared his throat and reverted back to the previous subject. “So uhh.. eating siblings.. Even Mipha?”

That was impossible to imagine, to conceive of.

“Yep,” Bazz nodded, a smile worming its way across his lips as he chased that natural line of thought. “And Prince Sidon,” he said with a titter, following it up with, “He probably had a really easy time with it, too,” clicking his teeth together for emphasis, though his face fell almost instantly into one hand and he mumbled a very muffled, “Oh, that’s inappropriate.”

“I’m not sure how to feel about this information or what to do with it,” Link laughed, a bit uneasy and very dubious, but somehow still amused.

“Hey- welcome to Zora culture. You’re one of us now, remember?” the Guard Captain raised his voice in praise, though it sounded incredibly flat. It was fitting, though, considering he was welcoming Link into their society and baptizing him with all the bitter truths that lurked underneath the grace and elegance of their race.

Bazz took another swig, wrinkling the skin at the base of his crested brow and curling his lip so his sharp fangs shined. “Also,” he began anew, his tone still taking on that dull, joyless sound, “..we ended up justifying that awful business by saying things like ‘At least our babies kill their siblings, not their mothers.’”

“Referring to what?” Link questioned, missing the context of the joke.

“Referring to how common it seems to be for Hylian mothers to die in childbirth,” the Zora man answered, clearly a bit uncomfortable as he did, despite that he was the one willingly criticizing the faults of his own people to somebody of another species, altogether. “..yeah, we always make all kinds of low blows at your people, to make us feel better about ourselves. Again, we don’t usually share this stuff with non-Zoras.”

“I’m starting to see that, yeah.” This time, it was Link who fell flat while he spoke and he took a deep gulp from his glass; it felt like something very bitter was suddenly resting on his tongue, so he chased it away with something a bit sweeter. “..some Zoras don’t really like to be forthcoming about certain things that non-Zoras might not understand or agree with.”

“Hmm..” Bazz nodded his head in a soft, knowing manner, his mouth forming a tight line upon his features. He took another drink while considering whether or not he should further comment on what his Hylian friend had said, but of course he couldn’t hold his tongue. “Prince Sidon didn’t tell you what was involved with that potion, then, huh?”

The glass in Link’s hand was set down just a bit harder than usual and his blue gaze turned sharp as his eyes flashed up to regard the Zora. “You knew about it?” he inquired, his voice harsh and nearly disbelieving.
“It’s pretty common knowledge that the process is physically stressful,” Bazz nodded, all too casual about it. “What’s worse—every Aristocratic family offers their daughters and sons up as suitors for the Royals, knowing that they’ll be required by law to undergo the same process, like a contractual obligation upon marriage.” The black Zora sort of rolled his eyes with a bitter shake of his head and Link could only wonder if Bazz had been offered as a suitor for Mipha at some point.

“.I think women aren’t required to grow themselves to quite the same size as men, but I believe they have to be at least a bit larger than half the size of the King,” the Zora continued and Link was content enough to let Bazz ramble while he festered in the sudden knowledge that he was the only one out of the loop and still Sidon hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him what everybody else already knew. “According to history, the Queen that preceded Dorephan, so his mother, outlived her mate by refusing to stop taking the potions. She was even larger than the average size of a King.”

Bazz cleared his throat, rubbing one hand along the side of his face at his own absence of empathy before he reached across the bar and gave his Hylian friend a nudge of encouragement and a soft smile. “Hey, I’m sorry Sidon apparently didn’t say much about it. He should have known that a Hylian would have no clue what to expect. It must have been pretty shocking.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Link intoned, taking another deep gulp from his glass, nearly finishing off another one; Bazz topped it up out of kindness or maybe pity, then the Hylian shook his head, speaking to revert to the previous subject again, but this time to conceal his own discomfort. “..all I can think of is how difficult that must have been to dispose of upon her death. The Queen, I mean.”

Though Link’s voice suddenly channeled the hollow ring of the man he was before he even met the Zora Prince, Bazz perked up, going silent for a moment while the Hylian’s comment absorbed and processed, then he let out a howl of laughter, folding one arm atop the counter and bending his head down into it, his entire body shaking from the effort.

“This is such an appropriate conversation to be having in the home of a recently deceased man,” Bazz bubbled sarcastically, stilling his laughter by turning up his drink and finishing it off. “..anyway, I believe the potions actually change the bodies of our Royals so astronomically, it alters the way they break down postmortem.”

“In what way?” Link threw up a single hand in a gesture of confusion, his brow creased with sudden stress that he hadn’t even known was camped out in his broken psyche.

“I’ve only read things,” the Guard Captain mumbled with a hint of uncertainty apparent in his tone. “..but my understanding is that they harden into an almost glass-like state, becoming exceedingly water-soluble and dissolving.”

“Bazz,” the Hylian mumbled drearily, taking another sip and rubbing his temples as he swallowed it down. He couldn’t believe there were so many wild ass facts about the Zora people just drifting beyond worthiness of mentioning between himself and his apparent lover. “I’m going to have to have you as my informant from now on. I need you around to tell me about all of this crazy Zora shit.”

“Ah! Fair enough, Master Link!” Bazz softly chuckled, his shoulders slumping a bit while he leaned into the counter, nursing his drink now that he was getting appropriately numb to everything. “..Then perhaps, if you plan to stick around, you won’t mind being my drinking partner from now on? It’s a wild change of relationship from the innocence of yesteryears, but hey.. People change, right?”

Bazz uttered his last words with a touch of spite, then he drowned them out with the drink in his cup,shrugging once more while he swallowed and confessed, “..also, I could use the company.”
“You got it, then,” the Hylian agreed with ease, reaching out to clink his glass against the Zora’s, then he took another few deep gulps, looking to finish it off yet again. When he succeeded in this endeavor, he placed his cup down in triumph, letting out an ‘ahh,’ before he said, “Drinking partners.”

“So,” the Zora hummed, his actual concern fading into plain acceptance, in regards to Link’s hasty alcohol consumption. He reached for the bottle, refilling the Hylian’s glass without question. He might have even crossed into the territory of intimidation, seeing how easily Link was out-drinking him. When he finally continued his hovering words, his voice had turned back to serious business. “.I may or may not have been softening you up for the sake of asking another favor; that offer to assist refugees traveling to Hateno Village is still standing, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” Link shrugged. He had been looking to put his life back on a meaningful course, yeah? “I don’t have much else to do at the moment. What do you need?”

“I have a team of guardsmen already assigned to assisting the back and forth travel, as well as keeping the peace in Hateno Village.” Bazz explained in his very official ‘Guard Captain’ tone. “I can count on you to help them settle in and to actually warn the other villagers ahead of time, right?”

“Right,” the Hylian agreed, nodding his mussed, blonde head. “When do you need this done?”

“Soon,” Bazz breathed, the golden embers of his eyes glinting only more as he narrowed the dark shadows of his lids. His fingers tightened on his glass and he brought it to his mouth swallowing the bitter drink down with renewed thirst. “Very soon. The situation here is bad, and that’s being polite about it. This has to happen as soon as possible.”

“Alright. I’ll travel out tomorrow to make preparations, then I’ll come right to you with whatever news I receive.” For a passing second, Link began to consider that maybe he was reverting back to being a selfish asshole again, or that the alcohol had loosened his true self out from under the soft, love-struck layer he’d added to soften his edges. It was terrifying, for whatever time he spent considering it, because it meant that no matter how he changed, he would always be the same basic shithead, destroying anything he dared to care about. Here he was, whining over not being told about this and that, while the Zora people were actually suffering and the Prince had a thousand things plaguing his peace of mind. With a sigh, he pushed those thoughts aside, needing to hate himself just a bit less so that he could pretend to be decent.

“You can count on me,” he murmured, a serious expression falling over his countenance while he peered across the table at the tired-looking Guard Captain. Despite the shadows of exhaustion and personal turmoil beginning to overwhelm the black Zora, he smiled back.

“Thank you, Master Link,” Bazz said, his voice warm and genuine. “Thank you so much.”

Chapter End Notes

How was it, everyone? Link and Bazz's friendship is just steadily increasing, huh? I don't know about you all, but I'm digging the bromance going on between them, haha! So, hey, definitely let me know what you all thought of the chapter, but I also wanted to ask one other thing- how many of you are long time Zelda fans and how many of you just started on BotW or maybe haven't even played the game at all? I'm slightly curious about that.
Just a reminder- definitely follow my tumblr. Not only is there so fantastic art on there, but I've also started an alert list for the physical copies of Coma Baby. If having a physical copy interests you, you realllllly need to be following my tumblr or at least my facebook fanpage.

I do really appreciate the generosity of those of you who go on supporting me and this awesome beast of a story. Thank you all so much for reading and for everything else. :)
Chapter Summary

With so much pointless loss of life, every person in Zora's Domain found themselves clinging to those who were still around, those who were still within reach. The Guard Captain, in his isolation, needed the help of his friend more than ever, though maybe he didn't realize it. Brivere, too, was utterly alone, and so he reached out to a person who both despised him, yet possibly needed him to. And the Zora Prince might have been isolated while in his artificial slumber, but it was for the sake of being there for others, who would've otherwise been alone in their final moments.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I finished this chapter up a titch early, so here it is, for all of you. <3 I'm afraid it is a bit on the depressive side, but honestly, what else is new. You've heard of depression memes, well, this story is the whole depression narrative. I'm so sorry.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Link actually managed to get a better idea what Bazz’s guardsmen were doing when the Captain ceased in his drinking long enough to oversee their progress. They wrapped the body in the sheets and cleared it out, leaving the Hylian fairly curious about where they stored their dead in the meantime and if all Zoras had funerals like the one he’d attended at the fort. He supposed these were questions that would eventually answer themselves the longer he remained alongside the Zora people.

Bazz checked over the inventory compiled by his subordinates, surprisingly lucid and very likened to his average, stern, serious, sober self, despite how very much he’d drank. Link could only look on in fascinated disbelief.

When the guardsmen finally cleared out, the Captain declared himself officially off-duty with some measure of exaggeration which was apparently necessary to outshine his overall apathy. He’d politely welcomed his Hylian guest to see himself off to bed, saying that he would linger a bit longer, clearly intent on continuing the assault on his sobriety. The tall, dark Zora rummaged through the hidden cabinet once more, searching for something to add on top of what he’d already had.

Even Link’s resistance to intoxication had slowed a bit with all he’d consumed and he’d begun to feel some mild effects; a new record. With that in mind, he declined Bazz’s dismissal, wanting to make certain that the Guard Captain didn’t send himself to some unfeeling abyss from which there was no return. The Zora’s behavior didn’t exactly scream recreation, as far as Link was concerned, so he slowed his own alcohol consumption to allow his miraculous resistance to catch up, all for the sake of looking after his friend.

He was sure that Bazz was quite the capable Zora, no, he knew that for a fact; what harm was there
in being sure, though? After another couple of hours in relative silence which was comfortably pensive for both of them, the Guard Captain quietly muttered something which escaped even the Hylian’s forward-pitched ears, then he leaned himself into the counter and promptly fell asleep.

This state could have easily been from exhaustion as much as the alcohol, but regardless, Link immediately reached across the bar to shake his friend back to waking. The black Zora didn’t shift and pull himself upright, he didn’t crack even a tired gaze at the concerned Hylian. All he did was let out a soft groan, flicking his tail in what could have been mild annoyance, and mumble the words, “Just go. I’m fine.”

If there was anything that Link was sure of, it was that Bazz wasn’t actually fine. He partly had to wonder if Bazz sought him out earlier, knowing that he’d need someone to care about him when he finally lost the will to do so. And, again, Link was assuming a lot, but it almost seemed that when the Guard Captain was officially set free from duty, all sense of responsibility was cast off, leaving Bazz completely empty and listless, without purpose or reason to prevent him from descending into an oblivion most thorough.

“You can’t stay here,” Link addressed the Zora, though he was thinking out loud more than anything. “..but I don’t think I could feasibly lug your big ass all the way back to the barracks.”

The Hylian let out a frustrated sigh, leaning his head into one hand, strands of his long fringe splaying between his fingers. He obviously had to think of something now and he kind of wished Bazz had possessed the clarity of mind prior to this to realize that a Hylian of Link’s stature could not carry a Zora anywhere without risking severe head injuries to both the Zora and probably himself, too.

“Damn it,” Link hissed, impatiently shoving his empty glass away, so that it slid across the smooth surface of the bar, only to come to a rapid halt when it collided with Bazz’s armored forearm. It produced a silvery metallic chime upon its halt, the ringing bell of an idea blooming into fruition.

The Hylian’s blue gaze peered across the tabletop, newly sharpened with cleverness that those damned shrines might have trained into him. When life gave him a puzzle to unravel, how often had his Sheikah Slate held the answer to these mysteries? And this answer was suddenly so conveniently apparent, he found himself unconsciously expecting the reward of a spirit orb.

Drawing the Slate from where it hung at his waist, Link lifted the device into one palm, tapping the screen to life, then navigating to his available runes, in order to access magnesis. Just as soon as he activated it and focused the Slate on Bazz, the iron-clad Zora lit up in a vibrant pinkish hue, and Link cackled over the sheer ridiculousness of what was about to occur.

“Don’t worry Bazz, I’ve got you,” the Hylian snickered, selecting the iron breastplate worn by the Guard Captain and lifting the Zora into the air with the magnetic strength offered by the Sheikah Slate.

Truth be told, however, Link was never too good at actually manipulating objects with the rune, so he took it slow while he eased Bazz off of his barstool and away from the countertop, carrying him through the house like a marionette dangling on tangled strings and trying incredibly hard not to bonk him into every door frame and corner. It was as comical as it was complicated- an otherwise imposing Zora man hanging like dead weight in the air, his limbs useless and flopsy, his head tipped forward in slumber that was only mildly disrupted by this bizarre occurrence, and a tiny Hylian in control of the entire scenario, trying to focus and show extreme care despite the horrid grin that had spread across his face.

If he actually got Bazz back to the barracks in one piece, he did not plan to let him live this down.
Only after Link exited the residence did he realize that there would be a secondary layer to this challenge; getting Bazz back to the barracks in one piece with his dignity also somewhat intact was sure to make for a much more difficult burden. The Hylian quickly ducked back inside the curved entry way of the cavernous Zora home when he heard the clank, clank, clank of a guard sentry approaching, accidentally slapping Bazz’s head into the top of the archway in his hurry.

Merciful Goddess, Link could not comprehend how tall people got themselves around without colliding into everything in their way. He was suddenly grateful for the fact that he was small and maneuverable, rendering the world around him ample and spacious. Anyway, it was a good thing that the Guard Captain was clad in so much armor, and not just because it gave Link the means to move him about.

When the sentry passed by, Link took a deep breath to steady his nerves, then he strode out and down the hall, his fingertip hovering near the screen of his Slate to make little adjustments along the way. He was doing his very best to take care that he did not injure his friend, while also avoiding being spotted. He couldn’t let anyone else see Bazz like this or he’d be humiliated. Not to mention that it was also incredibly suspicious. He wanted to avoid being mauled by the guard and imprisoned in the Basilica, if he could.

Again, it was one of his key goals to make sure that Sidon did not wake up to a huge disappointment.

Thankfully, the streets were mostly empty, with not even the wandering drunkard to be seen. As the black Zora had stated, alcohol was one of the many things that had run scarce in Zora’s Domain, so it was safe to say that partying was at an all-time minimum. The ever-scouting guardsmen lurked about, but the Hylian took care to avoid them by remaining in the shadows where he could, his keen hearing instrumental in helping him predict where and when the armored Zoras would pass by.

He was surprised to learn that he did, in fact, have something of a propensity for creeping about undetected. Once he got the hang of maneuvering his Zora charge, the actual stealth came naturally, like muscle memory, like instinct. Still, he felt an incredible surge of relief when he finally made it to Bazz’s private chamber in the barracks, knowing he no longer carried the weight of his friend’s reputation on his shoulders.

Breathing a heavy sigh, Link released the Zora from the hold of magnesis, delicately laying him down upon his bed. While he tucked the Sheikah Slate away, he smiled to himself over the irony, speaking it aloud just to see if Bazz would respond to the sound of his voice.

“The tables turned pretty quickly, huh?” he remarked, referring to how Bazz escorted him here a day prior. Link kicked off his own boots before he crawled up onto the bed, intent on helping the Zora out of the stifling, uncomfortable armor. He unfastened it all, piece by piece, until Bazz was left in only the cover of his black and white scales.

Link did nothing too fancy or neat with the discarded bits, save for casting them over the side of the mattress, making several loud, metallic clatters as he did. He hoped the noise would stir the slumbering Zora, but aside from some minor fidgets and shifts, Bazz did very little.

“Bazz,” the Hylian muttered, then he cleared his throat while tucking himself nearer to the Zora’s side. He raised the volume of his voice and hardened his tone, one hand gently slapping at the Guard Captain’s cheek all the while. “Bazz.. Bazz.. Bazz!”

“Wha- what’s wrong?” The Zora woke at last, squirming as though in an attempt to drag himself onto one elbow, the soft blue light of the faint luminous stone lamps hardly reaching the thin sliver of his eyes which were visible from beneath his heavy lids. Link could see him with fair ease in the
dark and reached out to settle him back down, placing a careful hand on his now bare shoulder.

“No- nothing is wrong. It’s alright,” he attempted to reassure, wanting to allow the exhausted Captain to rest, now that he was a bit more sure of his general well-being.

“Hm..” Softly nodding, the black Zora laid his head back down upon the pillow, quiet save for the smooth, deep sound of his breath. When Link leaned forward to tug at the blankets and pull them over his friend, however, Bazz jumped upright again, one hand shooting out with accuracy and speed that belied his utter drunkenness. His hand tightened around the Hylian’s wrist, his grip firm but not painfully so.

“Don’t go,” the Zora uttered, his voice gruff and achingly tired. “..Please, don’t leave.”

“I’m not,” Link responded, waiting for Bazz’s grip to loosen before he pulled the blankets up. He fully planned to stay the night, again, just to be safe, but that aside, he wasn’t sure that Bazz even realized who he was talking to. “I wasn’t going anywhere. Just lay down.”

The Zora obeyed with the same kind of sleepy ease of a tired child, settling down on his side and slipping right back into slumber. And while Link normally couldn’t even keep himself awake in the danger of the wilderness, while he laid next to his friend, he fought sleep off for as long as he could, lying awake and alert, listening to the steady sound of the Zora’s easy breathing.

Of the four grand sanctums within the Basilica, one was lined from wall to wall with sick, Undercity Zoras, the people who the Water Blight had hit the very hardest. Many laid completely still, some captured in the period of unconsciousness that would precede death, whereas others had already made it to that very grim destination.

Narrow corridors spanned out between the rows, enough for dutiful medical Apostles to dart here and there. They’d found ways to slow the symptoms and remedies that would make the ultimate descent a gentler plummet, but overall, they were veiled crows, flocking upon a mountain of dead, awaiting the inevitable again and again, until they were numb to it.

Among those who made tireless efforts to aid the dying, there was only one who could never be desensitized to the pain, no matter how many times he watched yet another Zora slip out of life and into a gruesome, pitiful death.

Somewhere in the crowd, one confused soul stirred. She felt first the woolen mat beneath the weight of her body, the way it provided little comfort to her thinned, bruised scales. There was hardly any strength in the whole of her frame, and her muscles burned from the effort of pushing herself upright as she fought her way to a sitting position. Her gaze was hazy, dark and her perception was utterly confounded. She could hardly recall how she got here, and the first sight she laid her eyes upon was the body next to her. It was hollowed and sunken, the skin tight around its bones, its sharp teeth and blackened gums protruding from beneath lips which had receded.

They were dead. No, no, no, why was she sleeping next to a dead body? Where was she? Why was she here? Where was her family? Why was she so utterly alone? Was she dying, too? Was she already dead? No, no, that couldn’t be right!

Trembling hands pressed over the woman’s eyes, her aching chest shuddering, heaving, hardly able to draw breath. She folded forward, coughing, sputtering, her useless lungs lined with blackness, just like the body next to her. No, no, no.
“There’s no need to be so fearful, my friend. You’re not alone here at all,” came a warm, gentle voice.

The woman’s hands dropped hesitantly from where she’d held them, shielding her eyes from the terrifying reality before her. When she looked up once again, however, the bodies were gone, her chest no longer burned in spasm, and there was a tall, young man standing before her, gazing fondly down. He held himself with elegant grace, taking a single step nearer before kneeling to be more level with the much smaller Zora.

“I’m here,” he purred with a soft smile and gleaming, golden eyes. One hand extended to the woman, his fingers unfurling, his palm upturned in beckoning.

“I...” she spoke up, her frail voice barely a whimper while her confused stare went from the other Zora’s face, to his offered hand. Not even mild consideration brought her hand toward his, however, her head shaking like she saw only a trap laid out before her. “I know you. You’re Prince Sidon.”

Again, the woman shook her head, her balled fists drawn tight against her chest, her hands hardly things allowed to touch a man like the one kneeled in front of her. Instead, she went to her own knees, her body bending low so that her rounded brow touched the stone floor. Maybe she’d never really offered the royal family much regard, and had only glimpsed any of them in rare passing. Yet finding one suddenly regarding her like she was something special, like she was important, it felt like a trick and she wouldn’t let herself fall for it. “Uhh, no my Prince, I mean Your Highness, Majesty, Excellency... I’m sorry, I’m not sure which one is right.. I’m sorry, please disregard me, Sire.”

“Sidon is quite alright, my friend,” he reassured, his extended hand carefully lowering to the groveling woman’s shoulder for a quick instant. “And I’m afraid I cannot disregard you, for I’ve come here to visit you. What is your name, friend?”

“Salis, my Prince,” she weakly piped up, still beyond unsure, but she carefully raised herself upright once more, her body no longer weak and burning with each movement. First, her silvery eyes looked down at her hands, her body; she appeared to be well and she certainly felt that she couldn’t possibly be ill. Her eyes then trailed ever so slowly up to steal a glance at the hovering royal son. “I’m known as Salis. I, umm, I don’t feel sick any longer. How can this be?”

Sidon’s smile softened at these words, his gaze faltering, but he didn’t dare allow it to slip away for long. When he looked upon the Undercity woman again, his expression was bittersweet and he nodded his head, his forefins swaying with the movement. “Yes, my friend, that was my doing,” the Prince explained. “I sensed your fear and turmoil, then came immediately to aid you. May I ask, dear Salis, do you have others waiting on you? Family, friends?”

The Zora woman allowed a comfortable smile to light her own features, her silver scales shining in the blue light of the Basilica sanctum. “I do, my Prince, I have a son.”

“Tell me about him,” the Prince said, gesturing to gently comfort and coax his seemingly shy company.

“His name is Mortua,” she spoke with a bit more ease. “..he recently got accepted into the City Guard, working downstream at the fort. He always wanted to be a warrior. I’m so proud of him.. I’m sure his other mother would be, too.”

“I’m sorry,” the much taller Zora tilted his head, attempting to look into the woman’s face as her head drooped lower. “Has she passed, then? The other mother of your son?”

“My wife,” she elaborated to make it clearer, noticing that the Prince made no assumption that they
were married. She hadn’t spoken of her in so long, not even to their son. She’d been so busy surviving in the meantime, every single day of her life, just surviving. It wasn’t a beautiful existence, constantly scrounging and fighting, but at least the daily struggle kept her woes pushed aside and at bay. She felt it now, however, almost as though some unrelenting force had reached inside to set her pent-up emotions free and no matter how she told herself not to break down, she couldn’t prevent it. The woman took a few deep breaths, trying to steady herself, only for her head to drop into her shaking hands again. “I’m sorry, my Prince. It’s hard to talk about.”

“You don’t need to be ashamed, not at all,” Sidon purred, his voice a warm, velvety blanket, enshrouding the Undercity woman in a kind of comfort she had seemingly never received.

“Allowing oneself such vulnerability is difficult, indeed. When people fall upon a hard surface, we naturally fall in a way that protects our most vital areas, minimizing whatever damage we can, avoiding whatever pain we can manage. Losing someone important to you is like falling, in that way. We shield ourselves from it. We lessen the pain however we can. We close ourselves off from those feelings, because they’re too much the bear.”

Quietly, idly, the woman nodded, her fingers brushing across her cheeks to prevent her tears from falling. For a moment, she peered down at her fingertips to notice the black stain left upon them, only for it to vanish with a few uncertain blinks.

“I’m so sorry,” the Prince apologized again, chastising himself for his own horrid wordiness. “I’m afraid time is short. May I show you something, dear Salis?”

The woman gave her head a nod, her trust suddenly budded into greater certainty when the Prince once again extended his hand to her, and she placed her own against the soft, pale of his palm. Her hand was a tiny, delicate thing by comparison, but the Prince’s grasp was ever so gentle, and he brought himself to a graceful stand, easing her to her feet alongside him.

Within the moment it took for them to get to their feet, their surroundings shifted, and suddenly they were no longer within the Basilica halls, but somewhere not so far away, somewhere very familiar to the woman by the Prince’s side. Her eyes wandered across her surroundings in confused disbelief, which melted quickly into awestruck wonder.

She was back home, in her tiny Undercity cavern. The dark gray walls were dotted with luminous stone, emulating starlight that burned dim and low. The sound of trickling water echoed throughout the tiny cave, but it was chorused by the sound of a deep, charming, familiar voice.

“Salis?” spoke a woman standing a few feet beyond reach. She was broad-shouldered and blue-scaled, the clear membranes of her forefins freckled with a pattern of black dots. She smiled just as soon as she saw the woman with Sidon, her canines awkwardly longer than what her mouth could contain, yet the feature only added to her charm when her face lit up with recognition and love.

“Toru?” the Undercity woman gasped, one hand pressed over her mouth, her tears now freely flowing and staining her cheeks with charcoal ash that the Prince could no longer hide away. “How can this be?” she uttered as her hand fell away.

“Souls that are bound can never be parted,” Sidon explained with a smile, his hand releasing that of the woman, and moving to the back of her shoulders, instead. “Go on.”

Upon being given the smallest word of permission, she hurried to the image of the woman she’d lost so long ago, embracing her with fervor that unveiled the depths of her loss, her heartbreak, yet also with questioning that was still readily apparent. She traced the form of Toru’s shoulders, her arms, her face. She pressed her own face into the crook between her neck and shoulder, basking in the feeling of Toru being really, truly there, doubting it, yet holding onto it while she could.
“You shouldn’t fret, my friend,” Sidon reassured her, his toeclaws tapping against the stone beneath his feet, his back curving while he bent himself to avoid the low hang of the ceiling. “You can remain by her side. You can take her hand and set off on a new adventure. The two of you will live again, together.”

“I’ve missed you terribly, Toru,” she cried, her voice tremulous and delicate, her legs equally weak, but the other woman lifted her lover into her arms to keep her from falling. “I’m so sorry that I was so weak without you. When we met, your love gave my heart light and hope. I always imagined that we’d be together until we were old, that our lives would be beautiful and full—maybe not perfect, but happy. I never had the heart to tell our son that all of my happiness vanished with you. I never had the heart to let him know that all my smiles were gone for good. Of course I loved him, but without you, living was empty persistence. I existed for his sake, not happy, not complete. I’m so sorry. I must have been such a weak, terrible mother.”

“No Salis,” Toru cooed, drawing her wife’s tiny frame only closer to her chest. “You could never be weak. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever known. You came through so much and you never gave up.”

“But I wanted to,” she breathed. “Aren’t I awful, just for wanting such a thing?”

“I think you’re very brave, regardless,” the Prince said with a smile, his tone confident and assured. The Undercity Zoras both turned to regard him, like they’d forgotten he was even there and he laughed softly, gladly, feeling no offense. “Pardon my interruption, but if you don’t mind me saying so, your desire to give up was quite the burden to carry, and it was very kind and selfless of you to fight each day, to do what was best for your son. Please, don’t discount yourself, and the wonderful strength of your spirit, dear Salis. However, if I may point out, your son, Mortua you called him?”

“Yes, my Prince,” the woman spoke with a nod, her tone turning sheepish. “That’s right.”

“You spoke of him as a warrior, a strong young man who is now standing on his own.” Sidon’s golden eyes wandered elsewhere while he spoke, his suggestion a difficult one to make. “He’ll forgive that you’ve returned to the one you love so dearly— you’ve waited such a long time, after all.”

“What?” Salis uttered, disbelief giving way to fear once again. Her eyes regarded the Prince in questioning, then her gaze meandered to her hands and the image of the woman whose arms in which she was safely held; they had faded to a transparent, luminous blue and just that sight prodded her nervous soul. Even if she’d longed for death, in the end, she still feared it.

“It isn’t an ending, my friend. Your life was but one story in a never-ending sequence of stories,” Sidon purred, taking a few steps nearer. “You and Toru have another story to tell, at long last. There is no reason to fear, and you’ll feel no pain at all.”

As Sidon spoke, their surroundings began to fade, the starlight-dotted walls breaking and falling away to reveal an entirely different cavern; a deep, dark tunnel with walls of royal blue that stretched endlessly toward a distant, golden light. The rays were warm and softly beckoned the two spirits toward their journey, yet Salis hesitated.

“Is this a trick?” she asked, her voice a pleading echo barely contained by her hovering form. She pulled free of her lover’s embrace, her body floating toward the Prince, coming to eye-level with him. “Did you put these images into my head to fool me?”

“I didn’t,” the Prince answered without hesitation. “I took away your pain, I drew the truth of your heart to the surface, and I carried you down the corridors of your memory. But Toru’s soul was truly waiting here. She’s been with you all along, waiting for the missing piece of her soul, so that the two
“You promise?” the Undercity woman whimpered, her tiny voice imploring the truth from the image of the Prince, standing with her at the edge of finality.

“I promise,” he smiled, folding his hands behind his back and straightening. “Your soul is free, your body is tired, and I’ll be here until you’re sleeping peacefully for the very last time. So go,” he gestured to where the shining form of Toru had paused, in waiting. “Rejoin your love. She’s waiting for you.”

“My Prince…” rasped the dying woman, her head gently cradled in the hand of an Apostle, her voice choked through the black blood that sputtered up from her chest, staining her lips. Her body was taut, shaking, gasping, clinging to life in the desperate way bodies did, until she shuddered one final time, and at last went still.

“Another one gone,” the Apostle mournfully uttered, his voice bleak and hopeless. Carefully, as though the dead woman might feel even an ounce more pain, he slid his hand out from behind her neck, laying her head down. His lips drew into a tight line, his features forcing away whatever show of emotion threatened to write itself there, then he raised his eyes to regard another nearby medic. “Why do they keep mentioning Prince Sidon?”

“The boy has powerful magic that he’s using to communicate with them,” the other Apostle answered, coming to stoop near the younger Zora, her body a shadow of midnight blue while she reached out to close the dead woman’s eyes, then she placed her other hand on her fellow medic’s shoulder. “...and to comfort them in their final moments.”

“They seem to pass much more serenely now,” the young man breathed, his heart heavy from witnessing so much death. “What a kind, gentle soul, to be with them as they go, to shoulder the burden of so much sorrow, for the sake of making their journey easier.”

“It must take quite a strong heart, to have so much love and kindness to give so freely,” the midnight woman agreed, though her tone was sullen, and she let out a dismal, tired sigh. “How many have we lost this evening?”

“That’s the eighth person I’ve counted,” the young man uttered, tugging at his shawl as a distraction. It felt as though having to verbally acknowledge the unfolding tragedy pushed him only closer to tears. “It’ll be many more before morning, I’m afraid.”

“Hmm,” the older medic gave a nod, her eyes closing as she did. “The young Prince’s work has only just begun.”

“I’ll be here until you’re sleeping peacefully for the very last time…” The voice of the Prince was a quiet hum of sound, like the autumn winds over the mountains, bringing the promise of winter rain. The sound, however, did not escape his ever vigilant, ever watchful Knight.

Brivere turned his head to look in the direction of his sleeping Prince and Sidon quieted the very moment the other Zora’s yellow eyes fell upon him. The otherwise silent attendant, who was carefully cleaning the blood from the Prince’s scales, drew back slightly in response, also hearing the sound of Sidon’s voice mumbling in his sleep.

“He utters quite a many things…” said the attendant, his pale yellow gaze shifting upward, to the
Knight across the room. Brivere broke the eye contact immediately, glancing toward the doorway of Sidon’s chambers, noticing the sentry just outside making rounds, then the golden Zora drifted a few steps away from his post, over to his Prince’s bedside.

Brivere gave the pale gray Zora tending to Sidon a quick glance, then he allowed himself to look upon the man whom he held so dear, his chest tightening, aching and overflowing with affection, both mournful and glad. “He’s speaking to those whose minds he’s touching.”

The attendant nodded, smiling softly before going back to his duties. Brivere remained, one hand cautiously outstretched, his fingers coming to rest at the edge of the Prince’s bed, which was as near as he dared to overstep.

He remained in silence for what might have been a few minutes, or perhaps longer, but nevertheless, his reverie was eventually interrupted by clanking footsteps coming much closer than the sentry who passed by again and again. Brivere turned to face the door before anybody even appeared there, but his guard softened when a fellow Knight of the Royal Order stepped across the threshold.

“Captain,” they addressed him, standing straight and attentive. “Your guard shift is over, Ser. I’ve come to relieve you.”

“Yes, thank you,” the golden Knight nodded, receiving a curt bow in return, then he strode from the Prince’s chamber, each footstep that carried him away taken with hesitance. Yes, Sidon was still well-guarded, yet Brivere couldn’t help but worry; it was his duty and obligation. It was something he simply could not escape.

Though, he did have other plans, and it was those very plans which gave him plenty to think upon during the quiet hours of his guard shift. They also gave him something to lean on, to push away other, more difficult realities.

The Knight went straight from Sidon’s tower, one of the highest points in all of Zora’s Domain, to one of the lowest, the depths where the Basilica was hidden away. His body was aching and sore from the ordeal the previous day, his scales marred and less vibrant than usual, but he was still an incredibly strong swimmer, and made it to the temple below with ease. He found his way to the infirmary with even less of a challenge, sparing hardly an upward glance as he went.

“Back again, Ser?” an Apostle greeted him when he entered, and he offered her neutral regard, nodding his head to answer her query.

He knew the rows of room dividers now as though they were the walls he’d grown up with, and he navigated the maze in an unconscious way, his stride quick and relentless, his legs carrying him to spare him from committing any further mental effort to this goal.

At last, he came to his destination, brushing aside the fabric curtain which offered privacy to the one whom he’d come to visit. He took only a few measured steps into the space of the other Zora, then he halted to await the other’s notice.

Sitting within a few short arm’s lengths from the golden Knight, a woman rested in a chair shaped to cup her form, softly cushioned for her comfort; the stumps of her lost legs draped over the lip of the seat, but Brivere’s eyes went straight to her face, which was darkened and lacking much of her previous vigor.

“Kree,” he spoke up in greeting, lowering his head ever so slightly when she looked up.

“What are you doing here?” the young woman hissed immediately, the sight of the yellow Zora an affront to her peace of mind, an offense to her very existence. She paused, further words taking a
moment to process, but they were nearly clear upon her features before she said a single word; the skin beneath her crested brow furrowed, her eyes shined with bitter tears and hatred, and her lip curled to show her gleaming fangs.

She tore her eyes away from Brivere, having to remove him from her own vision in any way she could, then she continued, “Did you come to gloat about how wrong I was and the consequences of my actions? Did you come to tell me that I deserved this?”

“I did not,” he answered plainly, not wanting to prod at the rage which was so palpable.

“Then why are you here?” the fallen Knight growled, though she spared not a second for the other Zora to answer her question; she didn’t even care what his answer was. Her question was an accusation, not needing a response. “You think just because you played the part of the ‘bigger person’ that I regret anything? Everything would have been fine if you hadn’t gotten in my way. If it weren’t for you desperately chasing glory that you’ll never obtain, I wouldn’t be stuck here, like this!”

The woman’s words tore from her throat, loud and merciless, as though her anger could solidify in her voice and strike the man just out of her reach. She gestured angrily at what remained of her legs, bandaged, battered stumps that hadn’t healed and ached with every breath. She never would have thought that the movement in her chest could sting where her bones had been severed, but now she knew better.

“This is your fault, not mine. You caused this!” she bitterly hissed, one finger pointing in Brivere’s direction, her eyes regarding him again, to find the man turned aside with his jaw tightly clenched. Looking at him, really letting her eyes take in the sight of him, it filled Kree’s chest with so many sharp, flailing, burning things that she had no possible way to set free, so instead her emotions dislodged themselves in the form of angry tears, which were hot as they traced her cheeks. “Everything you touch ends up destroyed. Your mother, your brother, that Undercity wretch you mercilessly beat for the position you now hold. Anything that comes anywhere close to you is ruined, so why don’t you just leave before you bring further misfortune!”

When at last every spiteful word had been spilled and Kree sat breathless and panting from the effort, it was left to Brivere to finally fill the silence; it wasn’t something he was terribly good at. He was sure that if he glanced down, or if he brought a hand up to inspect the expanse of his chest, he might find himself impaled upon a hundred merciless arrows, each one just another careless word, another hateful insult, but by Hylia, he’d be damned if he let them see it.

He’d come for a purpose. He had to remind himself of that. A deep breath in, then out, helped to still his nerve, the apathetic mask he wore enough to conceal him, and permanently hide his pain, or better, leave everyone with the belief that he felt no pain at all.

Everything would be so much easier, if he could channel even a fraction of Sidon’s poise and gentle reassurances.

“I understand. What happened to you was unfortunate,” Brivere spoke at last, his voice calm and steady all the while. “...And, what I know from experience is that blaming oneself for such misfortune will slowly kill one on the inside. It’s much more gentle to find somebody else to carry the burden of all the bad. So if that’s what you must do to get through this awful ordeal, then that’s fine and I’ll accept it. I suppose that being sel..”

Brivere trailed off as something of little relevance occurred to him, but he quickly pushed that invading thought aside, returning his focus to the situation at hand. “..being selfish is sometimes the only way to cope.. and survive.”
“Don’t you dare talk to me like that,” Kree muttered, her head hanging low, the wide flaps of her speckled forefins hiding her tear-stained face. “Don’t you dare come in here and flaunt your self-righteous bullshit to me.”

“I hate you,” the Zora woman hissed, her voice slowly losing strength and fortitude as her tears fell. “I hate you so much.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the golden Knight responded, detached but ever so gentle. “Perhaps we did not see eye to eye, and maybe you resented me as a leader.. but you were still a valuable member of my team and I want you to know- the loss of your service, temporary or permanent, was a grave blow.”

“You liar,” Kree spat, sniffing and rubbing her cheeks, still unwilling to look up to see Brivere standing there. “I’ll bet you’ve already replaced me, ‘Captain.’”

“Shall I go, then?” Brivere relented, Kree’s last word another puncture wound to his chest, an added weight to his shoulders. If she did not wish to hear him, he would not force her; maybe it was kinder for both of them if he gave up. He would allow her to make that choice, however. “..or would you like to know why I’ve come?”

“Oh, by all means, why have you come?” the woman threw up her hands, the tone of her voice sharp, yet also mockingly light, her beckoning a shallow pretense of interest, to flay some presumed notion of self-importance that she placed upon the other.

She didn’t want to know the answer at all and Brivere hesitated to speak it, considering whether he should wait, to allow her to say something more, or if he should have left her alone, entirely. Surprisingly, it was Kree who offered pause enough for him to continue, so eventually he resolved to do exactly that.

“..our people are so low on resources, they’re holding a mass funeral service for both the victims of the Water Blight, as well as those who died during the quake,” he began, his words coming slow and careful, to allow the distraught Zora time to process each one. “I realize that, as you are presently, you’re unable to swim back to the surface on your own. If you’d like, I can take you to the surface in order to attend. It’s the least I can do.”

“The least indeed,” Kree spat, her sharp teeth flashing with her words. The gray Zora yet refused to look in Brivere’s direction, but her expression visibly hardened further while she fell silent, perhaps considering his offer, perhaps considering how she hated him all the more for even making such an offer.

Brivere couldn’t help but ponder what her idea of his best offer would be; more than likely, it was his death or grave injury in her place, and his job as a result. And would she spare him a second thought, he wondered?

“I don’t need your sympathy and I don’t need your help!” she harshly yelled at the empty space between them, her body hunching with the effort, her claws gripping at the edge of her seat like she expected to topple to the floor from the force. New tears escaped her and she bent in half, her head nearly pressing to her knees when a sob at last came free.

Watching, Brivere couldn’t help but feel that something more had been levied upon the Zora woman, outside of the insult his presence presented, and her overall situation. Against his better judgement, he closed a fraction of the space between them, taking a few cautious steps toward the breaking Knight. Despite every awful thing she had said to him, all he could think of was the terror and pain written on her features while she was trapped beneath the stone, the night of the Blood Moon.
And if his own awful behavior had taught him anything, it was that people turned to vicious, spitting, feral things when they were in pain.

He was as soft as his mother always said he was. He was soft, because despite Kree’s vitriol, he couldn’t stamp down the very sympathy she accused him of.

She was given no choice but to peer up, to regard the yellow Zora, at the sound of his feet pattering against the floor, bringing him nearer. There was as much confusion in her tired, tear-stained features as there was anger and pain, but she only allowed the bitterness to paint her words when she spoke once again. “Why don’t you just leave me in peace?” Kree hissed through her bared fangs.

“Very well,” Brivere breathed, offering a soft bow before he turned on heel to leave, as requested. He’d cleared the curtain and made the shortest strides elsewhere before Kree’s voice called out, loud and desperate.

“Wait!” she yelled, her voice tight in her throat, still weak with tears that she’d only barely fought off. “Wait, wait!”

The golden Zora paused where he was, at first unsure that it could have even been Kree calling for him. Her voice went silent after a few short pleas, while he quickly assured himself that not only was it her, calling for him, but she must have believed that her cries came too late for him to hear. He would amend that.

Once again, he turned on heel, returning to the doorway and folding back the curtain. “Yes?”

“Ser Strata,” the woman began, her voice softened and nearly too weak to even speak the name. She could not break down any longer, as the tears had begun to freely fall, but she fought for whatever stability it would take for her to explain herself. It was visible in the way she took a deep breath, doing anything she could to steady her voice. “He was there at the fort on the night of the Blood Moon. He was one of the Knights who fell to the Water Blight. He and I were very close.”

Brivere listened while Kree laid out her explanations in concise sentences that she was able to maintain her composure throughout. Quietly, he nodded in understanding, and she brought her watery gaze hesitantly to meet his; it was still beyond angry, but even more morose.

“...fine,” she hissed this word like a declaration of defeat, a white flag of utter shame. “You take me to the surface for the funeral, because it’s important to me. But it doesn’t make us friends and it certainly doesn’t mean that I’ll like you.”

The golden Knight gave only a gentle nod of acceptance, a wordless promise to uphold the offer he made to her, then he left her in peace.

Chapter End Notes

I’m just gonna ask straight up - whose scene was the saddest? Seriously, friends, how was it? You know how I love when you all let me know. <3

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Have an excellent weekend. <3
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

As agreed upon, Link away'd to Hateno Village in order to implore the aid of his fellow Hylians, for the sake of the struggling Zora people. And though he knew well how stubborn and cowardly his own could be, he didn't expect his task to be such a chore. Brivere, meanwhile, kept a promise of his own, carrying out the kind gesture he'd offered to his fellow Knight.

Chapter Notes

Hey friends. I hope you all had a really good holiday. Here's another early chapter for you all! :]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even with autumn on the horizon, the heat of Eldin was never any less stifling. It wasn’t that Link expected something other than blazing, dry air so near the volcano, but with the weather in Zora’s Domain cooling down, it was even more noticeable.

He was an utter punk for leaving his horse here.

Crazy Girl detested being locked away and constantly handled, and Link was sure that the heat only made the situation worse. The stable workers certainly got a good laugh at the Champion’s expense, however, when they brought him his wild horse, only for her to see him and throw the most intense of horsey tantrums. She yanked and bucked her way to freedom, then hauled ass down the southernmost pathways, leaving Link to chase her in helpless desperation.

The stable workers cheered, waved goodbye, and howled with laughter of vengeful retribution when the Champion disappeared from sight, running into the dust cloud left behind by his ornery steed.

Link chased the horse until his fleeting wells of stamina ran dry, and he was reduced to a slow jog, huffing and puffing for breath. Whenever he would slow, so too would Crazy Girl, not allowing the distance to become so great that she couldn’t bask in her owner’s suffering, listening all the while with her backward-tilted ears. Her head swung from side to side, her mane flowing in the breeze like wildfire and she whinnied in spiteful amusement.

Yet even when she was making a literal horse’s ass of herself, Link found her to be charming.

He would recover a bit of strength, darting toward the horse with renewed vigor, only for her to go from a canter that made her seem more like a harmless child, merrily skipping about, back to a hell-bound gallop all over again.

Thankfully for the desperate Hylian, his horse trampled a thoughtless bokoblin which crossed the dusty pathway at the absolute wrong time, leaving its corpse for Link to loot. Link actually wasn’t interested in much that the poor sod had on it, apart from a good quality shield, which shined
brilliantly enough to give the Hylian an equally brilliant idea. He nabbed the shield, running to gain some speed, then he slammed it down, leaping onto it and hooking the toe of his boot into the handle on the back side.

The shield began to skid at a near breakneck speed down the dusty slope, rapidly closing much of the distance between the Hylian and his horse. It was all too convenient for him that his Crazy Girl had slowed to her adorable skipping pace yet again. Link leapt to mount the runaway steed mere moments before the shield slid under her hooves; she hardly even saw it coming.

Crazy’s ears pinned flat when she was mounted by surprise, and she went about the usual business of attempting to buck her rider, if only to save face. She made quite the effort, veering into a patch of dry, dead trees and slamming her sides into the trunks so that Link’s legs were battered and scuffed, but he kept right on her back, little different than a Guardian, once it had you in its laser aim.

Eventually, the horse decided to accept the inevitable, rumbling and snorting all the while. Link just gave his horse a pat for being her adorably spunky self; Crazy might have been her namesake, but he was probably equally crazy for loving her as he did.

Once his horse calmed, if one could call it that, Link finally took control and steered in the direction of Hateno Village. It was sure to be a long trip, but not even close to as long as it could have been, all because Crazy promised to gallop with relentless speed that only she could provide with some degree of normalcy.

He did have time, however, to brood over his awkward morning with the Guard Captain. Something about the rhythmic pounding of his horse’s hooves lulled him, easing him into the recollection.

The black Zora had awakened with something of a start, jumping upright in the bed energetically enough to startle the Hylian out of an otherwise peaceful slumber. Link, too, leapt into a sitting position, mumbling, “Wha-? What is it?” before even properly waking.

“Uhh, Master Link?” Bazz uttered, rubbing his head and peering about his surroundings before turning his concerned gaze to his drowsy friend. “I don’t really recall how we got here, or.. what happened.”

“Oh.. Umm..” Link gestured indistinctly, his sleep-hazed mind failing to produce anything akin to language, at least not immediately. “You got really drunk and passed out at the dead guy’s house. So, I uh.. Well, I brought you here.”

Bazz’s eyes immediately narrowed in clear suspicion and Link took a deep breath, then let it out, fairly sure that the Guard Captain’s next question was going to be, ‘How the fuck did you do that, exactly?’ He really did not want to explain that, because he absolutely didn’t want to embarrass the living daylights out of his friend. It was probably humiliating enough that some little Hylian had to fuss over his big, drunk ass.

The question that Bazz actually asked took Link by surprise.

“So,” he awkwardly began, “..we didn’t.. did we?”

Link slowly blinked, at first entirely confounded, though his perplexity very rapidly evolved into rather blind-sided astonishment. Bazz actually thought that they’d had sex? The thought had the Hylian taken aback, and his mouth fell open to speak some kind of answer, only for silence to issue forth.

Apparently, Link had earned himself a reputation as a manic Zora-fucker, out to reap the flesh of all
fish men; well, that was all he could think at Bazz’s suggestion. He was slightly offended by the suggestion, because he knew that his actions had been completely decent and entirely out of care for the other.

Did Bazz really take Link for somebody who would take advantage of a friend? And honestly, what kind of idiot would sexually assault the Captain of the Guard?

But, upon further consideration, something so brash and out-of-line did, in fact, sound like Link’s typical thoughtless, risk-taking behavior. The shit he’d pulled with Sidon didn’t speak well of him either, not that Bazz knew anything about it. He didn’t think so, anyway.

Okay.. so Link had actually taken advantage of a friend in the past, and the reminder of that very severe transgression burned with guilt in his chest. How wild that he suddenly possessed the ability to pretend that kind of nonsense was beneath him, though.

“Master Link..?” Bazz verbally prodded the Hylian when he got caught up in his own mental turmoil and failed to provide an answer to the very confused Zora. Link gave his head a shake to escape the static of his mind, then he cleared his throat in order to calmly explain what actually occurred. His friend was counting on him for reassurance, so it wasn’t exactly the proper moment for an internal guilt-trip.

“Nothing sexual happened, if that’s what you’re assuming, Bazz,” he said.

“No, Master Link, I’m certainly not accusing you,” the Zora man very plainly spoke, sounding almost indifferent to the entire matter. Something about that tone made the Hylian’s ears twitch, and he turned a concerned and questioning glance to regard the other. “..but you were very drunk as well, were you not?” Bazz questioned.

“Not like you were,” the Hylian stated, his voice taking on a worried sound to match the somber blue of his eyes, which were plastered to the image of the Zora’s bleak, empty stare. Link knew that kind of hopelessness; he’d felt its cold touch on his own features well enough to recognize it on someone else’s.

“I started to get worried about you, so I stopped drinking in order to sober up a bit,” Link calmly explained. “..then, when you lost consciousness, I brought you here, and I stayed in order to look after you. I don’t exactly know at what point alcohol is toxic for Zoras, but I was concerned.”

“Oh, I was fine,” Bazz said with a scoff and a dismissive bat of his hand.

“Yeah,” the Hylian uttered, dragging his syllables in an audibly dubious way. “You said the same thing while you were super drunk, so I don’t know if that’s really trustworthy.”

“Come on, Master Link.” Bazz might have smiled, but when he turned to look at his friend, he had his eyes narrowed and his tail was flicking softly at the very end; he appeared disbelieving or maybe even offended that the Hylian had underestimated him. Either way, he clearly didn’t appreciate the show of concern. Maybe he wasn’t even used to people bothering to show him any concern at all.

“Do I look like an adolescent? I know what I can handle.”

“Regardless..” Link trailed off for an awkward moment, unsure how to respond. He had a very distinct feeling that he needed to drop the subject, or play it off, or quickly find a way to change it. “..I wasn’t sure. I was just worried, and since you brought me here to sleep before, I figured you wouldn’t mind if I stayed.”

“I don’t mind, of course,” the Zora man stated, sighing and slumping in embarrassment. He shook
his head, letting his face fall into one palm for a quick instant, then he affixed a smile to his face. “And I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be ungrateful. I just don’t want to trouble you. There’s really no need to fuss over me.”

Link nodded, thinking he should have done or said something more, thinking he should have inserted himself right into his friend’s business, because that was what friends were supposed to do, right? Instead, he did nothing at all.

“I understand, Bazz,” he answered, letting the black Zora off the hook, fish puns not intended. The Captain accepted it, gracious and quiet, then he pulled himself from the mattress and began the task of gathering his armor from the floor, strapping it all back into place with quick, practiced ease. Bazz offered his Hylian friend something to eat from his remaining rations, but Link vehemently declined, explaining that he would immediately depart for Hateno Village and find food along the way; he couldn’t bear to take any more food from the Zora man in a time of shortage.

These thoughts occupied Link’s mind all the way to his destination and it was lucky that his Crazy Girl didn’t make any other random attempts to throw him, because she could have easily taken him by surprise, as revenge for his shield surfing trick.

Link only bothered to get his head back together, regaining his sense of focus, as he found himself clip-clopping across the wooden bridge that led to his little cottage. Just the sight of his house made him uneasy, the memory of the Blood Moon incident rushing in like the tide.

He dismounted his precious Crazy Girl out front, and she appeared to recognize the area, giving the sweet air an appreciative sniff, her nose raised toward the sky. The exercise must have contented her, or at least lessened her previous rage.

The rosy horse which belonged to Finley was still meandering the property, happily grazing. It immediately noticed the close proximity of another equine, lifting its head and rotating its ears in calm attention. Crazy Girl ignored the other horse, however, and Link even lingered for a few curious moments in order to see if his steed would take the opportunity to socialize.

Crazy had always been something of an outsider, even among her original herd. Link could easily recall the way she always drifted slightly away from where the others gathered, never standing too long in one place, a constant, unexplained agitation disturbing her peace. He had the impression that she was actually ‘defective’ in some way, at least where other animals were concerned, because her behavior was a bit beyond what was ‘typical’. Still, he felt that he understood her and something about that whimsical connection stoked his compassion and affection.

When Link was finished putting off the inevitable, he walked to the cabin door and pushed it warily open, pausing on the threshold. He would definitely have a phobia of walking through this particular door for the rest of his life.

The sight of Sasan and Finley greeted the Hylian, but he scarcely trusted appearances any longer. He must have been giving them the most suspicious of glares. Meanwhile, they both stopped what they were doing to look up and see him, their expressions quite surprised by his unexpected visit.

Measured forward steps were taken and Link only barely resisted the urge to wrap his fingers around the handle of his dirk for security; when he laid eyes on unfamiliar faces in the company of his house guests, he no longer resisted.

“I see you’ve rearranged things. It looks homey, lived in,” the Hylian idly commented while his sharpened gaze drifted across his surroundings in observation. The steel of his weapon clicked, his fingers tightening ever so slightly while he loosened the blade from the sheath, drawing it out enough
that it would come the rest of the way with smooth ease, just in case. “So, who are they?”

With a head tilt, Link gestured at the three other Hylian-looking people unexpectedly occupying his home. His gaze rapidly flickered across them; an older man, a young man, an even younger woman. They looked awkward and a bit perplexed at this suddenly tense situation, but the Champion didn’t trust innocent faces for a damn second.

The tiny Zora girl crossed her stubby arms over her chest, scoffing and absolutely not impressed. The first words out of her mouth openly criticized the newly arrived Hylian, not an ounce of fear in her, though everyone else present was precisely that. “Aren’t you being a bit too jumpy?”

“I’ve learned not to trust unfamiliar faces,” Link snapped. “...even familiar ones are questionable, in fact.”

The only real saving grace here was that Finley’s sass was beyond accurate, and the old man standing nearby had the fretting appearance of somebody expecting to get robbed. The other two strangers also looked very nervous, as well as Sasan, which felt characteristic of him, even though he knew Link.

“They came here from Zora’s Domain,” Finley explained with a little groan, her hands making their way to her hips. Oh yeah, that was definitely her, because she was so obviously a tiny replica of Kodah; a Yiga Clansman had no hope of emulating her that well. “They said they were looking for a fresh start and arrived here soon after you left. They didn’t have money to stay in the Ton Pu Inn, so they were camping a bit up the hill from here, near that little pond at the top. I kept visiting them each day, until I finally decided, why not just invite them to stay here? There was room and you’re hardly here, so I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

“It’s not a problem.” Link bitterly responded in a way that made it pretty clear that there was, in fact, a problem. “But didn’t I say to be careful about trusting strangers around here? And to keep the doors locked? This was the exact opposite of that.”

“The cold, winter wind of Link’s gaze went right to him as the man took a step closer, and the sound of his boots against the wood of the floor had the Champion’s own feet drawing apart, like he was moments from squaring up if the stranger dared to come any closer.

At Link’s hostile reaction, the old man put his hands up in surrender, his features furrowing in fear. His face felt like a contradiction; his skin was weathered from exposure, battered from skirmishes with Hylia-knows-what, yet he held himself like a pleading coward.

“I’m very sorry if we’ve imposed,” he muttered, his fingers trembling in nervousness, or perhaps palsy from his age. “.We certainly didn’t intend to linger here permanently and if it’s troublesome, we can move on.”

“What, back to camping?” Finley hissed in outrage, the only one present that was totally unshaken by Link’s unfriendly behavior. “You haven’t saved even close to enough rupees to make a down payment on a home, and if you waste what you have staying at the inn, you’ll just end up back at square one!”

Finley really did possess an incredible degree of fiscal responsibility, and even in his own standoffish state, Link was impressed. He’d count it as another hint that they weren’t imposters.

“That’s fine,” the older man reasoned, resigned or maybe too uncomfortable to consider staying. The man’s eyes looked to the young Zora for a careful instant, then back to Link before he said,
“We’ll leave, sir. We don’t want to cause any more trouble than we already have.”

“No,” Link relented at last, his hand slowly leaving the comfort of his weapon. His instincts were telling him that these people probably weren’t Yigas in disguise, and he placed some degree of trust in his gut feelings. “It’s fine for you all to stay here. It doesn’t bother me. I’m just concerned that some people may not be what they appear.”

“Sir?” the old man questioned, a spark of recognition lighting his face. “Are you referring to the Yiga Clan?”

“I am,” Link spoke harshly, his tone sharp and very serious. No sooner had his worries diminished to something more comfortable, than he was given reason for concern all over again. He’d always heard that the guilty dog barked first, but were Yiga Clansmen more clever than common dogs? No, they delighted in verbally outing themselves moments before attacking. Someone should have told them that’s not how stealth or the element of surprise was meant to work. “What do you know of them?”

“We’ve had our fair share of tussles with them.” The man’s words came quick in his want to avoid any further suspicion. “Before coming here, we were involved with a group of Hylian mercenaries who were at constant odds with those masked warriors. I don’t know much about who they are, personally, just that they had the ability to change their appearance at will, and that they were enemies to our group. I don’t blame you for being worried, sir. Again, if you want us to clear out, we don’t want to give you reason to worry.”

“.you can stay.” Though Link doubted they really wanted to anymore. Then again, if they really had faced down Yiga Clansmen as the old man insisted, the Champion’s paranoia was probably an understandable condition, indeed. “But you know, I’d personally advise against walking anywhere behind me, or even too quietly. Or doing anything I might find sneaky. In fact, just keep your distance from me, altogether.”

“Link!” Finley stamped her foot, beyond agitated at the Champion’s lack of warmth or any kind of manners. “These people are our friends. This entire family has just been trying to get settled here. This man,” she gestured to the older man, “he started some crops on the property. His son managed to become apprenticed to the local blacksmith, and his daughter has been teaching me mounted archery. Everything is fine and normal. Can we please move on?”

“It’s good that you’re enjoying the company,” Link commented, sounding almost teasing, if not for the fact that his tone lacked any kind of humor. “Get ready to have a lot more.”

“What?” the young Zora questioned, her head tilting inquisitively, her features blank in sudden worry.

“Finley, if you can channel any of your parents’ instincts in regards to running an inn, you’re really gonna need to harness that.” Link meandered slowly about the cottage, investigating the way it had been rearranged since he was here last. His pointed ears perked, closely listening to every other sound around him, since the unfamiliar guests went back to their previous business when the standoff finally came to a close. “A group of Zora refugees like yourself are going to be traveling here. I don’t know how many, but we’ll have to find a way to make it work, because things aren’t pretty back home.”

“Oh,” the young girl fell absolutely still, all previous spark leaving her, yet still she looked to Link with imploring, worried eyes. He could tell right away what was on her mind. He should have known all along that she was waiting for news from back home, but being the emotionally stunted piece of shit that he was, he failed to acknowledge that.
“How bad is it, exactly?” Finley spoke, her question general enough, but Link knew now what she must have been really asking, indirectly.

He let out a slow, hesitant sigh, absolutely not ready to give her the news she was waiting for, and by no means qualified to do so, either.

“Your father passed, I’m afraid. I’m sorry.” Link decidedly didn’t beat around the bush about it. In his opinion, it was better quick and direct, because flowery words could never soften that blow, no matter what Sidon seemed to think. “Your mother is distraught, but she seems to be surviving. Or she was, the last time I spoke with her. I can’t lie, things are still going straight into the void back at Zora’s Domain, so I wouldn’t recommend returning. You should probably write your mother, though. I think hearing from you would be of comfort to her.”

“Right,” Finley said, clearly stricken with grief, but so much more reserved than her mother in her response. Maybe it was because other people were around, or maybe she was a naturally internal person when it came to emotions, but instead of breaking down, she quietly pattered over to one of the dining chairs and clambered up onto it. As she settled there, with her head leaned into her hands for support, Sasan drew another chair near to her side, and made a quiet attempt to comfort her, only for the young Zora girl to push his hands away in resistance.

“I know that this is sudden and that you obviously will need time to process things..” Link started, approaching the table so that he could talk more gently. “I have to call a meeting and let the residents of the village know the refugees are coming. After that, I’m leaving for Zora’s Domain, but I’ll be returning soon after. Get your thoughts and feelings as collected as you can and write that letter. The next time I’m here, I’ll pick it up and deliver it to your mother.”

The young Zora only nodded, and Link gave a weak nod of his own in return. He looked, instead, to the girl’s very awkward, uncomfortable, Hylian boyfriend and addressed him, thinking it was best to give Finley some space. “Is all of my gear still upstairs?”

“Oh, uhh,” Sasan looked surprised that he’d even been spoken to at all. “Yeah, well, I think so.”

“I’ve been using one of your bows,” Finley weakly confessed. “If you need it, I can just.. give it back.”

“No, it’s fine. Keep it.” The Champion swatted his hand in dismissal, definitely not able to reclaim a borrowed weapon from a girl going through a time of loss. “I’m sure I’ll find more.”

Leaving all parties in peace, Link sauntered upstairs to look through his pile of weapons, which had been more neatly sorted since the last time he’d visited. Mipha’s broken trident still laid in pieces atop one of the bedside tables, and he sighed when he glanced it momentarily, but felt too morose to give it much thought at this particular moment.

He newly armed himself with a sword and shield, as well as a bow that was decent enough for his purposes, then he set off to accomplish the task Bazz had laid before him, hoping to be done before sundown.

Link’s first task in arranging the town meeting was to post a message about it on the bulletin board that stood in the middle of the village. After that, he spoke with Reede, seeking his aid in spreading the word. Link made it clear that the meeting had to happen that evening, and that it was an emergency.
After an hour or two of speaking with villagers who were out and about, stepping into shops and
going door to door, Link found himself at the Ton Pu Inn, amidst a successful gathering. Prima had
pulled out extra tables and chairs for the event, and though Link offered to pay her off for hosting it,
she apparently made enough on selling drinks and meat pies to be satisfied.

Once it appeared that the crowd was unlikely to grow further, Link went before the seated villagers
and stood atop a milk crate to implore their attention; it made him roughly average height and that
was somewhat demeaning, but he didn’t have time to waste on his literal shortcomings.

He cleared his throat, the candlelight from above casting him in shades such as the golden brown his
hair appeared in low light, and the deep blue of the Champion colors he’d adorned.

“This meeting was called to make you all aware that your village will soon be playing host to a
handful of Zora refugees,” he began, his tone strong but slow. He let the villagers absorb each
sentence before he went into the next. Link was leaning on his mental image of Sidon, standing
before the King’s council with patient strength and a sharp, clever tongue. “I haven’t been
personally made aware of what numbers we’re looking at, and while I’m going to do my best to host
as many as possible, I would recommend making use of the empty display homes as a means of
shelter. The refugees are coming here temporarily, in order to escape something of a disaster that has
befallen them back home. The Zora people are some of the most morally sound and kind people I’ve
ever met, myself, but I do understand that they’ll be sending a small group of their own city
guardsmen to make sure that order is maintained and peace between the refugees and you, the people
of Hateno Village, is assured.”

There was quiet chatter, first and foremost. The Ton Pu Inn often doubled as a small pub, and it was
even moreso tonight with the dull hum of voices and the scent of stew, ale, and floral candle wax.

“This does pose several great problems, Champion,” Reede stood up to speak. He often took it upon
himself to speak for the entire village, and had clearly caught enough commentary within the buzz of
combined voices to bring something up. “My first thought, concernin’ what you’ve told us so far, is
the notion that these people are comin’ here for assistance, but they’re comin’ armed and ready to
fight. As you know, our village lacks any kind of guard force. It’s enough to deal with the rowdy
people of our own kind, who occasionally drift through.”

“I don’t see how this poses any problem.” Link shrugged, indeed, failing to see any real logic, just
the typical fear and uncertainty that often ruled these peoples’ lives. “The Zoras of the city guard are
highly trained warriors that obey a chain of command with discipline. They’re professional from
what I’ve seen, so it seems to me that the people of this village have security to gain by welcoming
them in.”

“.but they would be cut off from their so called chain of command, and most likely be actin’ at their
own discretion,” the same man commented back, with his wife, Clavia, sitting nearby, nodding her
head. “That sounds like trouble waitin’ to happen.”

“Yes, exactly,” someone else spoke just loudly enough for their voice to carry, though Link didn’t
connect the words with a face.

“Champion, we’ve been happy to welcome Finley to our village. She’s been a treasure.” Clavia now
spoke, as though her own voice adding to the fray could soften the previous blow. “.but other than
that, our tiny village just doesn’t have the means to host any others.”

“Please, people of Hateno Village,” a strong, silvery bell of a voice sharply called over the dull roar
of everyone present. It was Finley, who’d insisted on attending the meeting, despite Link telling her
that it wasn’t necessary. She had this very calm, devil-may-care look about her, and as proof of how
low her stock of fucks to give really was, she climbed onto a table, just to make sure everyone would see her and hear what she had to say. “I fled the tragedy unfolding back home, in Zora’s Domain. Coming here was a relief that my words cannot properly express. The village has provided an escape from the fear that I may lose my life at any time. I do miss my home, of course, and I worry for my family, knowing that they’re still there, in danger. Before I left, my father fell ill with the Water Blight, which swept across our beautiful home, claiming dozens of lives. Upon the return of the Hylian Champion, I recently learned that.”

The Zora girl paused, steadying herself by taking a deep breath before she continued, “...I recently learned that my father has passed away, another victim to the scourge my people are facing right now. At this very moment, my heart is in pieces - Not only did I lose my father, but I scarcely even had the chance to say goodbye to him. Also, my mother, a woman who always wanted to be surrounded by family, is now there alone, mourning my father’s death, and still in danger of succumbing to the very same plague.”

Finley bundled her hands, refusing to allow her gaze to falter, and it was intense and beseeching as it moved across every face in attendance. Link watched, quiet and hopeful, noticing that the girl’s plight did appear to successfully soften a few people’s expressions, painting them with sympathy and maybe even a touch of guilt.

“This is only the loss and pain that I, personally, have suffered,” Finley’s speech went on. “I know that numerous others are suffering, perhaps worse than I, and if even a handful of my people were denied the chance to escape, it would make my own grief and guilt too heavy to bear. My people don’t deserve this awful tragedy that has befallen them, so I humbly implore you all, welcome them here as you have me. Help them, please.”

Link nodded in agreement while the Zora girl finally showed herself down from the table, quietly taking her place seated beside Sasan. Other residents appeared to be nodding in cautious agreement as well, some even daring to mutter things such as, “We should help them,” and, “It’s the right thing to do.”

“But we can’t. We don’t have the means.” One of the more stubborn villagers cut in, his own opinion clearly a thing which could not swayed, though he made a vain attempt to soften his tone, to sound sympathetic while also declaring his utter unwillingness to do the right thing. “We have to help ourselves first.”

“Right,” a woman called out. “It don’t do anybody any good if we try to help these Zoras and leave our own children to starve in the meantime.” Link recognized this particular lady, and he wasn’t surprised that she’d be the first to lean on her children for an excuse. He just couldn’t believe her audacity, because she was the very same woman who hung around the washing station all day, fussing over her laundry and gossiping, not paying a single second of attention to her own child.

‘Think of Sidon,’ Link was telling himself. ‘Think of Sidon.’ It wasn’t a bad idea.

“If Finley’s brave and heartfelt words aren’t enough to sway you, then allow me to also remind you,” the Champion spoke anew, his tone a thing which had newly hardened with his growing disappointment, “Prince Sidon of the Zoras came to Hateno Village some time ago, to assist the people with a problem that had claimed several lives. He slayed a giant Octorock in Hateno Bay, at incredible risk to himself I might add, surely saving the lives of numerous fishermen for years to follow.”

“I remember that,” the kindly old woman who could often be seen dawdling about the public cookery piped up. “What a sweet and brave young lad, the Zora Prince.”
“Our concerns are still legitimate,” Reede added. He was still standing, so Link would assume the man had no intention of sitting down until things turned completely in his favor. “Aid offered by the Zora people wasn’t offered with the expectation of gain. With winter approachin’, a bunch of displaced Zoras would be a strain that our supplies couldn’t endure.”

“That’s not true,” Link quickly spoke in rebuttal. “The Zoras’ diets are entirely different from Hylians. They’ll have no strain at all on crop stores, nor dairy production. If anything, they’ll probably increase the catch from Hateno Bay and other fishing areas, on top of the fact that they’ll likely come with rupees to spend. The Water Blight might be killing them, but it didn’t bankrupt them. Also, let me reiterate that their stay would be temporary. Most will return to Zora’s Domain when the danger of the Water Blight has been lifted.”

“And what of this Water Blight?” a woman’s voice uttered audibly enough to be heard and to receive a handful of agreements. “That sounds bad. I don’t want them bringin’ that mess here.”

“The Water Blight isn’t a disease that spreads between people,” Link explained, maintaining his sense of calm despite that he was quickly becoming frustrated with deflecting peoples’ concerns. Sure, this might have been a more legitimate question, but he couldn’t help but feel like people were just reaching for excuses now. “It’s something that has poisoned their water, poisoning them in turn.”

“What good does it do to waste resources on people who come as a burden durin’ the winter and leave, rather than contributin’ after becoming established? In my opinion, it’d make em’ no better than parasites,” the stubborn farmer from before commented, crossing his arms over his chest and shaking his head.

“I agree,” another man commented faster than Link could respond. “Plenty of Hylian folk live in a constant state of displacement thanks to the Calamity, and we can’t afford to welcome all of em’ here, neither. I think it’s more important for us to take care of our own, first. Long’ as our people are still strugglin’ to survive, I say let Zoras help Zoras.”

“I lived in the time after the Calamity, when we was all still scroungin’. When rebuildin’ felt like a distant dream,” an angry, elderly man slowly stood up, his body shaking and creaky. His sagging, wrinkled features somehow furrowed even more in his discontentment. “Zoras had their big, fancy city back then, all intact, but did they open their doors to help us? No. We outta just repay the favor, then.”

“Right!” the stubborn man hissed. “As long as there’s one Hylian still fightin’ to survive, we ain’t helpin’ no Zoras.”

“Bolson—” Link addressed his acquaintance directly, in his frustration. The way Link saw it, Bolson held the key, or keys as it were, to providing what was needed most- houses. And strangely, for someone Link knew to be sassy and outspoken, the head of the construction company was sitting to the side, quietly nursing a drink and paying witness, rather than doing anything as the Champion would have expected. “Your company owns the empty houses. Does the decision to offer them to Zora refugees ultimately fall to you?”

“Oh, um,” the man muttered in surprise, straightening the hair on one side of his balding head with careful fingertips. He was taken by surprise at being called out for support in front of an entire village, which could evolve into a mob with torches and pitchforks at any given moment. “Well, Mr. Hero, I’m with you on this. I think helping the Zoras is a fine idea. But even though my company owns the structures, we don’t actually own the land where the houses are sitting, so it does tie my hands a bit.”

“It isn’t the first time you would’ve defied a decision made by the entire village,” Link commented,
carefully refraining from saying in what way, though, just in case it could have repercussions. He knew Bolson was aware what he was speaking of.

“That was different,” the man shrugged, looking rather helpless. “I’m so sorry.”

Link’s gloved hands drew up, his bare fingertips coming to rub at his temples, where he could feel his pulse pounding in growing rage. He would still it, though. He would keep it concealed for the sake of the Zora people, for Finley, for Bazz, for Prince Sidon, for everybody who was counting on him, and who he actually cared about. A deep breath offered the Champion a little bit more patience, and he peered across the faces of the villagers gathered before him. Some were angry and combatitive, whereas others appeared sympathetic, but were unwilling to speak over their more aggressive fellows.

“Fine,” Link growled, his voice low but calm enough, calmer than he truly felt, anyway. “The refugees are coming, whether any of you like it or not. I’ll fit as many of them into my home as I can, and not one of you can stop me from doing that. You all speak of helping your own kind before helping others, but that’s just an empty excuse. Three Hylian people recently came here to start new lives, and did any of you step up to help them? No. Do you know who did?” His arm thrust outward to gesture, his palm flat and pointed in the direction of his nearby friend, “Finley- a Zora.”

“You’re certainly welcome to do whatever you wish, Champion,” Reede responded, much too fucking calm for Link’s liking. He was so calm, it sounded outright dismissive. “However, we must watch out for the residents of our village first. As such, all shopkeepers will be free to refuse service to refugees. Public property is for the people of this village and will not be shared under any circumstance.”

“Is that right?” Link spat. He’d had it. Fuck everyone counting on him. Fuck being calm and clever. Fuck all these people, and their selfish, cowardly bullshit.

“You don’t want to help people whose poor circumstances are being caused by the resurgence of the Calamity’s power? I suppose I can’t sway you.” Link shrugged, a sarcastic smile dangerously furrowing his features, his eyes shining with feral light. “But, just know that, for as much as you all huddle in your little village, pretending that disaster is never going to rise up to strike you all down- that’s absolutely not the truth. The Calamity is coming back, and this time there are no armies of Hyrule to contain the damage, and all the Heroes that once existed to protect our world are gone- not that any of you knew them. There’s nobody standing between all of you and the Calamity any longer. Nobody but me. And I plan to remember who selfishly hoarded their little illusions of security, rather than making an effort to help others. I’m going to remember that when I make my own decision who to protect, and who not to.”

He stepped down from his box, garnering a collective flinch from almost the entire gathering. As he headed for the door, he pointed an accusing finger, and said, “Keep that in mind,” then he slammed it shut behind himself.

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Early morning mist still shrouded everything from the sunless sky to the mossy ground, weaving between the crowd of ancient trees in the forest outside of Zora’s Domain. Brivere had swam downstream very early with a particular goal in mind, but as he wandered beneath the thick canopy, he swore he could hear footsteps pattering along at a safe distance behind him, soft and secretive, but audible despite the sleepy trills of early-waking birds.

His time was a measured thing, every hour of his day assigned to a specific task, so he had no choice but to rush through each one to be sure that he’d make it to the next in the most precise manner. As
such, he didn’t have time to concern himself over spooky occurrences, even in a dark, foggy wood.

The lingering darkness was helpful because his eyes were desperately searching for a soft glow that didn’t belong to a silent shroom, or a blooming blue nightshade. Instead, he was hunting down a rarer glowing flower, and all he could hope was that he located one in a reasonable amount of time.

He had to admit, though, the constant distraction of hearing those footsteps coming up behind him was not at all helpful. Brivere paused, sharply turning to glance back at the path that laid behind him, his long forefins swinging with his movement. As soon as he stopped, the pattering gait of his pursuer went quiet. He was armed with a bow and a newly acquired, boringly titled ‘Zora Sword’, in the case that this creepy occurrence turned dangerous.

Because of the fog, there was nobody to be found when the golden Zora turned around, of course. The mysterious presence in the mist would have to be right at his heels for him to catch sight of them. His electroreceptive senses weren’t of much assistance, either, because the entire forest was alight with life, even if he couldn’t see any of it.

Thankfully, the Zora’s apparent suspicion quieted the distant stalking, though the chills crawling beneath his scales and along his spine remained very persistent. He could ignore those, however, because a faint shine in the distance gave him hope enough to do so. He hurried toward the softly swaying light source, kneeling upon the dense, fuzzy moss when it turned out to be the very thing he was searching for, the rare silent princess flower.

It was small, probably new growth, but it had bloomed despite it’s tiny size. Its petals hardly possessed any light cells, and what glow it did have appeared more like a speckling of magical dust across its tender surface. Brivere’s hand was ever so careful as he reached out, feeling the delicate softness of it against his palm in satisfaction.

Apart from his weapons, Brivere carried with him a waterproof satchel, fashioned from bamboo. It was a cylinder that parted in the very center, then snapped back together to form an air-tight seal. He drew the tube from where it hung over his shoulder, and opened it, taking out the silvery spade he’d brought along for the sake of cutting the flower, if and when he found it.

The Zora gently bent the flower sideways, aligning the sharp edge of his tool with its delicate stem. He paused in hesitation, though, some soft, sentimental part of him insisting that he find something more merciful to do than simply slicing the rare flower and letting it slowly die. A want to push such silly, whimsical thoughts aside kept him poised and ready to cut the stem for a few lingering moments, but with a relenting sigh, he resolved to do otherwise.

The spade, instead, began to slice at the dirt around the flower, and Brivere wedged his fingers into the furrows, carefully feeling for plant’s roots, so he would know how deep to dig in order to prevent any damage.

In all, he had to laugh at himself over the entire matter, at his inability to kill even a flower. If people cared enough to acknowledge that, underneath everything, he was about as soft as this very flower’s petals, he’d never be permitted to carry a sword and call himself a Knight.

While Brivere was tucking his prize away in the bamboo satchel, a pattering sound grabbed his attention, and his gaze shot sharply forward to spy a newly appeared creature, standing bravely before him; a fox. The tiny beast was just beginning to grow its winter coat, and it was warily watching the golden Zora, an oddly expectant gleam shining in its curious gaze.

“Were you the one that was following me?” Brivere addressed the fox, biting the end of his tongue after he did, to punish the part growing inside him that was peculiar enough to convince him to speak
to animals. It was unfair, in a way, because he rarely spoke to things that couldn’t speak back, yet he’d chosen a creature that couldn’t even understand him to finally give it a try. Maybe he was losing his mind.

The fox’s ears flicked forward when the Zora spoke, its head tilting cutely, little different than a domestic dog. Somehow, it didn’t feel threatened by Brivere, so it settled on its haunches, watching with interest. Brivere scoffed; even the damn fox could tell he was harmless.

“I don’t have anything for you,” he declared, feeling somehow bad for saying so, despite that it was the truth. He turned away with his intended quarry acquired, gently placing the satchel over one shoulder as he headed back toward the river. The vulpine creature stalked along at a short distance behind the Zora while he went, which almost seemed to give the little animal away as being the one who’d been following Brivere all along.

Only the fox’s padding paws sounded nothing like the footsteps Brivere had heard before.

By the time the golden Zora made it back to the river, the fox was gone. It was just as well, because Brivere had no time to spare playing around with cute, little animals. He returned to the Zora city, navigating the waterways beneath the Great Zora Bridge, all the way to the trench that dropped to the depths where the Basilica lurked. There, he returned to Kree, as promised.

It was an awkward business, and the Zora woman didn’t appear to possess the same bitter will that she had the previous evening. Something in her had diminished, leaving her empty and broken, but Brivere withheld comment. Kree was already humiliated enough at being scooped into the arms of a man she despised, so he dared not make it worse by trying to make it better.

At the surface, it was all too clear that the funeral was soon to begin. Where normally the air in the valley was fresh and scented by clean, flowing water, today it was hazy with smoke and harsh to breathe. There was little doubt that it would also remain this way for some time, lest their people found an answer to the disaster slowly draining all life from their home.

“I can’t,” Kree harshly cried while she and Brivere made their way up the stairs toward the Uppercity.

“What?” the golden Zora came to a landing that was still tucked into the shadows, stopping there.

“Pardon- what can’t you do?”

“I’m just..” Kree’s face fell into her trembling palms for a hesitant moment, the act of having to confide in Brivere almost as terrible as the matter which was troubling her. Fighting herself, she lifted her head and spat the truth, as difficult as it was. “I’m just not ready to go in front of everyone, not like this.”

“I doubt that people will bother to gawk at you, while mourning numerous lost lives,” Brivere uttered, thinking he was reassuring her, though with how she disliked him, it likely came across as mockery.

“I can’t,” the gray Zora repeated, shaking her head.

“Then perhaps you’d prefer to watch from one of the gazebos?” the Knight suggested, adjusting the woman in his grasp so that she tightened her hold on him instinctively. She gave a weak nod of her head and he easily accepted her answer. It had been his plan to be present at the service, but he supposed that this obligation now came first.

When they made it up the winding walkways to one of the hovering gazebos, Brivere allowed Kree
to settle herself on the railing. She perched near one of the upward stretching pillars, giving herself
something to grasp for safety and balance, not that she was likely to slip and fall. Even so, the golden
Zora hovered near at her side, as being overly cautious was simply in his nature.

The pair watched the service in relative silence, not only because they had little to say to one another,
but also for the sake of being respectful and attentive, even if they weren’t technically at the funeral.
The fallen Knights were placed upon the pyre separately from the victims of the quake, as the
warrior funeral customs differed slightly.

The Goddess Knights in attendance had shed the shining, golden shawls that normally concealed
their heads, replacing them instead with the darker colors of mourning. Just as with the funeral held
at the fort, they kneeled one at a time before the pyre to receive the honor burns, in respect of the
members of their order who had fallen. Surely, neither Brivere nor Kree expected to be witnessing
another service so soon.

Kree could almost convince herself that she was down below, in full attendance, as she had the fort
funeral to reflect upon while she spectated now. Her dear friend Strata had been by her side that day,
and he’d gone before the pyre to receive the honor burns, just as she had. He didn’t know that he’d
be feeling the full sting of the flames so shortly after that small, foreboding taste.

When the roster of fallen Knights was read aloud, and Ser Strata’s name was spoken, Kree could no
longer withhold the tears she’d fought so hard to keep under control.

“Ser Strata was the Knight Divine’s son, was he not?” Brivere asked suddenly, his voice quiet and
unassuming, just there to offer the woman a temporary distraction from her grief.

“He was,” she answered, sniffling and trying to rub the wetness from her cheeks with haste. “He fell
to the Water Blight the very same night that I was grievously injured. The Knight Divine lost her
son, and the First Knight of the Royal Order lost his daughter, all in one night.”

“Don’t speak such nonsense,” the golden Zora’s voice came quick, but not too sharp, much as he
wanted to vehemently condemn the words of the other. “The First Knight didn’t lose his daughter,
because you’re still here. You’re still alive.”

“Am I alive? Is it really a life that I have now?” She laughed bitterly, gesturing to herself as though
Brivere had failed to notice the injuries she was referring to. “I’m only half a Zora now, I can’t even
swim any longer. I’ll never be a warrior again, I’ll never be what my father is. I’m a disgrace. I’m
worthless.”

“You’re not worthless,” Brivere’s tone hardened slightly, his hands gripping the rail before himself.
He spoke so insistently that Kree’s gaze shifted from the happenings below to the man at her side,
regarding him with confusion, not just because he was so very adamant, but also because he had little
reason to put such an effort into consoling her.

“People like us, people at our station, we put so much stock into pointless titles and pointless social
standing,” the Knight went on, his demeanor softening, steadying. “We trick ourselves into believing
that our value as living beings depends entirely on the imaginary grandeur and propriety that we
were born into. People like us, we let our attempts to uphold these imaginary ideals destroy our
spirits and turn us cold on the inside. But as long as it makes us better than everybody else, we keep
struggling to uphold the illusion, no matter what it takes from us.”

“Just shut up,” Kree spat, shaking her head in disbelief at what this fool was saying to her. She
wouldn’t only refuse to hear him, but she couldn’t even take him seriously. Was this the same man
who trained himself to be a warrior despite being turned down by every tutor in Zora’s Domain?
Was this the same man who’d almost certainly cheated to acquire the position he now held? Now he dared to condemn people at high stations, when he’d desperately chased that very station all his life?

“Our nobility comes from Diviner Zorana, the first of her river-born tribe to reject the savage ways of her people,” the woman filled in the hollow spaces of Brivere’s nonsense with the very history which gave Zora nobles their divine right to rule. “All the rest who live among us are the descendants of those who had the good fortune to follow her when she foresaw disaster. It was by her grace that they lived. Her blood is our blood, her grace is our grace. If you have a problem with that, then why not accept that you never belonged with us, and join the ones who still exist below, in the river beds.”

“Do you hear the words you speak, Kree?” the golden Knight uttered, not offended, but imploring the other Zora to see reason. “You speak of Zorana, who had the bravery to reject all that was wrong with the ways of her tribe, despite that she was a single voice among many others, all telling her that she was the one who was wrong. Then, when disaster came and showed Zorana’s tribe the fatal error of their ways, she still embraced them as equals, and guided them. A woman such as that wouldn’t have wanted something as irrelevant as her bloodline to become the standard by which we decide whose existence is more valuable.”

“It’s all so easy for you to say, isn’t it, Captain, as you stand there on the legs you still possess,” Kree scoffed, lacking the patience and energy to be bothered with this debate. More than anything, she lacked the ability to maintain even a shred of patience while this foolish man gave her his patronizing, little lecture, as if he understood a damn thing.

“I’m sorry. I don’t presume to comprehend the loss you feel,” Brivere spoke, after a short pause. His gaze faltered and his head drooped in shame; he’d gotten so caught up in trying to force Kree to see things his way, he’d quickly lost sight of his original purpose. “I only meant to reassure you. The fact is, our existence isn’t inherently more valuable than others, it never was. We aren’t valuable at all in the grand scheme of things, but.. There’s some comfort to be found in letting go of our illusions and accepting that we’re all ultimately worthless. Your value, the value of your life, was not diminished when you lost your legs. Your life is still worthwhile, as worthwhile as anyone else in this world. I’m telling you this, because in learning this lesson myself, it became just a bit easier for me to forgive my own shortcomings. I hope it allows you to forgive yourself, as well.”

“Sir,” came the voice of a single guardsman as they stood in the office doorway of a very busy Guard Captain. Bazz’s attentive gaze went to them immediately, yet he paused long enough to complete the document he was working on before greeting the other.

“Come in,” the black Zora spoke while he straightened.

The armored Zora on the threshold gave a gracious nod of their head, then took a few measured steps to stand before the Guard Captain’s desk. “The diving team have begun searching the reservoir,” they explained. “They haven’t reported any unusual findings as of yet, but the team that was sent to search surrounding areas for any clue as to the source of this Water Blight found something unusual on Ploymus Mountain.”

“Ploymus Mountain?” Bazz repeated in questioning, his eyes narrowing. “The lynel hasn’t returned, has it?”

“No, sir,” answered the guardsman, a thoughtful expression shadowing their features for an instant. “I believe it’s still wandering the valley below, in the apple grove.”
“The water in that grove is probably still safe, and therefore the fish would be safe to consume as well. I’ll bet that’s why it came down,” the Captain muttered, his yellow eyes moving slowly from side to side in thoughtful epiphany. “There were so many warnings that something was amiss and we didn’t heed one of them,” he muttered to himself.

Clearing his throat, Bazz’s attention returned to the patient guardsman still standing before him. “Forgive me, guardsman, what did the team find on Ploymus Mountain?”

“I believe it is what we were looking for, sir,” said the armored Zora, their voice holding a touch of hope. “There were these outcroppings of sludge, which possessed slumbering eyes; it fit the description provided by the Hylian Champion. The eyes opened as we approached, but while they didn’t seem to pose any danger, we destroyed the beast, regardless. It wasn’t anywhere near the water sources, however.”

“No, this is still good news.” The guardsman’s hope bled into the Captain, and he gently pounded one fist upon the top of his desk in triumph. Bazz had been so void of anything positive lately, he was an empty container seeking something to take up the space. For once, he wanted to be proven wrong in believing that their world would inevitably be torn apart by chaos and destruction, regardless of their efforts. “Maybe this malice creature wasn’t connected to the Water Blight, but it’s a sign that we’re on the right track. It confirms our suspicions.”

“Yes, sir,” the guardsman gave a smile and a nod in response to their superior’s hopeful conclusion.

“Oh. Before I forget,” Bazz began anew, gathering up the documents he had been working on. He paused when he caught sight of the Hylian Champion outside the open door, however. Link walked right into his office, only to quickly realize that the Captain was busy, then he awkwardly backed himself into the hallway.

The black Zora extended his reach across the desk, handing the documents off to the guardsman in his presence. “These are the names of all in the Undercity who’ve received rations. They’re being drafted for required labor. Make sure the lieutenant handling the situation down there gets this. We need to get these people downstream to replenish our supplies now.”

Folding the documents and tucking them away with care, the armored Zora spoke up to say, “I’ll get it to him, sir,” then they dipped their head in a polite bow as they were dismissed.

“Master Link,” Bazz called to the waiting Hylian, who peeked around the corner like he was unsure. The Captain couldn’t prevent the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth, and he spoke a further reassurance to coax his friend, as though he were some meek animal. “You can come in now.”

Bazz hadn’t ever known Link to be so bashful, and he wondered if perhaps this was some kind of imposter before him when the Hylian came to stand in front of his desk, his posture slumped, one hand scratching at his arm a bit sheepishly.

“Good morning,” the black Zora greeted his friend. That reminded him though—maybe Link was still embarrassed over the circumstances of the previous morning? “How did things go in Hateno Village?”

The Hylian took a deep breath, letting it out in a huff, and Bazz leaned forward in his chair, thinking that this already sounded bad. “So the Hateno Villagers know the refugees are coming, but they’re less than pleased. They definitely didn’t live up to their famed hospitality,” Link started, disappointment thick in his low tone. “I also... might not have... done the best job smoothing things over, either. Those people are impossible.”
“Master Link,” Bazz hummed with a deep sigh of his own, his frame bending like a wilting flower, his head propped up in his hand. “What did you do?”

“They were just so stubborn about the entire ordeal!” Link hissed, his hands flailing out in front of him, crinkling into something that resembled talons. The Hylian’s feet even spread apart into a fighting kind of stance, and Bazz swore that at any moment, Link might start stamping his foot. “They won’t offer the empty houses that are just sitting there, not being used. They apparently plan to deny refugees service at all of the stores and they don’t want Zoras using the public spaces, for laundry, cooking, etcetera.”

“I’ll have to keep these warnings in mind when I brief my guardsmen,” said the Captain with a shake of his head. He supposed that if the residents of Hateno Village really were so stubborn, Link probably couldn’t have swayed them anyway. “So what are we looking at for resources and space? How many of our people do you personally think can be housed with what is available?”

Link took another breath, though this time it was to calm himself. Despite not being able to depend on his people for fuck all, he had thought of something that might have made things a bit better. “Maybe a dozen, a bit more if they’re willing to really pile on top of each other- that’s using my house for sleeping and all other needs. But, I thought about it all night, and I did come up with a good idea. There’s a pond that’s just downhill from my house. It’s not technically part of the village, so they couldn’t fuss too much about Zoras using it. It’s also close enough to be reasonably safe, and with guardsmen to patrol the way they do here, the refugees could use the pond for communal sleeping, and that would greatly increase the amount I’m able to host.”

“Alright,” Bazz nodded, finding the Champion’s plan to be encouraging enough to give him a tiny bit more hope. He gestured to the chair before his desk, then said, “Take a seat, Master Link. Let me go over my plans with you, just to double check everything and perfect the numbers.”

Kree somehow seemed both relieved and discontented to be back in her recovery area in the Basilica. She settled into her cushioned chair, the feeling of it apparently soothing, but also imprisoning. The stress of having her shame paraded before all of Zora’s Domain was lifted, while at the same time, the depressing boredom of being tucked away descended over her anew.

The golden Zora saw his responsibility as completely taken care of, and seriously doubted that his fallen fellow wanted to be forced to look at him any longer, so he began off to see to other tasks. Before he could pass beyond the curtained doorway between the room dividers, however, Kree’s voice speaking his name drew him to a halt, and he turned to regard her again with ease.

“I still think you’re pretentious and patronizing and self righteous, and I don’t like you at all,” she hissed, though her anger was audibly flailing beneath a very heavy weight, pinned and helplessly submitting. No, there was something other than her hatred and pride; it was something vulnerable and she fought herself to expose it. “..but, of all the people from the Royal Order, members of my family included, you’ve been the only one to bother showing me any kindness, or try and help at all.”

Brivere understood the raw sting of revealing oneself from beneath the mask one wore to hide all weaknesses away. He understood isolation and loneliness, and not having anyone care about you at all. Perhaps he could not fully comprehend how trapped and betrayed and abandoned Kree must have been feeling at this very moment, but.. That didn’t mean he couldn’t sympathize.

“It’s all my fault, remember? Of course I should be the one to take responsibility,” he spoke, his voice smooth and steady. Kree couldn’t tell that he was joking, and peered up at him with a confused
expression until she noticed the hint of a smile on his face. At that, she averted her eyes, trying to
chase away the guilt that came to stain her own features.

“Maybe you wouldn’t mind...” the woman began, sheepishly twiddling her fingers before bundling
her hands together tightly in her lap, “just.. keeping me company for a while longer? It does get
incredibly boring being stuck here, staring at the damn walls.”

“Oh,” the golden Zora muttered in surprise. He considered the favor being asked of him, blind-sided
by the fact that it had even been asked at all, while also knowing that he inevitably had to disappoint
the other and needed proper words to soften the blow.

“Kree, you have my sincerest apologies,” Brivere began. “Not only do I have duty to report to within
the hour, I also have another matter to see to beforehand and have little time to spare.”

“Right,” the gray Zora mumbled dejectedly, shaking her head like she was chastising herself for
requesting something foolish. “Yeah, of course.”

“I’ll return again, however, if that’s your wish,” Brivere offered, in yet another attempt to reassure
the other.

Kree merely nodded in acceptance, quietly watching as Brivere turned to leave again, then she added
a softly spoken, “...thanks.”

Once he was beyond Kree’s section of the infirmary, the golden Knight loosened the bamboo satchel
from over his shoulder, snapping the container open in order to check on the flower he’d acquired
earlier. It was only somewhat wilted from the trip, and would hopefully perk up when it was placed
in a pot and offered some water.

Brivere would do just that before delivering it to its final destination.

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Chapter End Notes

Ohhh boy, how was it everyone? I feel like this chapter was really long, but I didn't
check the wordcount, so I'm not entirely sure. So, something I'm slightly 'conscious'
about is the fact that Sidon is not. It does help move the plot that Link is pried off the
Prince, but I have a feeling that it's kind of a bummer that he's not around. I'm trying to
write out as many scenes per chapter as I can, so that we can get back to the point where
Sidon is awake, but how do you all feel about it? Is the story still enjoyable and
entertaining enough for now, at least?
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The Zoras were recovering as best as they could. Little tears were mended. Small efforts felt immense. Broken bodies had been put back together with care and strained relationships were being maintained despite growing pressure. Link was readied for his trip to Hateno Village and willing to fight for the refuge of the Zora people. What he didn't know was just how hard a fight it would be.

Chapter Notes

A quick PSA, because it seems to me that a lot of people didn't know this? You do not need a Switch to play BOTW. You can play it on the Wii U!

This chapters gets pretty real, so steel your nerves for this ride. Dark shit ahead. Enjoy, friends. :]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There were voices, sounds of all sorts, pattering feet, objects being moved here and there, the swish of fabric; so many things. Everything was lost in a haze, yet the noise was always so clear, a constant buzz, not aided at all by the pounding headache wracking his skull, making sleep nary impossible.

He opened his eyes, his blurred sight very slowly regaining enough clarity to make sense of the jumble of blue which his gaze first fell upon. Steadily, reality began to resemble its former self and the shape of a silent princess flower upon a bedside table innocently greeted him.

Where was he? How did he get here? His body moved as though it were something that didn’t belong to him, like it was an awkward collection of parts, strung haphazardly together. As with his sight, his body steadily flickered back to life, but in the form of awful pins and needles. He began to move, his sense of touch bleeding back into his skin, one arm outstretcing toward the flower that had been left so near his bedside, only for his reach to fall shorter than expected.

A stranger’s voice added to the sudden surprise, and the boy hurriedly jerked his arm back toward himself, his head turning sharply against his pillow to regard the person speaking.

“You’re finally awake, are you, young one?” a dusty, pink-scaled elder spoke up, her body half tucked through the doorway, one arm holding back the fabric curtain.

Estuu said nothing- of course he didn’t. He dragged himself upright, the blankets falling back when he did, and he peered about his surroundings in confusion that he hoped would garner an explanation to his most obvious, yet unspoken questions.

The pink medic showed herself into the recovery room at the slightest sign of regained vitality from her patient. She had been carefully monitoring the boy and was certain that he was soon to need a change of bandages, on top of comfort that his elder sibling was not present to offer.
The woman let out a quiet sigh, gathering the materials she needed and placing them nearby before she took a seat at the edge of the boy’s bed. “Not to make light of your predicament, young one, but it truly is ironic, isn’t it?” she began. “You’re the only one with any power to heal all of these sick and suffering people, but even you still required the aid of our medical sciences.”

When the medic reached for Estuu’s injured arm, he ducked away from her touch, bundling himself into a neat, little ball of tail-flapping and nervousness. He wanted his questions answered and he wanted his space respected.

“I know,” came the graveled but gentle voice of the elder. “Your brother told us that you couldn’t tolerate being touched, and he warned us that you’d be very upset when you awakened. However, the bandages must be changed, so if you’ll kindly allow it, I’ll do my best to minimize contact.”

Fear and confusion did not make for the most polite behavior when it came to the young Zora, but just the mention of his elder sibling brought him some semblance of reassurance. Warily, he straightened, his eyes curious and hopeful while the medic reached for his bandaged arm, her hands hovering near, her fingertips carefully touching only the covered surfaces.

Where was Brivere? Estuu desperately wanted the medical Apostle say something more.

The bandages were tight and scratchy, so at least there was some relief in having them unraveled, even for a few passing moments. Once more, Estuu turned to look in the direction of the blue flower, though now it was out of a growing fear of what he would see when the last strip of cloth was pulled away, unveiling the full damage.

“I really tried my best,” the woman uttered in audible disappointment. “In the end, I felt that it was more worthwhile to save your life, rather than to risk losing you while attempting to preserve the full strength of your healing power. The worth of your life is more than the worth of your abilities, right?”

The woman sighed, then set the soiled bandages aside, saying, “Well, I hope so, young one, I really do.”

In his periphery, Estuu could see the murky stains leftover on the gauzy wrapping, and he swallowed nervously before his eyes traced a curious path in the direction of his own injured arm. The medic was preparing the new bandages, so the awful truth of the matter would soon be concealed once more, but for this hastily considered instant, the boy was allowed to take in the full scale of the damage he’d suffered, and all of its ugliness.

His right arm was severed near his elbow, the stitched, puckered flesh a mess of scabbing and bruises which turned his scales a dull, grayish violet. Estuu only dared to look for a fleeting moment before he tore his eyes away, a quiet hum of stress vibrating in his throat while his tail flapped against the back of his shoulders.

Something had been stolen from him, something more than just the full use of his magic and his ability to begrudgingly write out tiny fragments of the full complexity of his thoughts. Something precious had been stolen, and that reality struck a blow to his center that nearly bent him in half, leaving him unable to draw breath.

The Apostle allowed the boy to ride out his shock, wrapping his wound as quickly as she could, while softly uttering the word, ‘Breathe,’ every now and again, like he wasn’t telling himself the exact same thing. Every ounce of his being ached, and it was a pain that was beyond physical. It was beneath his skin and impossible to touch. He felt afraid and utterly alone, wanting nothing now but his brother’s presence and to hear his brother’s voice, yet Brivere wasn’t here and Estuu had no way
to ask for him.

With his one remaining hand, Estuu grabbed at the hem of the medic’s shawl, which encircled her waist. He gave a desperate tug, humming and flapping his tail in distress, needing something he knew she couldn’t give, wanting his needs received and answered, though he knew they wouldn’t be.

“Try to rest, young one. You’re still very weak,” she said, attempting to calm the frightened child, though Estuu’s hand pulled free from her shawl and went instead to tug at his forefin in frustration.

“Your brother visits often, usually late into the night or very early in the morning,” she explained, her words instantly stilling most of Estuu’s clamoring and he raised his head to listen. “He is the young Knight who serves Prince Sidon, is he not?” the woman continued. “I believe he has been tasked with some very lengthy guard shifts, but he is sure to return. He’ll be relieved to see that you’ve awakened.”

When Dunma entered the canvas-walled home of her secret lover, she was greeted by all the wonderful things which had grown so comfortably familiar. Betaal’s tent always had a warm, orange glow that was so unlike the soft, cool blue of luminous stone. The Sergeant had employed the use of Hylian-crafted candles and lanterns, which burned with wax and oil harvested from the hinox they’d slain, themselves.

There was a bed lined with woolen blankets, but scarcely did she occupy it. Instead, she was more often found in the opposite corner, working at her desk, which was piled with books and documents in no particular order. In the center of the structure, she’d acquired a tiny wood stove, putting it to use for the purpose of warming the herbal tea she would nurse, long into the night.

Betaal was slumped over her work, her hand moving with such fervor, one might assume that a very tiny opponent was squaring off with her from the surface of her desk. You could always tell she was into what she was writing though, mind and body, when she had her face damn near pressed to the paper.

The violet Zora chuckled to herself as she strode inside and removed the steaming teapot from the hot stove top. “You forgot about the tea again, didn’t you?” Betaal really, really got into her work.

The sound of Dunma’s voice and the words she spoke brought the blue Zora violently back to reality, so that Betaal sat up in her chair, her bright red fins puffing in alarm, and she hissed the word, “Yes!” She leapt from her seat to tend to the pot, only to realize that Dunma had already done it.

Heaving a sigh that held both relief and exasperation, the Sergeant made her way over to the stove, loosening the teapot from Dunma’s hand with a careful brush of their fingers. Betaal was quiet while she topped the water up and returned the pot to the heat, her single eye glancing upward to watch the taller woman for a hesitant instant, before her gaze drifted away in guilt and worry.

Dunma had yet to notice the change in her lover’s demeanor, as her own curiosity had drawn her over toward the Sergeant’s desk. She was always hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious pages that Betaal filled with words, but tonight she found something else to question, instead. Near where the blue Zora’s work lay, flipped backwards to keep the snooping guardsman from sneaking a peek, there was a container that held the remnants of what Dunma would assume was Betaal’s dinner.

What remained in the bowl was green and leafy, with flaked cutlets of very small fish, fish that most Uppercity Zora wouldn’t even bother to eat. Whatever it was, it was also very fragrant, not in an
entirely bad way, but in a way that was unfamiliar enough that the younger Zora regarded the dish somewhat dismissively.

“What is this?” she asked, gesturing when Betaal looked up.

“Oh, just something we uhh,” the Sergeant stumbled over her own words, as she so often did, making her way over to her desk to remove the apparently offending dish. A quiet sigh steadied her tone again while she placed the finished meal aside. “It’s a dish that we eat in the Undercity.”

“No offense, but,” Dunma tittered, “it looks like pond scum.”

“Yeah, yeah..” the blue Zora groaned with a huff, her wide shoulders stiffening at the teasing, then she wandered back over to stand near the stove, resolved to wait until her water boiled, lest she’d forget all over again.

At last, the younger woman began to realize that something was amiss, though she could only assume that it was her teasing which had dampened the other’s mood. One hand raised to gently cover Dunna’s features in momentary embarrassment, and she muttered an apology.

“Hm?” Betaal raised her head like she hadn’t expected the violet Zora to say anything more, or like her thoughts were still elsewhere. She was vaguely considering whether or not Dunma’s apology could be taken as sincere, or if it just served the purpose of asking to have unacceptable behaviors excused. Either way, Betaal typically couldn’t even force herself not to go easy on the other Zora, and she often found herself inwardly reminded that Dunma didn’t know any better, at times.

So she didn’t do anything, and nothing got better. At least that way she could blame herself, instead of being angry at the other. She didn’t want to be angry at her and had begun to perform strange mental gymnastics in order to avoid just that.

But that wasn’t even what was occupying Betaal’s mind, and she at last spoke up to clarify. “It’s not that,” she explained, her voice a dull sound. “Guardsman Gaddison recently transferred here and.. I don’t know. I have a bad feeling about it. I can’t help but think that we should break things off, just to be safe.”

“What things?” Dunma rushed to speak up, her head already shaking in denial, her big, golden eyes searching for Betaal’s own single-eyed gaze, so that she could see whether or not her superior was actually serious. When Betaal refused to give her any eye contact at all, the violet Zora pattered over to the shorter woman, unwilling to be ignored.

“We hardly have time to see one another as it is with how busy we are,” Dunma tried to rationalize. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I just have a bad feeling.” Betaal repeated, her tone hardened, as if her seriousness could somehow make Dunna understand. When the younger woman clearly didn’t, the Sergeant flailed her hands in awkward, frustrated gesturing, searching for the right words to describe this bizarre sense of danger. “I get the impression that either Guardsman Gaddison is here to interfere with us, or that she would if she were to figure out what’s going on.”

“Gaddison? Come on.” Dunma’s voice was both doubtful and imploring. In her mind, Gaddison was harmless and it was difficult not to think that maybe Betaal was looking for an easy way to excuse herself from this entire relationship. But no, Dunma also knew better than that, and inwardly chastised herself for those doubts before she spoke up again. “Gaddison has known me forever, she wouldn’t do anything to interfere with my career.”
“Maybe you trust her, but I don’t,” the blue Zora snapped, the sharp edges of her teeth shining with her words. She drew her hands together, holding them before herself while she took a breath. The words that Gaddison had spoken to her were pointed and undeniably meant to stand as accusations. The more Betaal considered it, the more she was sure. But how could she convince the other woman of that?

No, Betaal knew that she couldn’t, and she knew that if she tried, it was more likely that Dunma would start to think that she was some kind of paranoid coward.

“Listen, Dunma,” she started over, her voice gentle and sincere. “...I want more than anything to be with you openly and all the other wonderful things that come with romance, even if I’m terrible at all of it.” Betaal paused, having to stop speaking just for the sake of admiring the upturn at the corners of younger Zora’s pretty lips, and the genuine warmth of Dunma’s gaze. “But... It just doesn’t seem like a good idea, and if anything, we should stay friends from now on.”

“Hey, hey,” the taller woman cooed, reaching out to smooth her fingerscales along the bright red membranes of Betaal’s forefins. “We are ‘friends’, remember? That’s all we are. That’s all we have been this entire time.”

Dunma’s tender touch moved from her secret lover’s fins, to her cheeks and she cupped the other woman’s face, tilting her head upward ever so slightly so that their eyes met. When they did, the violet Zora gave Betaal a soft smile and a wink, then she said, “Wink back if we’re on the same page,” pausing for effect before adding, “Ah, good. I knew you’d understand.”

“Very funny,” Betaal breathed, unable to prevent a sheepish smile from brightening her otherwise dismal features.

“Don’t be so afraid,” the younger woman uttered reassuringly, her closeness ensnaring the other Zora, her presence possessed of a kind of gravity that only stars shared in common. She didn’t even know what kind of an effect she had, probably, and Betaal’s heart was beyond weak under the other woman’s gaze.

Maybe Dunna was attempting to calm her, but Betaal still read her lover’s words like those of a serpent, beckoning her to take a bite of forbidden fruit.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” the violet Zora purred, a smile on her face like she believed her own lies.

“Yes I have,” Betaal replied, her own voice weak and resigned, her fingers bundling and her arms folding together, to prevent herself from reaching out to pull the other woman closer. “...and I can’t trust myself not to do it again.”

A coy, little laugh came from Dunma at those words and her gaze drifted to her superior’s lips as they pronounced each one. Quickly, she bowed lower to deliver her own lips there, an irresistible temptation woven into something that resembled reassurance.

“Just leave Gaddison to me. I’ll talk to her,” Dunma spoke so soft and sweetly, hovering much too near the other for it to appear even remotely like a friendly conversation. Betaal should have backed off to maintain proper appearances, but instead she pushed herself up on her toes to place her lips against Dunma’s just once more. Any words of acceptance that she might have spoken would have seemed much less sure.

“For now...” the violet Zora murmured when the Sergeant’s affections no longer impeded her from doing so, “...am I still allowed to stay here with you, read something from your book collection, and
keep you from forgetting your tea, or would that be too scandalous?”

At that cutely casual reminder about the teapot, Betaal spun on heel to remove it from the heat, hissing the word, “Shit!”

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The Zora who came by to offer the woman her meal each day was standing in the doorway yet again; Swift hardly glanced up from her mat, because she definitely didn’t plan to greet the fish like an old friend.

When the Zora became impatient and set the plate down inside the prisoner’s room, the Hylian woman spared a quick look in the fish’s direction, noting the dismal expression on their face. Swift had to wonder, was the Zora so upset because their plans for rehabilitating her with kindness was failing miserably? Or was it because their people were suffering, dying and starving?

Swift rolled from her mat and onto her feet with nimble quickness, striding over to where the food had been so generously left for her. Crouching to pick up the plate, she inspected the contents; a small loaf of bread and a scoop of rice with some kind of thick, savory broth.

Well, it wasn’t much, but it was clearly more than numerous others were receiving. Standing in the doorway, she laughed to herself, her chuckles somehow more like a wasteland coyote’s growls. She ate the food slowly, not just because it was one of the only things she had to occupy herself, but because deep down, she wanted as many starving Zoras to see her, a prisoner, enjoying her own daily meal while they waited, and waited, and got nothing.

It was unbelievable, really, and even more amusing. She might not have fought so hard to avoid her fate if she’d known it was going to be so hilarious. How many of them were scrambling for scraps? How many of them had died? And they’d sent her here to teach her kindness? Laughable. Their ‘kindness’ was the most ironic part of all, and maybe the Zora who always brought Swift her meal was simply embarrassed? By Swift’s count, more of these pathetic fish were going to die of starvation than the Water Blight, itself.

“What kind of people take better care of prisoners than their own kind?” she mused. It was beyond her comprehension, it was outlandish and illogical as far as she was concerned. She smiled with jagged teeth at a passing Zora. It was one of the shorter ones that had been waiting around for food and it did not look pleased.

It reminded Swift of that fort Sergeant who had put her here in the first place. All of the shorter Zoras appeared to share traits in common with that particular one, and the Hylian woman had begun to wonder if there would ever come a point when she wasn’t giving every short Zora the up and down look, trying to discern whether or not they were the same one.

She would give anything for a rematch with that Zora bitch. Swift had spent so much of her time contemplating the idea of vengeance, the idea of destroying that one, particular fish.

“I wonder what will happen when Karmina realizes I’ve disappeared?” Swift idly muttered these words to herself, tossing the empty plate out into the hall when she was finished, then she skulked back into the room they’d provided her. If she knew her fearless leader, that woman wouldn’t just shrug off a disappearance. Deserters were met with merciless action, but Karmina knew Swift much better than that. She would eventually track down her missing people, and when she did.. Well..

Swift laughed once more, talking idly to herself, “For as strong as these fish are, and for all the resources they have, they won’t be able to stand against the Guardians of Hyrule.”
The group gathered in the square, as instructed by the Guard Captain and Link had been there the entire time, watching the collection of Zoras grow. Some appeared to address the statue of Lady Mipha, much as Sidon had done before, with the hope that she would watch over them in their travels.

Link, too, stood beneath the sculpture, contemplating how odd it was that she was carved into soft, pale blue stone, because it looked strikingly similar to how she appeared as a phantom, mysteriously fading in and out at anytime the Hylian was injured. He wouldn’t speak up to say anything to her, and not just because other people were around, though that was also a pretty decent excuse.

The truth was that Link had stopped doubting that she had purpose for haunting him as she did. He’d set Daruk’s spirit free, as well, but the Goron Champion never once appeared before Link again, outside of the struggle with Vah Rudania. No, Mipha wanted something, and Link was almost afraid to discover what it might be. He had a very, very deeply bad feeling in regards to her persistent presence and maybe it could be said that he was ignoring her.

But he also wasn’t ignoring her for no good reason at all, and that made it better. He hoped, anyway.

Once the refugees making the trip to Hateno Village were gathered and accounted for, Bazz came before the entire group in order to address them. Link stayed comfortably off to one side, to both avoid getting too crowded, and because he’d already gone over every little imaginable detail with the Guard Captain prior, so he wasn’t missing much.

“The first part of the trip will be made via the Zora River. Those among you who have been assigned to work duty at the fort downstream will be shown to the fort by the guardsmen accompanying you,” Bazz explained. Indeed, his guardsmen had separated one group from the other, and stood between them like the fort-bound Zoras needn’t even consider looking at the Hateno-bound group.

Actually, now that Link was really observing the details of this setup, it occurred to him that the Zoras being sent to the fort to work were all Undercity, and there were many more of them than there were people being sent to Hateno. As for the refugees making the journey to the Hylian village, there were perhaps five Undercity Zoras among them and they stood together in a tight-knit group, looking nervous that they may bump fins with the taller Uppercity people.

In all, it seemed very strange, because from what Link had seen before, there were Undercity people numbered into the hundreds lining the Basilica halls, waiting for rations. He supposed that sending them directly to the source of the food made sense, but considering how many of them hadn’t received any at all, he would have thought that they would be making up the majority of the refugees, as well.

Apparently, Bazz didn’t really discuss the full extent of the plans with the Champion. Maybe he thought these were irrelevant details.

“For the rest of you,” the Guard Captain was still speaking, “...you’ll be shown across the Lanayru Wetlands and make a short part of the trek on foot until you come to the Hylia River. From there, the majority of the journey will be made by water, assuring ease and safety. Once you come to the Proxim Bridge, the Hylian Champion will be guiding you all eastward to Hateno Village.”

That was the plan. The Zoras were going to make the first half of the trip without him, meanwhile, he would warp back to Hateno Village and ride Crazy Girl out to the checkpoint where he was to meet with the refugees. It was all very simple, and sure to be easy-peasy. The only difficulty that Link could foresee was the adjustment to Hateno Village itself, and the possible friction with the
villagers. It was his personal plan, however, to stick around in order to make the entire process easier, as much as he loathed the idea of being a babysitter.

But if he could aid the Zora people, and it was something to pass the days until Sidon awakened, he could do it. How long had the Prince been sleeping now? Three days? It felt like so much more than that.

Link yawned and stretched, trying to do it a bit stealthily because his apparent lack of nervousness quickly became noticeable and must have been unsettling to any Zoras standing nearby. They glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes, any furrows on their features deepening in concern. Were they doubting him? Did he look that untrustworthy?

He couldn’t help that he hadn’t had the ideal amount of sleep over these last few days, and also, listening to Bazz go on about expectations and rules for the refugee group was exceedingly boring. So rather than further upsetting already stressed Zoras with his growing exhaustion, Link decided to head out early, after all, he didn’t really need to hear this stuff. He sauntered over to one of the waiting guardsmen, noticing it was the kid who looked like he could be related to Bazz- what was his name again? Something with a T. Anyway, Link nudged him, quickly saying, “If the Guard Captain asks where I went, let him know that I went ahead, okay?”

“Oh, right! Of course, Hylian Champion,” the young guardsman addressed the smaller Hylian with brimming respect, but also a degree of uncertainty. “We should be setting off very soon. It’s alright for you to go early, right?”

Link nodded and flicked one hand to brush aside the Zora’s concerns, saying, “Yeah, it’s fine. Just let Bazz know,” then he walked away just as easily. He wanted to tuck himself out of the way before he warped, because if his yawns were worrisome for this nervous group, watching him turn into a being of pure light, shatter into bits, then shoot off into the sky would really spook them.

His boots stamped into the shallow waters surrounding the shrine in the very center of the city, but he avoided walking too near the dais, as it was still splashed with blood, his blood, from the Blood Moon incident. Avoiding the idea that something bad was going to happen to him when he arrived in Hateno Village was integral for his peace of mind, so instead, he hid himself behind the shrine before he drew out his Sheikah Slate and tapped in his desired location.

Like a fallen star fragment, Link’s body streaked across the sky to Hateno Village, his form coming back together and solidifying upon the pedestal of the shrine near his house. He would have liked to have said that everything seemed normal upon his arrival, but the deathly quiet hanging in the air insisted otherwise.

In suspicion, Link’s pointed ears pushed forward, listening for the usual background noise of the small but busy village; children running and playing, iron tools tilling the soil, the constant hammering of Bolson’s carpenters hard at work, all chorused by an ever-present chatter of voices from shopkeepers beckoning passers by, to gossipy villagers dawdling about the main stretch.

It had all gone quiet.

He did not like that, not even a little bit.

The Champion ducked himself low, proceeding like a timid forest animal taking its first steps into an open valley. His boots made soft crunches in the thick grass that surrounded the shrine and even that now felt loud to him.
He didn’t need to go very far before his eyes told him the story of why the village was so unbearably quiet. From the ledge that extended along the backsides of the houses which lined the main street, Link could see between the buildings, noticing a sizable procession of people on horses. They were, from what he could see, definitely Hylian, and from the looks of their battered armor, they’d seen some shit. Or they’d caused some shit, which Link would guess was more likely.

Link crept nearer, doing his best to maintain the stealth he’d been previously confident about. He hopped from the ledge where he was perched to a nearby rooftop, pressing his small frame up against the chimney and peeking around it with the hope of getting a better idea what the hell was going on.

Some of the unfamiliar, mounted warriors were climbing down from the backs of their horses, at least five or six of them with weapons in-hand, and with his slightly nearer vantage, Link could now see that nearly the entire population of the village had been neatly gathered and was encircled by this newly arrived threat. The gossiping woman had her daughter pulled near, so that the child was almost up under her mother’s skirts. The man who typically guarded the entranceway to the village was definitely no longer armed with his pitchfork, and it was apparent from how his face was streaked with blood that he’d gotten roughed up. Bolson was standing near a man that Link didn’t readily recognize, presumably the smith who was still new to the village, and the other man had one arm around Bolson- Link would have liked to say, ‘Good for him,’ but the situation was momentarily less than ideal. Standing in front of the entire gathering of Hateno Villagers was Reede, and he appeared both perturbed, yet bold as he stood his ground.

“People of Hateno Village,” one of the now dismounted raiders began to speak. Link was assuming they were raiders, because everything about them held the look and feel of raiders. “...listen up because what we’ve come to tell you is very important. We are the Guardians of Hyrule, a powerful organization made up of scores of Hylian people, like yourselves.”

The man who was speaking did not have his weapon drawn and his voice held an almost friendly tone, despite that his fellows standing nearby all had their swords readied. There was no way to mistake this for friendliness, however. It was blatant intimidation with a smiling face, the perceived kindness an offering meant to seem like a lesser evil compared to the obvious, underlying threat of violence.

“The majority of our group are strong warriors, organized for the purpose of unifying Hyrule once more and defending our people from the numerous threats of this world, including monsters, the scheming Yiga Clan and even the Calamity, itself. Our people once ruled this world as a powerful, respectable Kingdom, but those days are no more- we want to change that.”

The raider paused, seemingly hopeful that the people of Hateno Village would fall under the sway of his words with ease. There was murmuring among the villagers, though it was measured and careful. Link couldn’t make out any of it, of course, but he could already guess at what they must have been saying, because he, too, felt a touch of intrigue; these people aimed to destroy the Yiga Clan and the Calamity?

Honestly, the lone Champion had endlessly criticized his fellow Hylians for their complacency and cowardice in regards to these very threats. He’d slain hoards of monsters with hatred and frustration in his heart that wasn’t directed at the monsters, but rather, his own people. And by Hylia, it really would take the threat of violence to get some stubborn people on board with doing something, rather than nothing.

With piqued interest, Link continued to listen and the apparent leader of the group continued his spiel, “Unfortunately, for as numerous and strong as we are, our organization cannot exist without
support and supplies, and that’s where your village comes in!” The man straightened, clapping his hands together like an overly friendly, overly pushy salesperson. “We’re here to forge an alliance, a partnership of sorts, and your village will only benefit from our protection and success. So, here’s how this thing is gonna work. To support our efforts, your village is going to provide supplies: food, weapons, soldiers, whatever we may need, and these terms are, unfortunately, non-negotiable.”

“..You can either willingly partner with us, or we’ll take control of your land by force.” The speaker paused, laughing and gesturing to the hoard of heavily armed warriors for extra emphasis, as if it was needed. “After all, unifying Hyrule isn’t a thing that can happen if our people haven’t actually joined us.”

When the speaking man paused, nobody dared to utter a single word. It was impossible to tell if the hostage villagers were too fearful to speak up, or if they were actually in complete and total agreement, all threats aside.

Link shifted, peering out from behind the chimney where he was hidden by a few careful inches, yet even so, Reede caught sight of him, his dark eyes flicking ever so slightly upward to regard the Champion. His features gave little away, so there were no expectations to be found in the man’s face; no pleas for mercy, no blame, nothing. Link was uncertain whether the leader of the village was doing this to preserve the Champion’s stealth, or if he merely didn’t care at all. Maybe he thought Link brought these people here, maybe he was contemplating the threats issued by the Hylian Champion only one evening prior, or maybe he believed this deal was in the best interest of the village.

Personally, even the Champion’s opinions on this matter were obscure. On one hand, the people of this village absolutely deserved to be knocked down by several notches, if only for the sake of realizing that this world wasn’t going to get better if they simply pretended it was so. As well, there was scarcely one, single person from Hateno who had given Link any reason to care what happened to them. Perhaps it was selfish and cold that he actually needed reasons, but nonetheless, that’s where he presently stood.

Yet, while Link debated, the apparent leader of the raiders grew impatient, and hollered the words, “What will it be, Hateno Village? The easy way or the hard way?” His voice had turned sharper, more threatening, yet he laughed over the entire ordeal like it was a source of amusement. “There’s no need to be so damn hesitant! You all know what the right answer is!”

But then, before any one of the villagers could say a thing, a wave of arrow fire rained down over the raider group, knocking numerous riders from their horses, sending standing soldiers to the ground clutching at their wounds, and the Hateno Villagers shrieked in panic and surprise.

All at once, the children began to cry aloud, screaming in terror. Some of the villagers sank to the dirt beneath their feet, their arms covering their heads. Others bolted between the houses and down the street, unsure what else to do and utterly clueless as to what was happening, as the tense situation had gone from threats to all out violence without warning or explanation. A few of the riders’ horses reared and whinnied, the attack spooking some, injuring others, so a handful of them bolted down the streets, quickly adding a cloud of dust to the confusion.

Link, too, looked here and there for the answer to what the hell had happened and when the dust cloud rose over the rooftops, the phantoms responsible for the violence unveiled themselves from their hiding places for only a quick instant. Sheikah warriors clad in full battle armor and their dark war colors appeared upon the rooftops opposite from where Link was stationed. In unison, they dropped smoke bombs which concealed them behind a dense haze of charcoal gray and midnight blue that stretched up toward the sky, so that the whole of Hateno Village was slowly consumed by a
dark, smokey shadow.

Further arrow fire rained from the cover of the obscuring cloud, and it seemed that the raiders would be decimated with ease from the quick, hard, decisive attack. Yet, as though these ‘Guardians of Hyrule’ had entirely expected the Sheikah barrage, they moved to counter the surprise attack. Their horses galloped from the crossfire, an enraged, stampeding herd, and while Sheikah arrows poured in waves over the street that had been formerly occupied by raiders, instead of shrieks of surprise, now small bursts of flame were set free with each arrow fired.

The Champion leaned out of his hiding place to pay witness. Where the raiders had lined the streets before, they’d bolted into cover, leaving fire chu jelly in their wake. Now, with every arrow fired, the Sheikah themselves set Hateno Village to flame, causing a swirling wildfire that carried away their smoke cloud with the updraft.

While the updraft blew away the Sheikahs’ cover, raiders who had ducked themselves between the houses now returned fire on the attacking tribe, more than half of them armed with flame arrows that only further wiped out the obscuring haze, and left destruction where the hidden warriors had stationed themselves. Other raiders had already climbed the houses where the Sheikah stood, doing so under the cover their enemies provided so that when they engaged them, they did so unexpectedly.

Link watched as several Sheikah were impaled upon blades shoved directly into their backs, the expressions on their faces that of surprise and horror. They’d had no idea that these raiders would already know how to counter their techniques, and even the Champion was baffled while he looked on.

The haze over the streets cleared, so that the losses already suffered were made blatantly obvious. There were some raiders dead where they fell, and others who had crawled into cover, hands tightly pressed to bleeding arrow wounds. There was at least one injured horse rumbling in pain and puffing in distress, and a single Hateno Villager kneeled amidst the destruction, clutching the unmoving body of a child. Link couldn’t watch anymore, yet he also couldn’t interfere, because as far as he knew, these ‘Sheikah’ could have been Yiga Clansmen just as easily.

He did the only thing he could at this particular moment, and fell back to his house. He was hoping beyond hope that Finley and Sasan were okay, and that his Crazy Girl had been left untouched. He doubted the raiders could steal her, but they might’ve had the gall to slaughter her once they saw how dangerous she was. Hylia help them if they’d done anything to that horse, or Link’s guests. At that point, his stance would become much more clear.

When he darted across the wooden bridge, Crazy Girl and the rosy horse were nowhere to be seen, and the Champion’s heart sank into the pit of his stomach. His mind and body began to meld into a thoughtless state of blind instinct and his unbridled rage bubbled up as his nerves were drawn taut. He let out a quick, sharp whistle, trying to call his horse without making so much noise that he drew the attention of either side that was actively warring for Hateno in the streets at this very moment.

Coming to the front door, he found it to be locked and the window shutters were tightly closed. He hoped that was a good sign. With a few resounding taps, the Champion pressed his face to the slight crack between the door and the frame, saying, “It’s Link! It’s Link, let me in!”

There was a short pause, then after several audible patters of movement, the door flew open, and the Hylian found himself staring down a tiny Zora with a bow in hand and an arrow knocked and ready. He threw up his hands, but wasted no time saying, “Where are the horses?”

“Get in here, quickly!” Finley hissed, and Link readily obeyed, regardless of the fact that she had her
bow trained on him. He hurried inside, leaving Sasan to slam the door shut behind him, locking it up tight once more with trembling hands.

“Your horse threw a massive fit when those raiders came down this way,” the tiny Zora explained. “Then my horse ran off and yours followed after her. If she hadn’t made such a racket, though, we wouldn’t have had any warning about the raiders. Your horse bought us time to lock and barricade everything.”

“And the raiders just gave up?” Link asked, astounded but thankful enough. The small Zora just shrugged, equally confused.

“They’d already taken more than half of the others,” Sasan mumbled, and Link turned to glance at the young man when he spoke up. He was very pale, and had a glazed look in his eyes very similar to most of the other Hateno Villagers who’d been held hostage in the streets. “I was up on the hill searching for radishes. I saw it all.”

Swallowing dryly, Link looked around, noticing that the furniture had been pushed to block the windows and the candles were all blown out. In the tiny hallway beneath the upper level, the old man from before was huddled there with his two adult children. They were tensely discussing something, in sharp but hushed voices, but the man clearly didn’t want to hear any of it, because he was shaking his head and shushing the other two.

“We have no choice! We have to go! If they find us here, if they catch us again—” Link managed to hear as his ears pressed forward to listen.

“We just settled in here! We can’t run away!” the young woman hissed, unable to soften her words enough to keep them hidden. By her side, the young man was nodding his head.

“You know something about this group of raiders?” The Champion interrupted the little family dispute, striding over to where the entire trio was backed into the shadows. His ears were now pressed back, his sharp, blue gaze set upon the cowardly old man, who he knew would crack under it.

“Sir, yes, we know them,” he said, his gritty voice tight and shaking. “The Guardians of Hyrule. They’re a powerful group of mercenaries that banded together and took control of central Hyrule through sheer force and fear.”

“They control central Hyrule?” Link questioned, dubious. “What’s there to control?”

“All sorts of things, sir. The stables, for one,” the old man swallowed, trying to catch his breath between hastily spilled words that came rushing forth fearfully quick. “The group has an agreement with the stable families. They ‘protect’ the stables, but not for free. They take a share of all the income, they set rules for the central stables to follow, they take any horses they want, they expect the stable families to report any valuable information to them with consequences if they fail to. And they terrorize everyone else in between, like a beast consuming everything in its path and growing larger and stronger.”

“If they’ve made it this far, they have to be stopped!” the young woman cut in. “Father, if someone doesn’t stop them now, then soon they’ll be too powerful to stop at all, and we’ll run out of places to hide!”

“From what I heard—” Link interrupted, turning the conversation back in his own desired direction. “Their main goal is to rid Hyrule of monsters, the Yiga Clan, which we’ve established needs to be destroyed, and the Calamity. Sure, these methods are brutal, but maybe.. The ends justify the
“I’m sorry sir, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.” The old man’s attention returned to Link, yet at the Champion’s statement some of his nervousness had drained away, leaving him cold, empty and tired. “These people took everything from us. They had the power to exert themselves without the use of violence, yet they used violence just to drive home the fact that they were powerful, and we were helpless. Their only true goal is to further that power and regardless of whatever other goals they might strive for, the measures they take are not and will never be justified.”

“Just answer one thing,” Link hissed, knowing he needed to make a decision here, and that he needed solid information to base it on. “If these Guardians of Hyrule are out to destroy the Calamity and the Yiga Clan, two enemies of the Sheikah people, why would the Sheikah be here fighting them? Are they really the Sheikah or is this the Yiga Clan?”

And for that matter, could Link even believe these strangers? They could have easily been Yiga Clansmen, here to turn Link against possible allies and stab him in the back once he was vulnerable.

“I can’t say I know for sure, sir,” the old man had the gall to answer, so that the Champion breathed a frustrated sigh and unconsciously moved one hand toward his weapon, his killer instincts urging him to find his own forceful, violent methods to get what he wanted.

So how could Link even think to condemn these Guardians of Hyrule when their very behavior so closely mirrored his own?

“I don’t think it’s so simple as the enemy of an enemy being a friend, sir!” the man tried to reason with the Champion. “The Sheikah people surely recognize the Guardians of Hyrule for what they are! Monsters! Tyrants! Murderous thieves!”

“Um,” Sasan spoke up, his voice a feeble, quiet thing. Link sharply turned his head to one side to glance back at the other young Hylian as he spoke. The shy boy cleared his throat, still as unsteady as it was possible to be under the Champion’s fierce gaze, but he persisted. “There’s a chance that the Sheikah of Kakariko noticed the raiders moving through the area and sent aid. They’re the allies of the Hylian people, and probably would choose to aid a helpless, peaceful village, right?”

“Yeah,” Link breathed, thinking maybe, maybe it did make sense. He hoped it did, anyway.

All six of the people tucked away in Link’s house fidgeted at the sound of hoof beats, but the Champion recognized the wild, furious gait of his Crazy Girl and he, alone, breathed a sigh of relief. Sasan crept over to one of the windows, peeking between shutters to see the horses outside. “They came back,” he whispered.

“Good,” said Link, moving closer to the door. “Finley, Sasan, the two of you need to get on that horse of yours and get out of this village, for now. Actually, I have to ride out to meet the Zora refugees at the checkpoint and warn them about this bullshit. They’ll probably fall back to the fort in the wetlands, and the two of you should head there, too.”

“What? Run away?” Finley sputtered in disbelief, and her own confusion had Link turning a confounded expression of his own in her direction. She had a silver bow tightly clutched in her tiny hands, and a fiery look in her big, yellow eyes, and Link immediately shook his head.

“Absolutely not,” he spat. “You need to think about your mother, and about how your death would effect her before you do anything stupid.”

“I came to Hateno Village to be safe,” the tiny Zora replied, her tone firm and steady despite the
child-like sound of it. “So I’m going to do my part in keeping it safe and unless you plan to drag me back, I’m not going.”

“Did you even write that letter?” Link asked, though it was more of an accusation.

“I did,” Finley confirmed. “And when you get back with the reinforcements, I’ll give it to you.”

Letting out a huff of both frustration and submission, Link unlocked the front door, growling the words, “I don’t have time for this!” as he darted off toward his Crazy Girl, ducking low upon her back and letting out a, “Hyah!” to get her going.

She raced down the hill and out of Hateno Village, and Link was ever so grateful for her constant haste. The thundering of her hoof beats steadied him, the rhythmic puff of her breath stilled his own tension, and her rush would give him as much time as he needed to think over this wildly fucked up situation before he made it to the checkpoint.

Link found no Zoras when he made it to Proxim Bridge, but unsettled as he was, he knew better than to think they would have arrived before him, considering he left early. He could see now that it was a good thing that he had, or else he would have teleported right into the middle of an ongoing shitstorm.

There was one other soul about; a Hylian sentry who scouted the bridge and kept it clear of monsters. When the Champion rode onto the bridge and Crazy Girl’s hooves clip-clopped resoundingly against the stone masonry, the sentry peered in Link’s direction and he could already see the man’s bruised face.

Link dismounted his horse, choosing to approach the other man on foot to minimize any risk of Crazy Girl attempting to add to his bruises.

“Need directions, stranger?” the sentry called to Link as he, too, strode nearer.

“I’ll make it,” Link answered, stopping a bit more than an arms length from the stranger before he posed a question of his own. “Monsters scuff you up like that, or people?”

“Oh.” The fingers of one of the man’s hands raised to touch the tender edges of the blooming bruise underneath one eye. “Monsters wish they could leave a mark on me. But you know these mercenary types. They had a bit of fun pushing me around, but they passed by quickly enough without causing too much damage. You just better watch yourself if you head back east, though.”

“Got it,” Link uttered, then turned away, only for the sentry to sputter some further question and hold him up.

“Are you headed east? Kakariko should be fine,” the sentry instructed, oddly persistent about it. “Sheikah won’t tolerate much nonsense from our people, so the riff-raff is sure to pass their village by. Head there if you want to avoid any trouble.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” the Champion agreed, decidedly keeping the details of his intentions quiet, since he never knew who was truly trustworthy. “I’m waiting for some friends, though. It’d be a good idea for you to keep a little distance from me. My horse isn’t really the friendly sort.”

“Ah, of course,” the sentry agreed, tapping the butt of his old halberd against the stone of the bridge.

Thankfully, the other man gave Link the space he’d requested, staying toward one end of the bridge,
while the Champion settled at the ledge on the opposite end. He watched the movement of the water for some time, probably less than an hour, but it felt like more with how anxious he’d become. Eventually, a collection of shallow swimming streaks on the surface announced the presence of the Zoras, and Link stood to hail them.

The Zoras erupted from the river below, each of them coming to remarkably graceful landings upon the bridge. Some clanked in silvery steel, while others only made wet patters, the water cascading off their glassy scales and turning the old stone of the bridge black beneath their webbed feet.

“Hello, Hylian Champion. I’m Torfeau of the Zorana City Guard, assigned to leadership of the refugee pilgrimage.” One of the guardsmen came directly to Link, addressing him a bit formally, despite that they had exchanged more casual conversations in the past. It had only been once or twice, so perhaps she didn’t recall, or maybe Link was mistaken. She was, after all, yet another black-scaled Zora and he knew several at this point. “You are to guide us the rest of the way, correct?”

“About that—there’s a big problem,” he began, sure that his own voice sounded as dull and tired as the Guard Captain’s often did, touched with a bit of urgency that he attempted to veil for the sake of seeming calm. “When I arrived in Hateno Village earlier today, they were being attacked by a large, strong group of raiders. The people of Kakariko arrived to aid the villagers, but at the time when I departed to come here, it was still an all-out brawl.”

While Link explained, more of the guardsmen came in nearer, standing elbow to elbow with one another in order to listen. There was another young, black Zora that took a place directly beside Torfeau; it was the one Link had been inwardly referring to as ‘younger Bazz’ and of all the other armored Zoras, he appeared particularly worried.

“As of right now, I haven’t a clue which side prevailed, or if either has yet,” Link continued. “With that said, I can’t exactly advise that your people go there for safety, because the situation has drastically changed.”

Much as Finley pressured him to come back with ‘reinforcements’, something didn’t feel right about asking people who were already in such a dire situation to jump to the aid of others. Or, maybe Link just couldn’t help himself, and unconsciously he had some kind of desire to protect the Zoras from danger. His eyes traced each face in the group while a quiet clamor of voices began to hum from them. They were wary, confused, upset, and understandably so.

Torfeau put one hand up to hush the commotion and the people answered her unspoken orders easily. Once the group was quieted, she addressed Link again, saying, “Champion, what do you suggest?”

“The safest option for your group, at this time, would be to fall back to the fort in the wetlands and wait,” he answered with ease and without much thought. His own natural instincts in regards to the apparent requirement for him to combat the Calamity was, ‘It’s not my problem, I shouldn’t handle it.’ So, of course, he took a similar stance for the people he wanted to shelter. This wasn’t their responsibility, and it wasn’t up to them to handle the problem.

The dark-scaled Zora in charge, however, rather grimaced over the answer she’d received. For a moment, she gazed upon Link with fierce, amber eyes, as though she were dubiously waiting for him to offer alternative suggestions, or possibly considering if she was even allowed to speak up against him. In the end, she did just that, but in a way that was poised and polite, offering a counter suggestion of her own.

“You don’t think it would better serve everyone for us to simply provide assistance to the troubled
“Villagers?” she asked, though it was entirely a statement.

“That would be the gracious thing to do, sure, but as it is...” Trailing off, Link let out a sigh, having not exactly wanted to explain his reasoning, lest he’d be taken for a selfish coward. “It would put your people in danger, and I see no reason for any of you to aid people who didn’t even want you around.”

“Would it not serve to possibly change those opinions?” the Zora woman spoke in careful rebuttal. “If we march into the village to assist in driving out the attackers, would that not help sway opinions more in our favor?”

“Maybe,” Link answered, a bit frustrated, unsure as to exactly why. Some cruel part of him would likely cherish the idea of Hateno Village burning. Another part of him felt sick at the possibility of Zora lives being put at stake for selfish, cowardly weaklings who couldn’t help themselves and refused to help others in turn. He was torn, and these questions of morality weren’t his strong suit.

He wished Sidon were here, if only to advise him. That idiot Prince would probably make boundless compassion seem reasonable, logical.

“Do you really want to help these people for the sake of making them like you?” Link answered at last, speaking seriously because this decision was very likely one that would wager lives for principle.

“Maybe not just for that reason alone. Is it not merely the right thing to do?” the guardsman predictably answered, though her fellows did not appear to be against her in saying such a thing. Link, meanwhile, let out a sigh of disappointment. Why were these people so righteously selfless?

“Champion, we are warriors and we do not fear these vile enemies,” Torfeau attempted to reassure the Hylian, laying one hand carefully upon his shoulder. “For those of us who serve in the City Guard, we are trained to fight and protect the helpless, and we will not hesitate to do our jobs. As well, I personally feel that it would be shameful for us to approach this village with the intent to seek refuge, only for us to turn away when that very village is in peril. We must offer refuge to our allies in equal measure, or not bother to call ourselves allies.”

“It’s up to you, guardsman. Bazz clearly put you in charge for a reason,” the Champion relented. No matter what, his own existence couldn’t be extinguished, and if these Zoras wanted to fight, he would gladly go in with them. Surely they would give him something real to fight for; that was the only vaguely positive light he could find.

Once more, the blue flame of Link’s gaze traversed the collection of faces in his company. Plenty of them looked ready and willing, steeled and determined, even if others were unsure. Most of them were armed with bows and spears, even the civilians, and if Link knew Zoras, every one of them had at least a minimal understanding of how to make the best use of those weapons.

“I’ve seen your people fight and I know what you can do,” Link stated, nodding his head in a show of determination of his own. It was, evidently, time for him to put his own instincts aside, and be the man his Prince would be proud of. “I won’t force you to fight a battle that is not your own. However, if it is a battle you feel you must fight, then I believe in our chances. I believe we can win.”

Torfeau nodded in agreement, a small smile lighting her features. She quickly turned to the other young man at her side, issuing her orders, “Guardsman Tottika, you will fall back to the fort with the civilians. When the fight is done, we will return and the rest of the group may proceed to Hateno Village at that time.”
“You’re going and I must stay?” The black Zora by Torfeau’s side baulked, rendered speechless for all of a few seconds before he made an attempt to question the other Zora. “Sister, you can’t just-

“Follow your orders, guardsman,” the dark-scaled woman cut off the other, setting an intense gaze upon him that he answered with a quiet, pleading one of his own. Then, after another moment of hesitation, he dipped his head to her and separated from the group.

While he went, Torfeau pointed in his direction, saying, “The rest of you may fall back to the fort, unless you have wish to fight. Understand that, if you are not a member of the Guard, there is no obligation to do so.”

Link watched a bit impatiently as the group split, his gut churning all over again with the knowledge that they would be charging back into the fray. He took a few deep breaths, trying to channel that belligerent asshole who invaded the monster-infested fort beside these very people. Now that he thought about it, some of these exact same guardsmen had been with him that night. He’d feel better if Bazz were here, or Betaal, maybe even Brivere. Zoras with ‘B’ names must have been in a class all their own. The point, however, was that they had all been present for the fort invasion and now they weren’t here.

When the process of deciding who would proceed and who would fall back was done, a surprisingly large amount of civilians were left standing with Link, Torfeau and the rest of the guardsman assigned to this mission. There were a few with small children who could not simply march into battle, and surely some who didn’t possess the proper experience or nerve, but for the most part, many wished to fight. Even the small group of Undercity Zora who’d been sent to Hateno were willing to take up arms.

“There you have it, Champion,” Torfeau announced once the splinter group had begun back downstream. “We’ll follow your lead, sir. Lead us into battle.”

“Not just into battle,” Link asserted. “To victory.”

The Zoras dove back to the river depths when Link mounted his Crazy Girl and galloped eastward along the banks. They chased the horse’s hoof beats in tight formation, the pounding of her stride upon their battle-bound path as good as any war drum.

As the sky faded from orange to deep blue over Hyrule, the lone sentry took a torch in hand and walked the length of his bridge post, lighting the massive lanterns that would illuminate the path throughout the night. His boots tapped resoundingly against the stone, the one and only sound to be heard at all, save for the last chirping crickets of the season, and the distant cries of a camp of bokoblins, shrieking into the coming darkness.

Of the six lanterns, however, the sentry failed to light the last one, leaving the westernmost edge of Proxim Bridge with one lit flame, and one still dark. The sentry stood in wait near the unlit lantern, extinguishing his torch and shrouding his lurking figure in shadow.

After some time, the slow clip-clop of a lone rider crossed the bridge. The rider pulled his horse’s reins so the creature came to a quick stop just between the mismatched lanterns.

“You have a message, then?” the rider addressed the waiting sentry, not turning his hooded head even slightly to regard the other man.

“I do,” the sentry responded, his voice unsure, perhaps even guilty, or fearful, then he continued. “A
young Hylian man rode east from here, in the company of a bunch of Zoras, all armed and looking
ready for a fight.”

“Think they were headed for Hateno?” asked the rider.

“He wouldn’t say, but it seemed noteworthy,” the sentry explained. He was still cursing himself for
failing to get a straight answer from the stranger; he must have enjoyed the beatings and all the other
potential punishments. “There was one other thing, though. The guy, he appeared to match the
description of the person those Yiga assholes have been looking for.”

“The Hylian Champion?” the rider uttered in intrigue, going quiet for a contemplative moment. His
horse shook its head impatiently, its halter making soft jingles. “Hm. I’ll ride for the Colosseum
tonight. Karmina will want to hear this,” came the voice of the rider at last. “Excellent work. That’s
what we like. Keep it up.”

“Right,” the nervous sentry mumbled, finally lighting the final torch as if it were merely something
he’d forgotten to do. “Yes, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

How was that, friends? My beta-reader said that she really liked the rising action in this
chapter, so I hope you all appreciate the growing tension! Seriously, I can say pretty
confidently that things about to go from 0 to 100 from here on. This story is about to get
mad intense and stay that way until the end of part 1.

Okay, so BIIIG shout out to so many people. First, all of the sweet artists who have
made fanart recently- ya’ll are amazing. Momoshiki hasn't been officially mentioned
here yet, so here is my shout out to her! Her art is lovely, you all should really check her
out! A certain reader sent me a big list of mistakes that they found within several
chapters, and I really appreciated it, so shout out to them to! Thank you for your help!
ALSO, thank you to some other very kind people: Kaz, StupidBlackCat, and XSystem!
I wish I could express how much it helps my motivation to know you all love this story
that much. :]

And to the rest of you; the persistent commenters, the ones who are leaving me kudos,
the ones who have followed me on twitter, or tumblr and sent me sweet messages. ALL
of you! The support and enjoyment of all of you makes me incredibly happy and gives
me the willpower to keep working on this big beast of a story. Thanks for all that you
do. <3
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

The sun went down over Hateno Village while the hands of the Guardians of Hyrule tightened their hold. But as the light disappeared, leaving the Hylian village in darkness, the gallant Zoras marched into the night, to restore peace and take back the hope for freedom. The hesitant Champion bared his steel once more, not in the name of his Goddess nor the safety of his own people, but on the decision to fight made by his Zora companions.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. I'm dreadfully sorry for the wait, but I assure you, it has been for a good reason. This chapter is LONG. It is SO. LONG. It is also full of juicy action, for those of you who really enjoy those kinds of scenes. I hope you've all been waiting on the edge of your seats to find out what is gonna go down in Hateno Village, because the wait is OVER.

So, quick warning, as this chapter deals with all-out battle, things do get incredibly violent. Read on, and enjoy, friends! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From where the creeping waterways came to quiet ends at ponds that lurked in mountain-enclosed glades, the Zoras marched uphill to Hateno, their armor gleaming almost golden in the setting sun. Trios of crimson-skinned bokoblins met their ends on Zora spears, having been waiting to ambush unsuspecting farmers and traders on the dusty paths, only to clash with warriors ready for confrontation.

Crazy Girl slowed to a skipping trot, the strength in her hindquarters carrying her forward with impatient little hops up the last stretch. The Zoras scaled the hill, their pace a slow but steady jog, their armor clinking, their weapons drawn. When the rooftops of the village came into sight, Link set his horse free to run, diverting from the path and instead circling the pond just downhill from his house.

He could already hear the first signs of ongoing struggle and yanked Crazy’s reins to bring her to an emergency stop in the cover of the trees that grew around the pond. The horse shook her head and grumbled in displeasure and Link offered a reassuring pat to her neck as he peered up from his makeshift hiding place.

For Link, there was little reassurance to be had. His house was surrounded and besieged by these ‘Guardians of Hyrule’. They were at every window, smashing the glass and pounding at the fortifications while placing handfuls of fire chu jelly, with some already lit and burning. There was a trio of raiders at the front door, swords and bows drawn, ready to slaughter any who came running to flee the flame.
The band of armored Zoras soon caught up to the mounted Hylian and they came creeping near with bent knees, doing their best to shelter their ranks beneath the cover offered by the trees. Torfeau was at the head of the bunch, crouching right in earshot of the Champion, awaiting his guidance in recognition that he, alone, knew the terrain.

“This is my house that they’re attacking,” he uttered, keeping his voice low. “I’ve counted ten of them, but there could be more lurking out of sight. They’re armed with swords and bows. Either way, your people should have an advantage with the range of your spears.”

“So this is my house that they’re attacking,” the black Zora answered with a nod. “How shall we approach?”

“Can your people make the jump from this river, to the tops of those cliffs?” Link gestured in the direction of the trickling flow that filled the pond. The river ran alongside his property, snaking its way through a deep cavern; if the Zoras could leap from the depths, it would offer some element of surprise, lending them an advantage. It looked no higher than jumps he’d seen Sidon make with ease.

“We can jump that, yes,” Torfeau confirmed, her voice confident and ready. That was exactly the reassurance Link had been waiting for.

“Good. Get your people into position,” he said, loosening the Sheikah Slate from his belt in order to summon the luminous orb of a bomb. “I’m going to ride up the slope and engage them first. When you hear an explosion, consider that the signal to attack.”

“Yes, sir,” the Zora woman responded, gesturing to the company of warriors at her back. They slunk into the watery depths of the pond and disappeared beneath the surface, their stealth comparable to prey-stalking lizalfos.

Link didn’t linger long enough to see the Zoras into position. He fastened the Sheikah Slate back to his belt and took hold of Crazy’s reins, letting out a spirited ‘hyah!’ to let her know that the time had come to charge into battle. She bolted up the hill, her hooves pounding the ground with a kind of intensity that might have shaken the mountains into the seas, her puffing breath a hot, hurricane wind.

The flames were taking hold, beginning to reach toward the roof of Link’s cottage when he cleared the slope, tossing his bomb in the direction of the very surprised raiders waiting near the front door. They turned their heads quickly enough to let out warning hollers, but they didn’t react nearly fast enough to save their own lives. One hand fell to Link’s waist, a hurried tap on the screen of his slate detonating the bomb and sending enemies back with the force of the blast.

The entire gathering went flying, the ground beneath the bombs blown to blackened craters, shattered stone and bodies all sent aloft. Link steered Crazy back from where he’d tossed the bomb, but she still shook her head in discomfort at the blast, letting out a wail of pain and fury. She fought the tug at her reins, but her Hylian rider forcefully yanked, giving her no choice but to begrudgingly obey.

They circled the house, knocking aside unsuspecting raiders who had thought success was just within their grasp. It must have come as a great surprise when an enraged horse carelessly trampled them beneath her hooves, with the Champion astride her catching those he could at the end of his blade. Not all of the enemies fell so easily to his horse’s bloodlust, however, and numerous others dodged aside, chasing the fleeing Champion with hastily fired arrows that bounced at the corner of his cottage while he circled out of reach with only seconds to spare.

Once they came back around to the side of the burning cottage, Link leapt and rolled from his horse’s back, only for her to continue the rampage of her own accord, ferociously charging at the
raiders, unperturbed by the weapons they carried. If anything, the shine of steel stoked the part of her that went mad in response to danger and blindly attacked anything that moved until all was still.

Link immediately charged the cluster of invaders who’d come chasing at his heels, his shield now brandished, his sword a silver flash that sliced the air with blinding speed. He moved quick on his feet, a wild and untamed beast, his every strike impossible to read, impossible to apprehend. It was at the loss of a handful of lives that a lucky trio of raiders caught onto the tiny Champion’s messy but ferocious style of combat and they circled him just the same as a pack of maraudo wolves, all licking their chops, hungry for his fall.

And then all at once, the circle closed around him. The steel of his shield and blade clanked against that of the two attacking raiders, sparks dancing from them as they engaged. Link’s shield caught their swords and he tucked into their range, slashing at one, then blocking another with yet another harsh, clinking scrape of steel against steel. They hammered at him with deathly intent, his arms and shoulders mere extensions of the weapons in his hands, his body absorbing one shock after another, threatening to shatter under it, but hardening despite everything.

The archer of the trio backed away, taking aim at the fighting Champion with their bow, and Link’s ears bent in the direction of the most dangerous of sounds. The bowstring creaked while it was drawn taut, an arrow aimed for the Champion’s heart while he drew one arm up to fend off the flailing blades of the two others. With each breath and the burn of his straining muscles, time felt as though it slowed around him, his body moving with natural grace, instinctual preservation, like a river cutting its way through a canyon, finding the natural furrows in the stone and weaving into them. Nothing could stop him, nothing could end him, and in time, he’d find his way to the sea.

The fighting Hylian’s shield shifted in his grasp to protect him from the archer’s arrow when it hissed through the distance between them. With another swing of his sword, another enemy met their end, their blood chasing the blade that had drawn it in vibrant ribbons of red.

The archer danced aside to a new position as another of their fellows fell, becoming desperate to land a shot. Link rotated on heel to apprehend it, raising his defending arm yet again to shield himself from the arrow fire, his blade rising to parry the blow that would finally shatter the steel.

The sword burst into silvery fragments, crying out when it was destroyed, leaving the Champion defenseless. The two remaining enemies knew they had Link at a disadvantage, and that this was their chance to at last prevail. Both prepared to land the strike that would end him, the hulking swordsman drawing their weapon back to slash the smaller Champion, the archer nocking an arrow and pulling the bowstring tight as they aimed.

Link’s shield turned toward the swordsman attacking him and the blade clanked harshly against the surface, a tremor that echoed down his arm, painful to the bone. He gave a push, shoving his enemy’s sword back as his own empty weapon hand went to the dirk sheathed at his hip, drawing it out. He moved on his toes, his body turning just enough to give his own strike power, and in the seconds that the raider’s weapon arm was pushed back and defenseless, Link plunged the dirk between his enemy’s ribs.

The slash was quick, and the Champion turned while the swordsman fell, his shield tilting toward the archer but a precious few seconds before they released their arrow. The arrow bounced against Link’s shield and the smaller Hylian darted over strewn bodies to get at the last enemy. The archer drew another arrow, but Link leapt, his body rotating in the air, his shield slamming the bow from the raider’s grasp right before his weapon hand slashed across the archer’s throat, setting free ruby droplets that stained his blade.

Though Link had prevailed, there was no time to process the sight before him, the sight of his lawn
scattered with dead Hylians, the ground sipping spilled blood, and the sickening, metallic reek that melded with smoke in the air. He avoided it altogether, giving his dirk a final slash to shake away the blood before he sheathed it and went running around to the front of his house.

He found an untouched line of Zoras at the cliff, all armed with bloodied spears and standing over a pile of unmoving, felled raiders. He could see the same thoughts etched on the faces of his Zora allies, the reflection of something resting in the pit of their stomachs and his, heavy and indigestible.

Until this point, they’d only slain monsters. Now, their hands were soaked with the blood of people, and that was unsettling. Link felt he could shoulder that reality, as there was little else that could further burden his soul, but he worried for his friends. He worried that this day would change them, damage them, and they would have to go on living with these events, always remembering that their hands had killed people.

The smoke from Link’s house had turned dark, the fire taking hold of the timber frame with a vile promise to consume every inch of it, yet nobody had dared to exit. The door was yet untouched by the flame and Link pounded on it to little avail, calling out as loud as he could for anybody alive in there to stay away from the door. He tapped his slate for another bomb and dropped it by the structure, rushing back in order to detonate the thing, yet not quite as far as he should have.

The Champion’s hands were pressed over his ears, but the force of the blast shook him, causing him to stumble. Debris struck him in rebuke, like the house itself had taken enough abuse for one day and had decided to strike back. Nevertheless, the door was destroyed and Link rushed inside, the crackle of the flame lost to his painfully ringing ears, so there was nothing but the feel of the heat and the scent of smoke.

He climbed over the destroyed furniture which had been barricading the door, one arm over his face to help him breathe. Inside the house, Sasan, Finley and the other trio of guests were attempting the beat out the flames, while yet another unfamiliar group huddled in one corner. They wore the blue and gray of Sheikah armor, though one of them was stained black with blood which was slowly leaving him from a wound on one side of his chest.

Link did not pause for introductions nor suspicions. Instead he rushed up the stairs to his bedroom loft, falling on one knee in order to sift through his pile of weapons. Seemingly buried beneath all of the others, there was a discarded Blizzard Rod. The item created a film of frost upon the steel and wood of the other items and it turned wet and cold as it was taken into Link’s bloody palm.

With the weapon in hand, the Champion leapt over the balcony rail, hurrying between areas of climbing flame and putting them out with a few quick flicks of the rod. As he did, Torfeau clambered through the ruined doorway, her fellow guardsmen alert and looking on with the intent to help in any way they could.

Link hoped the battle was over as easily as that, but he also doubted it.

Once the flames were extinguished, the Champion turned his attention to his very newest guests, though it wasn’t in greeting. The one among them who was badly injured was coughing a sputter of blood in the smokey air, while the other hovering Sheikah tribesmen removed his armor and pressed a tight roll of fabric against the wound.

“Don’t you have potions?” Link hissed, having thought these people would have been more prepared, not that he was, either.

“All used up, I’m afraid,” one of the Sheikah answered, his voice a familiar ring to Link’s ears. The Hylian only hoped that it wasn’t a bad sign, because he couldn’t bother wracking his head to recall a
face to match the voice at this very moment. Instead, he shoved the blizzard rod into his weapon strap while he went to the food prep counter, tearing open the cabinets in search of any useful items. He had a collection of dried potion ingredients and with hurried grabbing, he haphazardly dragged out whatever he thought could be of use.

Link’s hands were filled with this and that, some items spilling along behind him as he shuffled to the nearest person available, which happened to be a frightened, wild-eyed Sasan.

“Take these to the cook pot outside and use them to brew a healing potion,” the Champion explained, his words running together in his haste.

“I don’t know how t-” Sasan stammered, only for Link to interrupt him with a violent shush. He didn’t care for any bullshit excuses, and he hated wasting his breath on people who couldn’t listen.

“Crush this into the pot first with enough water to wet it,” the shorter man shoved a chunk of dried bokoblin liver into the other Hylian’s shaking hands. “Once the water turns a deep violet over the heat, drop this into the mix and wait for the liquid to turn more red, like a wine color.” Link lastly handed Sasan the skin of a hearty lizard, and pointed toward the door. “Hurry up, this injured man doesn’t have time for you to stand around doubting yourself. Torfeau, can you make sure to cover Sasan, and have your guardsmen watch the bridge for any other enemies?”

“Yes, sir,” the Zora woman answered, escorting a hurried Sasan out the door, helping him over splintered furniture and rubble.

With the healing potion hopefully on its way, Link returned to the side of the ailing Sheikah, a few more helpful ingredients in hand to suffice until it was ready. He threw them down before himself, taking out his dirk and rubbing the blade against his trousers until it was a bit more clean, then he used it to slice a hearty radish down the middle.

The crisp vegetable was tucked beneath one of the Champion’s knees, so that his weight was bared down upon it, softening it. He chased the hands of the other Sheikah away from the wounded man with a motion, holding the crushed radish out so that it was hovered over the deep gash. The pink flesh of the vegetable turned crimson as it was squeezed, and a dark red juice dribbled from between Link’s fingers, down to the stab wound. When all the juices were extracted, the Champion reached for his last item, a bundled skulltula web, which he placed over the gaping injury before gesturing for one of the tending Sheikah to place the roll of cloth against the wound once more.

Link breathed a sigh and said, “That should slow the bleeding for now.”

“Thank you for your aid, Champion,” the gruff, familiar voice of one warrior addressed him and Link turned to the source while he rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead, wiping away the sweat gathering there.

“We’ve met, right?” Link asked, a touch of suspicion returning to his otherwise breathless tone. The Sheikah man had half of his face concealed beneath a mask of midnight blue fabric, but at the Hylian’s questioning, his hand reached up to pull it away.

“I am Dorian,” the Sheikah man explained. “I often stand guard outside of Lady Impa’s castle in Kakariko. We met briefly when you came to speak with our Chief.”

“Right, right.” Maybe he didn’t show it well, but being offered some solid proof that these were, in fact, the real Sheikah greatly comforted the previously edgy Hylian. “So what’s going on here? Can you fill me in?”
“We received a tip that this group of raiders was on their way to attack Hateno Village. The same group already took control of another Hylian Village to the south, so we couldn’t ignore it,” the Sheikah man grimly explained, pausing to pull his mask back into place, all breathing hindered by the lingering smoke. “We came here to protect Hateno Village, but these raiders had a much better grasp of Sheikah technique than we’d expected and their numbers were great.”

“Then where are the rest of them?” Link commented, his fighting spirit steeled for the bad news he was expecting. “Those that we killed outside, I could count them on my hands.”

“Our warriors retreated to the lab at the top of the hill,” Dorian stated, one hand reaching to cradle the head of his wounded fellow, a look of worry on his otherwise stoic features at the deepening pallor of the bleeding warrior. “In aiding the injured, we got cut off from the others and fled in this direction, only for a kind, young Zora to usher us into the shelter of this house.”

Link raised his head, a reprimanding glare shining from beneath his smoke-stained fringe, the look directed at Finley, who lingered nearby. She was keeping her attention focused on the doorway, her bow in hand and ready, yet she glanced over her shoulder to catch the Champion’s glowering, offering guiltless regard in return.

“It was about to be a very unsafe pile of ash, from the looks of things,” Link commented, his roughened voice making him sound all the more snide.

“We must go, to aid the rest of our group,” Dorian spoke, carefully withdrawing his reassuring touch from the injured man. He climbed to his feet, the other Sheikah who were accompanying him following his example and readying themselves for battle all over again. “Are the warriors you brought along willing to lend further aid?”

“It’s why they came,” the Champion answered, glancing toward the destroyed doorway, the waiting Zoras still just within his line of sight. “We will fight.”

“We’re going, too,” Finley asserted, pattering closer to the Champion, her head inclined to stare up at him. By the small Zora’s side, the young Hylian woman who’d been staying in Link’s house nodded her head. She had her black hair tied back from her face and braided, ready for confrontation.

Before Link could say anything, the cowardly old man stepped in front of the two young women, his hands drawn up before himself. “You’re not going anywhere,” he addressed the Hylian woman, no doubt his daughter.

“Father, these assholes already destroyed our lives once. They forced us to do their dirty work and to supply them for nothing in return,” she fought, her voice shaking with anger, her blue eyes both fiery and ice cold at the very same time. “They tortured and killed mother and if we don’t stop them, they’ll steal the futures of every one else in this village. They’ll steal any hope we had of starting over.”

While the family bickered, Sasan came running back inside with the entire cook pot clutched between his hands, the cloth of his shirt stretched out to protect his palms from the heat. He kneeled at the side of the injured Sheikah and Link followed, dropping down by his side. He gave Sasan’s shoulder a pat of praise and drew the Blizzard Rod back out with his other hand, then very carefully tapped the rod against the bottom of the pot, instantly turning the hot, black steel a dull, steaming gray with the intense cold from the magical item.

“The potion has to be cooled before it can be used,” the Champion explained, passing the Blizzard Rod to Sasan and leaving him to tend to the Sheikah.
Link ran upstairs once more to arm himself, taking both a sword and a spear, sure that he was soon to go through more than one weapon. When he came back downstairs, the family was still locked in debate.

“.the night the Guardians of Hyrule came, your mother wanted to fight more than anything,” the old man tried to reason with his angry daughter, placing his palms together in pleading. “She resisted with all she had, and that’s exactly why they made an example of her. If she hadn’t been so damn determined, she might still be alive now.”

“In a way, she’s better off, because at least she died free, rather than living to become as pathetic and disgusting as we did,” the young woman spat. Link folded his arms, watching impatiently, and growing all the more certain that this feisty young woman had enabled Finley’s own bold personality, and vice versa.

“I’m going,” she said, getting directly into her father’s face. “I’d rather die fighting tonight, than spend another moment cowering and running from these awful people. If we don’t stop them now, nobody will ever be able to stop them.”

“You can’t,” the old man’s voice turned desperate, yet demanding, hardening. He was too cowardly to allow his loved ones to risk themselves, but strong enough to pretend that he could stand permanently in their way. “You just can’t g-”

At last, the old man’s grown son pushed himself between the two warring sides, his arms extended to block his father. “Just go Nora,” the young man said, speaking over his father and holding him back.

Nora didn’t waste another second. She spun to face the doorway and ran toward it, her boots clicking and her black braid swinging with the sharpness of her movements. Finley skirted along behind her, a small, pinkish shadow clutching a Silver Bow. Link could only let out a sigh of frustrated disappointment in his certainty that he would fail to dissuade the young Zora girl from this madness, the same as the cowardly old man had failed to dissuade his own daughter.

When Link, too, strode for the door, Dorian fell in line with him, along with the small group of weary Sheikah warriors, who left their injured fellow in Sasan’s hands.

“What are the raider’s remaining numbers like?” Link asked, turning to regard the Sheikah man near his side when they strode out of the charred building and onto the red-painted grass. “Do you think we have enough here to make a real fight of this?”

Dorian’s deep gaze moved across the litter of bodies, then over the collection of Zora warriors who all stood ready for battle, measuring, contemplating, only to shake his head in doubt. “I would say it depends on how many of our warriors survived,” he spoke, his voice calm despite his certainty that the Guardians of Hyrule still possessed greater numbers. “I understand that Lady Purah has a weapon of some kind, though I know nothing at all about it. I only hope that it’s been of some help.”

“Hmm,” the Champion nodded his head solemnly, also taking stock of the faces surrounding him, knowing that in the end, some of them were bound to perish. His gait remained quick and confident, however, because he wouldn’t allow himself to stifle the spirit of his Zora allies. He went to Torfeau’s side, speaking to address not just her, but all of the guardsmen in her command.

“From here, we march toward the hilltop, to engage however many of these raiders are left. If this goes bad, use the river to fall back to the cottage,” Link raised his voice so that he was audible to all. “Some of the Zoras can position themselves in the waters below the bridge and make use of arrows from the river. The rest can hold a defensive position at this end of the bridge and destroy these assholes from there. That’s only if we fail to end them at the hilltop, which I’m hoping we won’t.”
“Yes, sir,” Torfeau called out, the rest of her warriors straightening as she did, preparing to march. The Champion nodded his head, then turned away from the collection of warriors, striding toward where his Crazy Girl had come to stand, near the rosy horse, yet still out of reach. The young Hylian woman, Nora, was saddling the other horse, with Finley waiting by her side.

“Finley,” Link addressed the small, Zora woman. “If you insist on doing this, you’re riding with me. You can provide some cover, at least.”

“I don’t think so,” she hissed in reply, unlike the other Zoras who respectfully obeyed his command. “I’m riding with Nora. Cover your own ass.”

The Champion let out a tired sigh, everything serving to remind him exactly why he preferred to go it alone. “..If anything happens to you, your mother—”

“Link, I’m not a child! This is my choice,” Finley determinedly raised her voice to the Hylian who was trying his best to protect her. She might have had the voice of a child, but her tone held the steadiness of an adult, just as she was asserting. “If anything happens to me.. then you’ll deliver the news to my mother the same way you delivered the news of my father to me and life will go on. Or it won’t. Either way, you can’t stop me, so stop trying.”

Link’s voice was consumed by a helpless brand of silence, and maybe it was better that way. Maybe he so often opted not to speak because in these difficult situations, what difference did his words make? None. All he could do was shake his head, watching the Hylian woman climb onto the back of the horse, defying Link with her steely, blue gaze while she bent low to extend her hand to Finley and pull the tiny Zora up.

“What happened to that letter?” Link asked.

“Sasan knows where it is,” said Finley, in reply.

Walking away, Link closed the short distance between himself and his horse, and she gave him a wary nicker, her ears flicking here and there in nervous anticipation. She’d already seen plenty of danger, yet she could smell the smoke and hear the clash of battle still going on just beyond where they were waiting. Link liked to pretend that she knew no fear, but he could see otherwise clearly in her behavior; she might have been afraid, but she was even more fierce and angry than fearful and he could trust in that.

“I know it’s asking a lot,” he addressed his horse, grabbing her bridle in order to pull her muzzle closer, so he could look into those wild, pale blue eyes of hers. “But maybe be a little less crazy and a little more careful, my lady?”

She yanked her head free from the restraining grasp, puffing indignantly, and Link climbed onto her back. Of course she didn’t plan to listen to him. Really, nobody did, so he wasn’t sure why he expected it from her. Quickly, Link fastened his extra sword to the horse’s saddle, then with a soft click, he commanded her to walk, coming up beside the other mounted duo. “You two can follow me into the fray, but keep a little distance, because I’ll be using explosives. Even if you’re not close enough to be in danger, the blast will spook your horse.”

“Got it,” the Hylian woman answered. She appeared glad enough to be taken seriously, while Finley only nodded without saying a word.

When Link and Crazy Girl continued toward the bridge, the two mounted women followed at his flank. He slowed to a stop near where the Zoras and Sheikah tribesmen were anxiously waiting. The Sheikah weren’t obligated to listen to him by any means, but he spoke up to address the Zoras who
were, apparently, under his command.

“Like before, I’ll ride in first to get an idea of their numbers and pick some off while Torfeau leads the charge uphill. Hopefully, some of the raiders will come running downhill in pursuit, allowing your group to ambush them,” Link explained, pausing long enough to receive their acceptance of this plan, then he rode onward, leading his Zora soldiers as he went.

The sky had turned a hazy, smoke-laden shade of blue and the silvery light of the moon only further painted the formerly vibrant landscape in more dismal tones. Hateno Village was the very image of rampant destruction, perhaps not quite rivaling the Calamity, but close enough to give these previously sheltered villagers a bitter taste of the world to come.

Link ignored the body-lined streets while he rode through with the other mounted women trotting along at his flank. He glanced aside to get a look at them only once, noticing both of their faces darkened in sorrow. Good, it would give them the fuel they needed to keep their passionate hearts burning brightly. They would need that sheer force of will to survive.

The two mounted parties marched slowly enough to see the company of Zora warriors to the foot of the hill, then the Champion tapped at Crazy’s side with his heel just enough for her to feel his movement. She didn’t require very much prompting and surged ahead of the ranks, determined to climb the hill like it was flat ground that her powerful legs had no problem sailing across. Nora audibly urged her own horse onward when Crazy bolted, but was already maintaining some distance, as instructed.

Link’s fingers tightened on his mount’s reins, the leather creaking while it flexed under pressure. He counted the seconds until they neared the top of the hill, his pointed ears instinctively pressing forward at the sound of clashing steel and the hollering cries of fighting soldiers. Just as they were about to clear the hill, one hand drifted to the screen of his Sheikah slate, his fingertips hovering, ready to summon the first bombs he would use to rain destruction on these bastard raiders.

Yet before the mounted group could enter the battle, a rumble shook the ground and a blast of golden light erupted from the laboratory. It swelled from the building, its rays reaching toward the darkening heavens, bright and blinding. Link’s eyes squeezed shut in the disorienting flash and he reflexively yanked at his horse’s reins to swerve around and avoid the blast which burst free like any other explosion, the boom it produced quaking empty air and striking all who were near.

Crazy let out a shrieking whinny, sharply turning away out of instinct, not just because her rider had commanded it. She reacted to the bright, golden blast the same as she would to bombs or fire, but Link was thrown aside with the jerk of his horse’s movements. He hardly had time to hold tighter before he was rung from the saddle, cast to the dusty ground and sent rolling.

But Link’s body reacted with equal haste, and he sprang to his feet, leaping backward and crossing his arms before his face in the expectation of searing heat or body-shattering force, neither of which came. Nora, too, yanked the reins of her horse and it skidded to a stop near where Link stood.

“What is that?!” Nora called out, in shock and fear.

Link had no response. He watched in awe and confusion while the shining light engulfed the lab and the hilltop, just short of where they’d come to an emergency halt. It bubbled around the entire area, a perfect sphere of brilliant glass that lit the darkening land in bright gold, turning the inky blue of his starless eyes a mesmerized yellow as he watched, astounded.

At last, he only shook his head, as that was all he could do. Images within the erupting sphere blurred and blended, running in unnatural reverse. Spilled blood returned to the bodies it had been
drawn from, and those bodies zipped back to their feet. Fired arrows shot back to the bows which had released them, and the hands of archers returned those very arrows to the quivers they’d been drawn from. Smoke and fire slunk down the laboratory walls, swallowing up their own black char as they went, lessening and dying out as though it had never been lit. Destruction and death disappeared, a scene of battle undoing itself, knitting itself, repairing itself. Written events disappeared from the pages of time, having never happened, having never existed, and Link watched it occur before his very eyes, his mind a blank of thoughtless still, with not even the buzz of static to break his inner silence.

Fallen raiders arose, shifting back to their starting positions, the lot of them gathered in neat ranks with fresh weapons in hand. Bleeding Sheikah warriors returned to health, the golden light setting them all back on their feet, so the stairs that encircled the lab were lined with midnight soldiers, proudly emblazoned with the crimson Sheikah eye, renewed and untouched.

Then, like frail glass, the swollen sphere shattered and dissipated, its light fading away and out of existence. Events began to play in their natural order and the people inside the explosion went about their battle, seemingly ignorant to the bizarre, magical event that had just taken place.

A raging hoard of raiders swarmed the building, with outnumbered Sheikah tribesmen making their last, desperate stand on the stairs that spiraled upward, toward the upper level of the hilltop lab.

None had yet noticed the presence of the newly arrived Champion from the distance where he stood, still utterly aghast. He shook his head, all too aware that he’d have to put his deep, burning questions aside because now was not the time for thought, now was the time for action. He ran to where his horse had stopped and mounted her once more, turning her sharply around and commanding her into the chaos that laid before them.

When Link charged in, Nora and Finley fearlessly followed. The hilltop was lined with attacking Hylians, their numbers like an impossible, enraged swarm. The Champion had never seen his own people in such mass, fighting in a bloody frenzy like maddened bokoblins, but more skillful. They had taken control of the lower area of the building and the very fires Link had just watched shrivel and disappear were newly set ablaze- these people really liked to play with fire, from the looks of things.

Orange flames lit the night, slicing through the dark cover which had concealed the approach of the tiny cavalry, but the light wasn’t all that cast an ominous glow. While the pounding of the horse’s hooves carried Link into the fray and he drew his spear to take out unsuspecting stragglers, a concentrated, crimson light sliced the shadows to target him.

Link recognized the blood red beam focused on him with terrifying familiarity. His gaze shot to the top of the tower, noticing immediately that the dismantled Guardian atop the structure had newly sprung to life, unmoving but certainly not unthreatening. He could only guess that Purah had some way of manually activating the machine, and while it was certainly a powerful defense, firing upon the numerous raiders threatening to swallow up the lab with their numbers, it unfortunately didn’t discriminate in who it targeted.

“Speed up, speed up!” Link called out to Nora in a fretting attempt to protect the mounted women following him. He knew that his Crazy Girl could outrun the Guardian’s deadly aim, but the horse behind him would undoubtedly get caught in the shot. Against his better judgement, he pulled his horse’s reins until she slowed and he twisted round in his saddle to make sure that Nora and Finley got past him. “Go, go, go before that thing shoots us both down!”

Link didn’t know if Nora had ever had the bad fortune of encountering a Guardian in her life, but he could assume by the fact that she was living, probably not. Nevertheless, she easily sensed the
urgency in the Champion’s commands and sharply tapped her heels against her horse, letting out a loud, ‘hyah!’

The mounted woman surged past Link at a glaring speed, and as they did, he, too, gave Crazy Girl the hasty command to run for her life. The laser aim pointed at him, blinding him with its red light, flashing in his eyes while it began to blink in quick succession. The shot charged to completion just as Crazy furrowed the ground beneath her hooves, blasting forward with more speed than even a Guardian’s fire could strike.

The ground quaked violently as it was blown wide open by the Guardian’s deadly laser, and even Link could feel the tremor in the stumble of his horse’s gait while dirt and stone shattered beneath her feet. Her neighing voice tore from her throat in surprise, her head high and her neck arching. This was a familiar threat to her, one that she recognized with ease, and it sent her right into the bizarre ‘fight or die’ instinct that she, alone, seemed to posses.

Link rode behind Finley and Nora, maintaining a safe distance by his own judgement. The mounted trio circled the building, their horses running at full gallops to avoid the searching threat of the Guardian’s laser beam. They rode in close enough to the raider hoards for Link to finally summon two glowing, blue bombs from his slate and he tossed them into the tightly knit clusters of attacking Hylians, tapping the slate at his hip for satisfying detonation.

The boom of the blast was a deafening thunder, which left the Champion disoriented and reeling, even from a safe distance. The rosy horse up ahead of him predictably swerved away with a pitchy cry and Crazy Girl followed the other horse’s path out of instinct. Link shook his head, the ringing in his ears muting the screaming and pounding hoof beats around him, leaving him a bit dizzy but clear enough to remain in control.

He could see Nora yanking at her horse’s reins while the rosy steed shook its head in fear. Crazy Girl ran alongside the other horse, her breath coming in hard puffs, and the pink horse followed at Crazy’s flank.

The raider group scattered, some torn asunder, their bodies rent so irreparably that death came with immediate swiftness. But this small dent in their numbers wouldn’t win any battles, and if anything, it put the mounted trio in greater danger because they’d finally been fully noticed by their adversaries.

The Hylian aggressors turned their attention to fending off the newly arrived opposition, and arrow fire was quickly added to the list of threats posed to the Champion and the women in his company. Again, the Guardian atop the tower focused on Link, and he pushed his mount to the limit of her speed, bolting away from Nora and Finley, riding instead into the hoard, chased by the danger of the crimson beam.

Crazy knocked raiders aside, mauling down all who stood in her way, and Link deposited bombs as he went, throwing them deep into the ranks of his enemies and detonating them so his own detonations chorused the fire of the Guardian, which brightly lit the entire battle with a hot, red blaze.

Link darted out of the fray, his eyes searching the fire-lit silhouettes for Nora and Finley, so he could catch up to them. They were working as a brilliant team, with the Hylian woman steering the horse with her left hand, and spearing one enemy after another with her right. Finley rode along with ease, arrows flying wildly, her movements smooth and natural. She didn’t hit all of her targets, but she didn’t miss them all, either.

“Who are these fucking kids?” someone screamed over the chaos, and Link’s eyes went right to the source. Standing at the edge of the stairs, amidst a gathering of fellow raiders, was the man who’d spoken before the Hateno hostages, attempting to threaten them into submission. Was this the leader
of these Guardians of Hyrule?

On second thought, Link didn’t even give a shit, because he absolutely did not like the guy. With quick, precise movements, the Champion fastened his spear to his weapon strap and loosened his own bow from over his shoulder. When Crazy circled, galloping near the man’s perch, Link drew an arrow, nocking it and taking aim.

He wasn’t a kid. He was twenty-fucking-six.

Link let the arrow fly, only for the mouthy man to tilt his shield in the riding Champion’s direction right in time to block it.

“Shit!” Link cursed. Apparently this guy really did have some skill. Or maybe luck.

“Somebody kill them!” the man hollered, clearly pissed at being targeted. At his command, however, a handful of raiders leapt down from the tower stairs, rushing toward their own nervously waiting mounts in order to pursue Link and the women on horseback.

Link felt the time to retreat back to the Zora lines was nearing, yet Nora gave her horse a sharp kick, so it galloped directly toward the cluster of other horses, which the raiders were presently climbing aboard. He rode after them in confusion, calling for them to follow him all the while, and they blatantly ignored him.

Without any mercy, while the women rode past the raider mounts, Finley fired a volley of arrows directly at them. Her shots struck the large targets with ease, sending the herd bolting this way and that, sharp whinnies of pain and fear elicited with each strike.

“Not the fucking horses,” Link groaned. The move was effective in stealing some of the power from the larger group, but by Hylia, it hurt Link to watch it happen. It could be said that his compassion for all that was equine surpassed his compassion for any other form of life.

While some raiders attempted to wrangle what few horses they could get their hands on, Link swapped his bow for his spear again, passing just close enough to land a few cheap strikes on his hapless enemies. They took swings at him, but Crazy Girl stayed out of sword range, giving Link enough reach to knock a few of the Hylian aggressors aside with the sharp force of his blow, surely leaving them with deep, deadly puncture wounds.

Nora, too, impaled more than one of the Guardians of Hyrule on her spear as she rode by, leaning over to spit on one of the raiders when they fell. Link shook his head, wondering how he’d found a Hylian even angrier than him.

Several raiders at last got up onto their mounts, and at that point the danger was much too great. Link whistled in a last ditch effort to get those feisty women to follow him, wedging his weapon beneath the strap around him while pulling Crazy’s reins so she turned for the downhill slope and ran.

Thankfully, he soon heard the rosy horse riding at his heels, though the active Guardian did not fail to target them as they galloped away. The two horses bolted for the slope at full speed, rounding a corner, completely oblivious to the danger behind them until the Guardian’s laser pierced the sky and tore open the ground that lay at their backs.

Screams came from horses and Hylians alike when the Guardian’s shot fired. It missed its original target, but struck a target nonetheless. Link supposed that, even though this group of raiders was named the ‘Guardians of Hyrule,’ actual Guardians felt no guilt in accidentally shooting them down.

However, the laser fire didn’t stop the pursuers for long and the thundering stampede of mounted
enemies soon gained ground on the fleeing trio. The chill of the night air sliced at Link’s fire-chapped cheeks as his horse bounded down the hill, but he dared not slow her when the Guardians of Hyrule rode close enough to shoot at them with bow and arrows.

“Don’t ride in a straight line,” he called to the women whose horse galloped at his side. His hair was windswept and whipping around his face and neck, and his voice felt as though it got lost in the wind. Still, when he cast a glance to his side, he made momentary eye contact with Nora and she nodded in understanding.

With the reins tight in his hands, Link leaned lower, pressing his body into the bouncing frame of his horse, to make himself less of a target. Crazy Girl naturally began to curve from side to side while she ran, in recognition of the pursuing threat. She and Link had outrun enough gangs of mounted bokoblins for her to understand how to avoid the sting of flying arrows.

Arrows hissed past them in a steady barrage, the steel of their bladed heads clinking off stone ledges, getting buried in the dirt, but most shots missed until a shrill voice cried aloud into the night.

Link’s eyes darted over once again just in time to see Nora arch in pain, an arrow shaft deeply embedded somewhere in the trunk of her body, yet she fell from her horse and rolled across the path too quickly for Link to judge whether or not it was fatal. Finley had been turned around backwards on the rosy horse, her own bow drawn in defense, and she called out when her friend took the hit.

“Nora! Nora, no!” the young Zora’s voice screamed in fearful loss that had gouged her as deeply as the arrow which brought down her friend. Link swerved toward the rosy horse, leaning himself out in order to take hold of its reins, to keep it on track.

“Finley!” he called to the wailing Zora, who was gaping in disbelief, one hand clawing onto the saddle for dear life. “Finley, you have to take control of the horse and stay focused! We have to keep going!”

The young girl could not steel herself, she had no way or means to do so. Even so, she did as commanded, her body obeying automatically, her mind closing down and surrendering to the actions she had no choice but to take. She righted herself on the horse and settled in the saddle, her tiny hands reaching for the reins which Link released when she took them.

Yet just as Finley resolved to keep riding, leaving Nora behind, the pair of horses at last galloped past where the Zora guardsmen had ducked into cover, waiting to spring their ambush. They must have heard the sound of hooves charging down the mountain, as the entire group had tucked themselves behind a tree-lined ledge, so that even Link didn’t catch the steely glint of the moon on their armor, until the moment he’d ridden past.

In a disciplined flash, the entire company bolted across the path, forming a tight, spear-lined barricade. The small handful of Sheikah tribesmen accompanying the Zoras stood just behind their lines, bows drawn and aimed at the approaching raiders, firing a volley of arrows into the mounted group without hesitation or mercy.

The raiders were hard pressed to yank their horses’ reins to emergency stops, and the pileup that occurred as a result was an utter mess. Some horses reared back, others fell aside when they were shot, and yet others failed to stop before they hit the Zora spears at near full force. Uncounted Zoras went beneath the hooves of the stampede, raiders tumbling from their saddles and horses running headlong into those in front of them in a graceless heap of bellows.

The animals fled here and there in utter terror, with the Sheikah firing at raiders who remained astride their mounts, and Zora spears casting them down with fatal blows. Some of the guardsmen
clambered back to their feet, while forcefully dismounted Hylians went running for the safety of those among them who had yet to fall or be shot down.

It was bloodshed and chaos, innumerable details lost in each blink of the eye, too much to see, too much to comprehend all at once. Link turned his horse around, his blue eyes wildly flicking across the scene before him and he drew his bow, just to have the comfort of a weapon in his hand.

His Zora allies were rushing any and all enemies who stood near enough, those spears fierce and deadly precise, just as they had been the night they fought for the fort. He hadn’t considered it, but even up next to Hylians, the Zoras were imposing foes, with bloody skill and a dangerous range.

Those raiders who’d managed to stay out of the fray turned tail to flee back up the hill, back to the power offered by their massive hoard. Link saw them turning to run and fired after them, unsure if any of his shots met their mark from the distance he was at.

“Don’t let them escape!” called the voice of Dorian, fierce and steady as the mountain itself. The Champion’s gaze went straight to the Sheikah man, watching him fearlessly run for one of the escaped horses which no longer had a rider, mounting it and steering the equine in pursuit of the fleeing Hylian enemies.

All of the Sheikah tribesmen followed Dorian’s example, clambering onto wandering horses and riding into battle, their tightly bundled white hair a stark contrast against the blackened night sky. The Sheikah group did not wait, and when they went galloping uphill, Finley gave her horse’s reins a sharp snap, sending the obedient rosy horse running to follow the fleeing herd, probably with the intention of locating Nora.

Link hesitated, however, his voice lost somewhere in his aching, dust-laden chest and smoke-burned throat. He and Finley had survived that bullshit at the top of the hill because they were on horseback, but Zoras on foot? Sure, they were unstoppable in the water and a force to be reckoned with at close range, but with an active Guardian firing randomly at anything that moved? It would waste the lot of them without even giving them a chance to fight.

The Champion swallowed and looked over the collection of spirited soldiers gathering around him, awaiting his word. Some were scuffed up, but otherwise fighting fit, and Torfeau was still there, ahead of all the others, her head upturned to regard the mounted Hylian.

Link’s stomach was clenching as though his voice was burying itself there, unwilling to show itself. The Sheikah tribesmen wouldn’t last without the support of the Zoras, but with an active Guardian to contend with.. It was impossible to see any of these guardsmen walking away from this fight.

There was only one option- Link would have to deal with the Guardian first. At the very least, the damn thing was stationary, so perhaps he had a chance. The real challenge would be fighting his way through the raider group to get to the lab and climb to the top.

But he would, because he had to. This was the only choice, the only hope.

The Champion breathed, feeling as though he’d forgotten to, his chest tightening and sore. Then, when he was ready, he addressed the Zoras under his command.

“The greatest danger as we march to the hilltop is the fact that there is an active Guardian on top of the laboratory, and it will target each and every one of you. I’m going to ride ahead of you and attempt to take the damn thing out,” he explained, not even knowing if these particular guardsmen were old enough to remember the Calamity, and Guardians. “If it is still active when you make it to the top, stay as close to the building as possible, because it’s the only place out of the targeting laser’s
range.”

“Understood, Champion!” Torfeau answered, with a clamor of valiant eagerness from those around her, and they pounded the butts of their spears against the ground.

“To battle!” Link called over the Zoras, so that they gave a holler of, “To victory!” ushering him off while he sent Crazy Girl galloping ahead with a fierce command. She ran for the top of the hill like it was the peak of Death Mountain and she was the very fire and eruption that would shake the entire province. Link only hoped he could channel even an ounce of his horse’s unstoppable spirit.

Once they crested the hill, the Champion’s gaze hurried to take in as much as possible, to get some measure of the chaos, to give him some kind of notion how to proceed. A small band of Sheikah tribesmen still held the upper level of the laboratory, knocking off a few attacking raiders at a time, doing all they could to make those stairs impassable, impossible. Dorian’s group was circling the building on horseback, shooting arrows into the raider hoard, quick and brutal, little care for aim as they were sure to hit a target no matter how precise they attempted to be. They decidedly risked the Guardian’s wrath, staying within the danger of its targeting range, because it made it all the more difficult for the Hylian invaders to mount an assault on foot.

The mounted Sheikah warriors were a cyclonic procession, ever chased by the rapidly seeking line of blood red which fired from the heavens, furrowing the ground until it seemed there would be little left of the hilltop property, once this battle was done. For now, the Guardian served to aid them, while also threatening to steal their breath in a burning demise, but Link could tell that soon there wouldn’t be enough solid ground for their horses to tread and it would no longer matter.

The Champion’s blood-stained hands were moving rapidly, unfastening the sheathed sword from where it had been secured to his horse’s saddle, tying the spear there instead. Much as he admired the Zora peoples’ strength with a spear, he preferred a blade for going forward on foot.

With a parting pat to his Crazy Girl’s neck, Link took a breath and rolled from her back, setting her free to attack as she pleased. He darted away while she ran in the opposite direction, following the movement of the other horses and charging any Hylian on foot that came near, her jaws gaping, an indiscriminate trap ready to close on anything that threatened her.

Link rushed fearlessly into the enemy collective, a sword at his back yet it was the dirk he had in hand. Hylian bodies were pushed together in the madness, each face an indistinct blur of orange tones in the light of the burning flame, with bright, shining eyes like luminous stone, glinting reflectively in the shadowy dark. In their minds, they were all fighting midnight soldiers with vivid, white hair and didn’t immediately recognize Link as a threat when he infiltrated their hoard.

He was one of them. They saw themselves in his image.

So it was to his advantage not to pull his sword, and instead he allowed the razor sharp of his dirk to slip inside one after another, a swift, clean movement while he hurried past. The blade was so sharp that they almost failed to feel anything more than a gentle prick from the shadows, only realizing that death was upon them once they began to bleed out. By that time, Link had moved on.

The heat from the fire was intense as Link approached and it stole breathable air, replacing it with smoke to mask the stink of sweating, leather-encased bodies and spilt blood. The Champion sheathed his soiled dirk and leapt for the walls once he pushed through the crowd of enemies to reach the laboratory. Yet while the stone of the tower structure had not and could not be consumed by the growing inferno, every inch was red hot and burned on his skin, each furrow he reached into adding blisters to any part of his hands which weren’t already calloused.
He pushed, persisting, some part of the knowledge that his body was a tool, a weapon, giving him the ability to ignore all weakness. His shoulders did not ache while he dragged himself up the structure, because weapons felt no pain. His burns and injuries did not matter, because damage was irrelevant to a tool. His inability to breathe in the thick smoke would not stop him, because he did not need comfort to continue.

Link clambered up the walls, along the underside of the spiraling stairs. His boots scraped at the masonry in a way that caught the attention of the Sheikah warriors who still held the upper length of the stairs, but not by much. One of the archers clad in what now appeared to be ashen black peered over the ledge and took aim at the climbing Hylian, sure that this was another Guardian of Hyrule attempting to claim victory, as they had not failed to try this very maneuver. But even with only the light of the moon and the flame, they acknowledged the Champion colors he’d donned and realized who he was, thankfully before they shot at him.

“Don’t shoot, it’s the Hylian Champion!” the Sheikah cried out to make sure that their fellows didn’t fill him full of arrows by mistake, though it was also with some sense of triumphant joy, like his presence was an omen of victory. They placed their bow over one shoulder, bending down upon the creaking timbers and reaching over the ledge to extend a hand down to aid the climbing Hylian.

Link wasted no time reaching for the offered aid, taking hold of the Sheikah’s hand while the toes of his boots pushed hard against any foothold that could give him additional leverage. As he was pulled up, his other hand grappled at the wooden ledge of the stairs, scrambling for safety when the raiders at last noticed that he was not, in fact, with them. Enemy arrows were fired from below, hissing past his dangling body and his grip tightened on the Sheikah’s hand. The tribesman gave a strong tug that felt as though it would be enough to finally drag Link to safety, but just as he heaved his upper body onto the ramp, the one anchoring him stumbled, causing Link to slip all over again.

Link’s frame slid from the wooden ledge, one hand still hanging on, and his eyes went to the face of the person aiding him in confusion, finding their countenance blank, the shaft of an arrow buried in the socket of their eye. The Sheikah’s body slumped, boneless and slowly beginning to topple over the side, but Link dared not let go. With one arm, the Hylian clawed his way back up, swinging one leg up onto the wooden landing while also pulling up the weight of the felled warrior. They put their life at dire risk to help him, he’d be damned if he let them fall.

The Champion gracelessly rolled himself up onto the solid surface with the dead weight of the other warrior in his arms. A thin stream of blood trickled from their wound, staining the edges of their hairline in deep, crimson red, and Link laid them down with care, a feeling of wretchedness burning in his center. He couldn’t pay even a second of respect to this sacrificed Sheikah, however, because there were other lives at risk with each moment he wasted.

Clambering to his feet, the rushed Hylian ignored the way the wooden structure creaked beneath his weight, threatening to give out. He was so near the top of the tower that the forgotten limbs of the Guardian dangled within his reach, so he took hold of one leg, using the strong, flexible steel like a rope to pull himself up. The terracotta shingles were unsteady beneath his feet, cracking or slipping as he tread upon them, so when they fell loose, Link stumbled onto his knees, bruising and scraping the skin beneath the cover of his dirt and bloodstained trousers. He hardly felt any pain, and nothing now would stop him, because from the height of his perch, he could see the company of Zora guardsman breaching the hilltop and charging in to engage the Hylian enemies.

The whirring of the Guardian’s heavy frame filled the empty air at the top of the tower, its mechanical parts scraping and clicking with age and mossy overgrowth. It’s pointed laser aim cast the lonely peak in a bloody light while it took aim at the newly arrived soldiers below, and Link hurried to cease its fire.
The machine was tied and mounted to the top of the building, and while Link surely could have begun hammering at its focusing lens, it would only begin to fire wildly in defense, likely doing even more damage to the vulnerable Zoras. Instead, he peeked into the small space below the dismantled Guardian, noticing a heap of wiring was strewn from its undercarriage, brilliantly lit in pale blue by the machine’s internal power source. It was probably rigged to some kind of switch, which Purah would have activated at the first sign of trouble, but he didn’t have time to find her and ask, nor search for a switch that may or may not have been destroyed. The Guardian’s laser was already charging a blast and focusing on his friends, so his only option was to destroy the damn thing right here and now.

The space beneath the Guardian was minimal, the gap between its frame and the roof like a door left slightly ajar. Link wedged himself into it, reaching for the wires that dangled underneath, but he could only bury himself up to his shoulder before he couldn’t fit any further. The wires were so near that he could brush them with his fingertips, but he couldn’t take hold, no matter how he flailed, no matter how he tried to push himself in more.

It felt as though the entire sky flashed with crimson light when the Guardian’s beam fired down upon the grounded soldiers, and from his proximity, Link could feel the searing heat of the blast against his skin. The explosive force sent dirt and stone aloft from below, ripping through bodies and leaving them in cinders, melting through steel like it was butter. The shot even shook the rooftop, leaving Link uncertain of his footing, but he clung to his position in desperation, his body fighting all the more when he felt the first few raindrops strike his face in warning before a cold, torrential downpour wept across the battlefield and all of Hateno Village.

Link’s head was wracked in thought so panicked that little of any good came to him, especially not with any kind of speed. He was just about to start jabbing his sword into the crevice beneath the Guardian in the blind hope of severing the right thing, when movement nearby drew the Champion’s eyes to it.

Something akin to a drifting dust cloud scrambled along the edge of the roof, a bit beyond Link’s reach, skittering and indistinct in the light. It was formed of tiny, shed petals and sand that glittered like it had been pounded from gemstones. A pitchy, disembodied voice echoed right at the tips of Link’s pointed ears, as though whispered directly into his mind.

“Need help?” it asked, only for Link to scoff in bitterness.

“Yeah, no shit,” he hissed, his fretting heart playing drums in his ringing ears. The Guardian was charging another shot, and there wasn’t time for him to coddle a whimsical child of the forest.

A body quickly solidified around the softly jingling cloud of petals and seeds, so that a tiny Korok with papery, gray bark perched near the rather angrily pleading Hylian. Link’s manners mattered little, because these sprites were utterly tone-deaf and had an equally absent sense of danger.

“I need you get under here and disable this thing,” Link explained, his hands gesturing to the crevice he’d been attempting to push himself into, then he slapped the iron frame of the Guardian with one open palm.

The machine fired another crimson blast before the little creature even moved, and it toppled to one side from the force, uttering a little noise of surprise.

“Hurry, please!” Link shrieked over the noise of explosion, his hands trembling, his eyes peering over the ledge to measure the damage, hoping beyond all hope that he didn’t find the ground scattered with Zora bodies. Only a fucking Korok could drive him to begging while it just kept standing there, inquisitively regarding him from behind a neatly decorated, leafy mask.
“Sure!” it answered at last, fading once more back into a drifting cloud of glittering sand that jingled like the bamboo wind chimes of Kakariko Village. It crept into the crevice with ease and disappeared from sight, leaving Link to wait while the Guardian whirred, refocusing its aim and charging up all over again.

The first time Link had met a Korok, he was utterly intrigued, despite dire circumstances. He’d been so tender and untainted at that time, just like the pure-hearted swordsmen of nonsensical fables. While attempting to escape from monsters on the Plateau, he hid himself inside a giant, hollow log, uncovering his first forest sprite completely by accident.

His circumstances now were just as dire as they were then, but he wasn’t intrigued any longer.

Within a few moments, before the machine’s laser could begin to flicker then fire, its power dimmed entirely and died, leaving Link to heave a sigh of relief, crying out to the rainy heavens in celebration that burst free from him, then faded like a trampled ember.

This fight wasn’t over. He pushed his wet fringe back from his forehead, brushing droplets of rainwater away from his eyes. The building was steaming, the water turning into mist upon the hot surface, while the fires below hissed and began to die in the downpour, so that only a sliver of moonlight lit the battlefield between the rain clouds. Everything below was silver and shining with wetness.

Link slid down from the roof, landing amidst the few remaining Sheikah who were still defending the top of the spiral stairs. He tumbled a bit clumsily, so that one of the warriors grabbed at his wet tunic and yanked him back toward the tower wall for safety. They released the Champion like it was nothing, their hand going back to their quiver, drawing an arrow and firing it with lightning quick movements.

All they could do was fight, and even now they probably knew that they would all die this night. Their numbers were down to something that even a small child could count up to, whereas the encroaching raiders swallowing up the tower with their numbers just kept coming, knocking the Sheikah off one at a time. Link had to do something about that.

The Champion tapped at the device at his hip, ducking into cover while he summoned a glowing bomb, which now drew quick glances with its brightness and the promise of danger. He hurled the thing down the stairs, where the Guardians of Hyrule were attempting to close in on the defending tribesmen, their swollen front lines covered from Sheikah arrows by the curve of the tower, itself.

When Link detonated the bomb, attacking Hylians went flying, their bodies limp and contorting in air as they were blown back and off the side of the hill. The tower trembled, the stones that its walls were built from shattering and falling loose. It wouldn’t withstand much more of that abuse, but Link hoped, at least, that the bomb bought the dwindling Sheikah a bit more time.

Even from the top of the tower, Link leapt from the wooden stairs and into the chaos below, rolling across the ground where he landed and back to his feet. Only now could he finally do the very thing that his most deep and resounding instincts bid; he took his sword in hand and drew it forth, the singing steel a soft vibration that passed over and through him.

Fighting was all he could do now, the only feasible means of success, but he welcomed that reality with familiarity and thirst. His fellow Hylians set upon him where he stood, but his heart beat within his blade, each strike the very pulse within his veins, each slash bringing his searching soul nearer to its ultimate prize—victory.

The Zoras spread out across the field, no need to stand side by side with one another for safety, as
their fast, deadly spears provided all the security they could ever desire. With the threat of the Guardian’s laser gone, they moved across the battlefield with ease, their large, powerful frames made of glimmering, wet steel and glassy scales. It even seemed like the falling rain had made them stronger, giving them the tiny bit of extra strength they needed. Droplets danced off of them with their every movement, from the quick jabs of their spears, to the graceful, sharp way they turned, going between many enemies all at once.

What remained of the thinning raider herd gathered around the Champion, threatening to overwhelm him. They didn’t know that his body didn’t tire, but rather grew stronger under siege. They didn’t know that by spilling his blood, they only further prodded his inner beast. It was almost merciful when he darted away, rushing for the blackened remains of the lab. Of course, they gave chase, apparently lusting for the sweet release of death that he had to offer. He ran inside the destroyed building, coming to a halt as he crossed the threshold, his weapon tucking under one arm and jabbing directly into the unsuspecting body of his nearest pursuer. The smaller Hylian yanked his sword free, leaving the felled raider to topple back, then he stood waiting, daring the rest to try and enter, to fight him in a place where they couldn’t overpower him with the sheer force of their numbers.

And foolishly, they took that bet. Surely, many of them had seen some rough things in their lives. Many of them had survived some wild, bizarre, dangerous situations and maybe that’s what gave them such overwhelming confidence that they could succeed, but the truth was, they could not. The Champion dammed the door with the corpses of brawler Hylians who believed they could fight their way through, only to become fodder beneath his feet. A few clever, little assholes circled the building and began to enter through the side door, thinking that now they had Link trapped, tied down, cornered, but they did not. They rushed in, yes, but his body and weapon were faster than they could ever be. He hacked them down, knocking bodies back, knocking bodies aside, moving so quickly that he wasn’t thinking any longer; he felt nothing, no pain, no weakness, not even the in and out of his breath.

He only felt the steel in his grasp, the smooth strength of each cut, something dark and dangerous erupting inside him. He’d felt this bloodrush before. He’d pushed himself to this precipice of inhumanity and, oh yes, he’d certainly given himself over to it.

But this was the first time that, when at last his fight was over, the bodies scattered and strewn at his feet were those of his own people. Yet even so, when his eyes moved across the bloody horror of it all, taking it in, he trembled in satisfaction.

Then, just as he’d thought his fight was done, another soldier rushed in at his back, charging the stationary Champion as though to catch him off guard. Link’s freshly blood-soaked hand tightened on his blade, his feet sliding back into position as he turned, his sword swinging to block the blow of the other. The weapons clanked together, the steel harshly clashing, blood rippling and spattering both combatants.

The Hylian’s eyes flashed reflective blue in the shadows, absorbing even the scarcest light from the charred, fallen roof to see that the person attacking him was no Guardian of Hyrule, but a Zora.

“It’s me,” he hissed, his voice immediately disarming the other.

“Champion!” she uttered. “My apologies, I didn’t realize.”

Yes, her dark scales blended into the blackened surroundings with a great deal of ease; it was Torfeau. Link would hope that her being here meant those raiders were on their last legs, though his pointed ears twitched at the clamor of warfare, which was still audible and painfully obvious.

“These raiders are set on taking the upper level and the Sheikah are fighting a losing battle up there,”
Link explained, his voice tired and as ragged as his body. “We have to help.”

“I’ll get our people up those stairs, sir,” the black-scaled Zora spoke, quick and determined. “Maybe come into the light a bit, to prevent any further incidents.”

The two warriors shot free of the destruction together, both surging back into the fray, lending one another a helpful bit of assistance for a short while. It freed up enough time for Link to look around and evaluate his situation once more. The Guardians of Hyrule still lined the spiral stairs, all with shields drawn to protect themselves from any arrow shots from below, though Dorian and two other Sheikah tribesmen were making their best attempts to get through those very defenses. The trio stayed tucked neatly near fighting Zora warriors, benefiting from the cover they offered, the same as Link at this very moment.

The raider hoard on the ground had been decimated so severely that those who still fought, defending the staircase landing, were sapped of strength and spirit, but they were destined to lose so much more than that. Torfeau gave the rallying cry to lead her guardsmen toward the tower and handfuls of Zoras charged in as commanded, forming an impenetrable line of spears as they begun the climb.

When the Zora leading the guardsmen left Link’s side, his sword begun to wildly swing, fending off those who attacked him while he was left seemingly wide-open and alone. He took a deep breath, whistling into the battle-torn night, and soon enough, he wasn’t quite so alone any longer.

His beloved mare reappeared from somewhere down the slopes, and Link imagined that she might have well gotten bored with all this nonsense, and ventured off to graze. But at his call, she came thundering forth, the horse equivalent of the Calamity breaking free of its restraints and charging across Hyrule. She galloped near at such a pace, she nearly knocked Link aside rather than allowing him to climb up, and if he’d had time to think on his horse’s behavior, he might have wondered if it was intentional.

With the Zoras collecting near the base of the tower, the Champion circled, once again taking up the spear he’d left tethered the Crazy’s saddle. He wouldn’t celebrate prematurely, but this fight was fucking over. The Hylian invaders who remained fighting on the ground were either extremely persistent, or had simply failed to realize how low their chances had fallen.

Link jousted one hapless raider after another, waiting until the Zoras were cleared from the field of battle before he threw more bombs, blasting gaping holes in the enemy forces. And though the ranks lining the tower were still quite heavy, the numbers they had surrounding the tower were becoming so rapidly depleted now that Link could see bands of them running for the cliff sides and the slopes, in hopes of fleeing.

They were even losing the stairs, slowly but surely. The Zoras were making their way up, fighting well against the raiders in the narrow corridor provided, pushing them back with the long reach of their spears and the strong organization of their lines. And whereas before the Hylian aggressors had backed the small band of Sheikah into a corner, now they were being squeezed between the Sheikah tribesman and the Zoras, fighting on two fronts and failing.

This was the beginning of the end; Link could feel it, he could see it. Apparently, however, he wasn’t the only one. A whistle sharply called from somewhere within the remaining cluster of raiders and a previously wandering horse came galloping in, in response. A man from the raider group leapt from the tower, landing on the back of the horse without the equine even slowing its pace when it galloped past the building and then it circled toward the downhill slope with its master newly astride it.
Link recognized this man, he was the one who had spoken over the hostages, yet now he was making a hasty retreat in the realization that the odds had tipped out of his favor. It was too bad for him, however, that Link had long decided that he wasn’t going to make it out of this fight alive.

With a determined ‘hyah!’, the Champion rode after the fleeing man he presumed was the leader. This man was the metaphorical head of the stalfo, so far as Link was concerned, and if he remained alive, the entire fucking thing would just come back together.

For the second time this very night, Link found himself bounding down the mountain path with Crazy Girl galloping at full speed. This time he was not the one fleeing, and there was unfortunately no blockade of Zoras waiting to cut this bastard off. Up ahead of Link, the apparent raider boss glanced over his shoulder to see another person chasing at his heels, as he’d no doubt heard the hooves of another horse pounding the dusty stone of the path.

Link pulled his bow from over his shoulder, ready to shoot this damnable character down from his horse. He drew an arrow and nocked it, taking aim and pulling the string taut while he held his hands as steady as possible. Steady aim on horseback was a tricky skill as it was, but to make matters even more complicated, the raider leader was apparently familiar with fleeing under arrow fire and he rode his horse in a steadily curving way, to avoid Link’s shots.

The Champion fired regardless, once, twice, again, again, losing count, missing each time until his frustration mounted into pure anger. He placed his bow back over his shoulder with such a hard movement, it was a wonder he didn’t simply cast it aside, altogether.

Brash and utterly cocky, Link pulled his spear once more and gave his feisty mare a few coaxing taps with his heel. Her gait shifted, her legs moving with such ferocity that next she might take flight. Crazy Girl’s neck extended forward as she ran, her breath hard, rapid puffs. This guy wouldn’t outrun them. He couldn’t.

Link began to catch up, his beloved horse as unwilling to be bested as he was, himself. They drew nearer and the Champion’s fingers tightened on the shaft of his spear when he drew back, ready to strike.

Then, all at once, everything changed. Even with his ability to see and feel events outside of the limits of time itself, everything happened so fucking fast. The fleeing leader waited until the perfect moment, then he cast a handful of fire chu jelly onto the path, so that neither Link nor his horse had time to avoid them. The tiny blobs burst with flame beneath the mare’s feet as she trampled them, and her hooves skidding in the mud, her head shaking in surprised pain, but she did not stop.

The other horse, however, came to a very controlled halt. It slid ever so slightly as its rider pulled the reins, and Crazy ran to bypass the other horse entirely, bucking and wild to the point that Link was thrown off balance and could only hold on for dear life.

Then, the moment Link began past the raider man, time felt like it stalled in place, all for the sake of letting Link admire his own grand failure. His running horse’s hooves were a slowly beating drum that echoed around him, the rain was paused so that tiny, glittering droplets hung in the air like jewels, and the raider man was there waiting, his own bow drawn and ready as his enemy rode past him. Link could see every detail, the man’s weathered, blood-stained hands pulling the bowstring tight, and the ruby, glinting arrowhead which ignited with steaming flame while it was aimed at him.

When the arrow flew, time quickened anew, and Link saw absolutely nothing in between that final moment of slow, steady clarity and the moment he found himself on the ground with a burning arrow in his chest.
The blow was hot and sharp, and if Link could have screamed, he would have done it. He lay still in the mud, rendered unmoving by the pain and pressure wracking him. His cheek was scuffed and pressed against the puddled ground, but his eyes were open and he could see the mounted raider riding off with Crazy Girl in vengeful pursuit. She was lunging for the man, biting at his arm, his leg, stamping her hooves much harder than necessary while she ran, until she ran out of sight, and there was nothing else but the cold patter of the rain hitting Link’s face and the burning pain.

The water around him turned a murky red, not just from his wound, but from the blood rinsing free of his tunic and every other perceivable inch of him. Link couldn’t speak, or scream, he couldn’t breathe at all. He kicked one leg to push himself onto his back, unable to move the arm nearest the injury, though the opposite one raised easily enough, allowing him to take hold of the arrow with the intent to rip it free from where it was buried.

The shaft of the arrow burned with magical flame, hissing in rebuke from the rain and searing the flesh of the Champion’s fingers as he took hold and yanked the arrow from his chest. He could shudder and cringe at the pain, but still he could not cry out. Once the arrow was dislodged, an all new warmth radiated from the wound, a trickle of blood set free, a heavy pressure atop his chest keeping him unmoving and grounded.

Did that asshole actually strike his heart? He hadn’t died yet, so he doubted it, but it wasn’t difficult to imagine that it had been very close.

His hands were shaking, and he supposed he should have been thankful that he could even feel that much, but he wasn’t. If ever his story was told for the sake of entertaining some audience of listeners, he somehow imagined that they would assume this part got easier every time. It was probably simple to think that reliving death and surviving grave injury beyond one’s capacity to count the occurrences would make one numb to all of it, but it didn’t.

It always hurt, that never changed. Pain didn’t amount to less when it became more frequent. Death was terrifying, even for a person who knew it wasn’t final. He hated it. And his mind twisted with fear and dread, twisting him in the process, until he wasn’t a person, but a distorted image of himself.

It wasn’t until his hollow eyes were squeezed shut in response to the blinding light cast over him by Mipha’s luminous form that he was reminded of something: He really needed to learn how to use that fucking magical shield left to him by Daruk.

The fallen Zora Champion’s magic warmed and soothed him, not just healing his wounds, but taking away every bit of his pain and discomfort to such a degree, his hardened spirit was softened, humbled, and he muttered a word of gratitude when he crawled to his knees.

He didn’t deserve it, but he received it gladly.

Link’s body was wet and unsteady as he got to his feet, but he scarcely felt even the chill on his skin any longer. He took one slow breath, feeling the air expand his chest like it was a privilege to have such a thing. Then, he let out a whistle to call for his dearest Crazy Girl.

Mipha hovered by Link’s side while he anxiously waited for his horse and his cautious gaze drifted over to regard her. Her floating body was as lifeless and still as the statue in Zora’s Domain, but her expression wasn’t nearly as serene. No, her features were mournful and imploring, like she somehow expected for Link to return the favor and save her from a death which was a hundred years over and done.

Again, Link whistled for his horse, waiting but seeing no sign of her. His head turned, his neck craning so his gaze was upturned to peer in the direction of the hilltop. He had to get back, be it on
foot or otherwise. He hoped that Crazy Girl was opting to ignore his calls and that she was okay. Regardless, he carried on.

With hesitant, limping footsteps, Link turned to begin the uphill climb alone, well, mostly. Mipha drifted along at his flank as he went, her ghostly body serving to light the path in soft, peaceful blue. Perhaps she thought she was further aiding the man she haunted, and that much was true, but the Champion knew the much greater likelihood was that she was patiently waiting, expecting his attention and repayment for all she’d done for him.

Or maybe she simply planned to never allow Link to forget the awful deed he’d committed by spitefully summoning her to his side while he indulged himself in her brother’s body, forcing her to watch as it all played out. Considering he’d never confessed the vile truth to Sidon, maybe that really was it.

Before he made it so far that he was sure to be out of his horse’s range of hearing, Link made another attempt to call Crazy Girl, though he didn’t bother to stop and wait. In some way, Mipha’s lurking made the awful reality of this battle all the more wretchedly clear, her shining halo casting the details of the body-lined path in sharper clarity. Somewhere in Link’s darkened psyche, he couldn’t help but imagine his fallen lover, who apparently loved the Hylian people like her own, greeting the spirits of these slain raiders with mourning and forgiveness. Her light shined now to guide them to her, to guide them in the dark.

Or else she wished to guide Link from that very dark, a feat even less likely in terms of what could be feasibly accomplished.

Just as Link had lost hope that his beloved mare would return, his ears perked at a sound which rolled like distant thunder and the promise of a coming storm. As it neared, the apparent stormclouds broke to unveil a force much more terrifying and destructive than lightning and gales; the pounding hooves of a very ferocious horse. She closed the distance between herself and her fleeing rider, skipping across obstacles like they were hardly an interruption to her.

This time, when she ran to Link’s side she actually slowed, like she recognized the weakness that remained in him, his body unable to forget the injury which had existed, even if it did no longer. He pulled himself into the saddle, lifting his body with the struggle of exhaustion slowly catching up to him, and Crazy gave an impatient, ragged puff, her muzzle darkened and wet with blood. She still bolted up the slopes like little had changed, but Link bent himself closer to inspect, one hand rubbing at her neck with care.

He hoped his horse had merely donned that raider bastard’s blood like warpaint, as she was more than capable of drawing it even without sharp fangs. Link had seen her jaws snap hard upon the unsuspecting forehead of a stable worker once before, pinching the man’s flesh down to the bone so that Link was forced to scramble to provide a potion.

It was likely a mixture of both his and hers, as the fleeing coward no doubt had to kick Crazy Girl in the face to discourage her attacks. If Link ever met that piece of shit again, he’d kick him in the nose, and let him live just long enough to feel every painful sensation that came with it before he killed him off.

“I hope you got him good, my lady,” Link growled while they neared the top of the hill once more.

The smoke and fire had cleared completely, and though the battle was waging on, the Zoras were already crying out in victory, their front lines mercilessly flinging foolish Hylians from the tower and leaving them to crawl away for their lives. The guardsmen in the back were shooting a steady volley of arrows at the grounded raiders, letting out a hearty, ‘Zo ra ra ra!’ with each strike.
Riding up, Link began to circle the lab almost casually, letting a few fleeing raiders taste his spear for their trouble. Even more of them got a taste of Crazy’s hooves. A small cluster of raiders were still making the most vain attempts to keep fighting, like they truly believed something at the top of this tower would turn the tide and give them back their long lost advantage.

They were steadily falling beneath the sheer tenacious strength of the trained Zora warriors, yes. But they had stopped even attempting to avoid the Sheikah arrow fire and had rushed the dwindling group of warriors defending the room at the top, laying down their lives as though death was irrelevant and all that mattered was slaughtering the Sheikah who were still resisting.

Their leadership was lost, from what Link had seen, and all he could assume was that those still fighting were in the mindset that their own deaths were inevitable and their final option was simply to be sure they took as many with them as possible. That was one possibility, but then again..

The Champion’s mind drifted back to the unusual occurrence he’d witnessed before he’d even entered the battle; the bright flash of golden light, and the unnatural backward loop which had shifted events seemingly in reverse.

He’d paid for overconfidence once this night. He wouldn’t make that mistake again. This fight had to come to its full conclusion, and that couldn’t happen until the very last Hylian raider laid still and dead.

For what he hoped would be the final time, Link exchanged the weapon strapped to his horse’s saddle, taking up the familiar burden that was his sword once again. The very last blows of this battle were being exchanged and he had a little more of his own to give. He steered his galloping horse for the tower, tugging the reins just enough to have her swerve aside at the last moment, then he leapt from her back and high into the air, his body rotating, his legs tucking near while he turned. With a little bounce on his toes, Link landed on the tower stairs amidst the remaining raiders, determined to shorten their last stand.

It was a foolish, folly move, but what did he care? This fight was done. It was over and he’d come to show them that. His hand went to his sword with a movement as natural to him as drawing breath, and it was unsheathed like a force of nature being unleashed upon his foes. They surrounded him by his own choice of entrance, not failing to land their own blows while he fought, pummeling him, shoving, slashing. With his shield in hand, he blocked and parried what he could, but he sacrificed grace for ravaging brutality. His feet moved up the stairs, then danced down again, his blade swinging, his body rapidly turning, following the swipes of his weapon like it guided him and not the other way around. He took the injuries that came, then returned them tenfold, splitting the group and cutting their numbers with the disregard one might show to errant weeds, rather than lives.

He would bleed to end this. He would die to end it, if that’s what it took.

But no, they wouldn’t take that much from him. Not tonight.

The Champion fought his way through the bunch, doing all he could to step over the numerous dead Sheikah that laid beneath his feet as he made his way up. These tower stairs had become a slow-dripping fountain of blood that even the rain had yet failed to wash away.

When Link at last breached the top landing of the spiral, the remaining Sheikah had fallen, not a single one of them having survived. The Guardians of Hyrule remained, however, and had finally managed to break through the upper level door, splinters and destruction left in their wake.

There were less than ten of them still standing, but it was enough to crowd into the previously guarded room, claiming the space like rushing water breaking past a weakened dam. Link ran for
them like his life somehow depended on this final moment, his sword plunging into one who lingered at the threshold, tearing them aside and casting them from the landing entirely. He did not know what these people were so desperate to have, but he was equally desperate to keep them from it.

His movements became wild and erratic, his body delving back into an uncontrolled mode, fighting like everything previous to now had been practice, and he had only just broken free of some unknown restraint. Bodies fell so rapidly before him, he damn near blockaded himself from reaching any others. His mind and body split, so that while he physically fought, his thoughts drifted elsewhere, processing details at such a rate of speed and with such clarity, he began to lose himself, his soul drifting free of his warring frame.

The unstoppable shell of the Champion continued, slaying his foes without heed or halt. Yet, at the very same time, he was fully aware of everything else playing out, paying witness like an onlooker who was not present at all.

Even between the fighting bodies facing the Champion, it became visibly clear that Purah and her lab assistant had been taking refuge here all along. While Symin huddled against the farthest wall for safety, the form of the tiny Sheikah elder was moving like an illusion of pure white, a specter of pale light that had no physical form to strike at all, or so it seemed for a fascinating instant.

She was making a stand of her own against the invaders and it was by no means meek or meager. Within each tiny hand, she brandished Sheikah kunai, each one an unstoppable force, neither hand more or less dominant than the other. When Link laid eyes on her, she had her feet braced against a man’s chest, both blades sunk into the flesh of his neck like he was an entire mountain and she was a climber who’d conquered him.

Then, in a flash, she bounded off the raider man’s chest, his body falling back with the strength of her jump. She shot through the air, landing upon yet another enemy, one knife stabbing in to keep her from toppling downward, the other finding some place soft and vulnerable to slash. She was impossible for one enemy to land of blow on before she darted aside again, out of reach, jumping between her adversaries, leaving blinding-quick damage with every movement.

She didn’t have the strength to overwhelm her enemies, but she allowed her impact to lend her further power. Her little body was light and moved with ease, flipping through the air to land upon yet another of the standing raiders, her blade sinking into the soft flesh of their throat and she heaved herself over their shoulder with an effortless swing of her frame, dragging the blade along the side of her enemy’s neck as she went.

Only when the creaking cry of steal preceded the inevitable snap of Link’s battered blade did his mind and body fade back into a unified presence. His sword broke in half when he cut yet another opponent down, leaving him with naught but a jagged stump. Still, he shoved his felled enemy aside, moving onto the last of them with the bloodied, pointed remnant of a blade, and he rammed it into the raider’s back, again and again, tireless and brutal, his blow like the enraged, repetitive sting of a courser bee.

When the final raider crumbled, there was hardly time for Link to even recognize that the fight was over before a tiny, white flash struck him in the chest and toppled him backward, his feet stumbling over the corpses that laid in his wake. He fell hard upon his back, his head hitting the floor and stealing his awareness for a blinding instant, then slowly his blue eyes shot open to find the image of Purah hovering over him.

One blade was drawn near his throat, the other pointed against the flesh of his cheek, pressed there so tightly that he could feel the sharp edge cutting into him. He dared not move, risking only the most
shallow breath, as he could feel the Sheikah woman’s tiny body rise and fall upon his chest.

Purah’s white hair fell around her face in errant, blood-stained wisps, her glasses lost or cast from her face entirely. Her skin was spattered with crimson, but none so deep and intense as the red of her gaze, sharp and cold as it bore into the eyes of the Champion. Indeed, she stared down at him like she was measuring the worth of his life, considering sparing him like doing so posed some kind of dire risk. Link almost fooled himself into the belief that maybe she did not recognize him in the low lantern light, but the smile that crawled over her lips said otherwise.

She smiled in sly recognition, something in her face both coy and dangerous, then in the most secretive of whispers, she uttered the words, “It gets easier with each attempt, doesn’t it?”

A weak, quiet titter came from the child-like elder in her distant haze, her tiny hands loosening on her weapons until they slid aside, and her body slumped against the grounded Champion, every inch of her utterly overwhelmed and far too much for her to continue holding up. Like that, her consciousness ebbed away, leaving Symin to scurry over and bundle her up, apologizing all the while like she might stir and chastise him at any moment.

“What is with Sheikah and being so fucking cryptic?” Link groaned as he slowly pushed himself up, his voice hoarse and breathless. He reached up to brush his hair back from his face, almost opting to reconsider at the sight of his own gruesome hands. Figuring every inch of him was in an equally repugnant state, he did it anyway, then upturned his gaze to regard the man, who was carefully laying Purah aside on the soft surface of her bed.

“When I arrived, I saw an explosion of some kind,” the Hylian spoke, so abnormally calm that the gentle tone of his voice became a new kind of threat, all on its own. “It wasn’t destructive, because it didn’t blow anything up. But it had some..unusual effects.”

“I didn’t witness it, I’m sorry,” the assistant continued his denial, pushing his glasses up while evading the Hylian’s accusing stare. His hands fumbled with the potion bottle that he drew out, the cork pushed in so tightly that he couldn’t pry it free.

“Do you know what she was talking about?” Link intoned, his body aching and spent, but with an effort, he pulled himself back to his feet even so. His sharp, blue gaze set upon Symin, his boots clicking on the wood of the floor as he drew nearer, watching the man fumble for a potion to aid his superior as quickly as possible.

“She took quite a blow to the head, Champion,” he sputtered, his nerves frayed. Link wondered if that had anything to do with him and the threat he actively posed, standing here covered in blood. “I doubt anything she could say at the moment would make any sense at all.”

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“You know what it was, don’t you?” Link growled, low and coaxing, taking another step closer to Symin, who stood clothed in untainted, pure white. One of the Champion’s hands reached for the potion bottled, wringing it from Symin’s flimsy grasp. “Purah isn’t awake to hear you tell me the truth, so let’s have it already.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, Symin’s nervous gaze traced across the open air to meet Link’s unfaltering, expectant own. It didn’t linger long, falling downward to the red bottle in the Hylian’s hand, then hesitantly, he began to speak.

“What you saw was some kind of highly weaponized version of the same stasis rune you have on your Sheikah Slate. It takes a great deal of energy to charge and fire it, but it can reverse events by nearly an hour, to stall for time, to keep something bad from happening.” The man paused, looking as though he expected a response of some kind, yet Link kept quiet, waiting to see how much more
he could get from the other.

“I’m not suppose to talk about it, Champion, because it’s something of a secret that we’re meant to guard over,” Symin spat, frustrated with himself for spilling something he was likely meant to take to the grave, if necessary. “It’s better if nobody knows or understands how it works, because it minimizes the risk of our enemies copying it.”

“So..” Link quietly uttered, his own fingers prying at the cork of the potion bottle, then he handed it back to Symin. “when it’s fired, time goes backwards?”

“Events within the artificial rift reverse, yes. That is my understanding,” the lab assistant gestured with his one empty hand, bending over the director to administer the potion as needed. “I can’t tell you anything more because I can’t remember what occurred. I can’t remember how many times the weapon was fired. My own knowledge was erased with each use of the weapon, so there is nothing I can recount for you. Only Lady Purah knows how many times the weapon was used, and what happened each time, and as you know, she keeps strictly quiet over the matter. I’m sorry. I’m grateful for your aid, but please.. don’t ask me anything further.”

“Alright,” he replied, not entirely satisfied, but lacking the will to push any further.

He wasn’t sure if he had the strength to carry on for even another step, yet somehow, he did it anyway. His legs were heavy weights that he heaved slowly over the bodies in his path, all of the pain of his evening finally hitting him, all at once.

Link exited the tower bedroom, pausing at the edge of the upper landing like it was a porch for him to relax upon, admiring the warm sun of summer. It was the gravest of opposites, however. Every board was lined with bloodshed and death, and though the rain had lightened, it was still coming steadily down. Link let it permeate him, hoping that it may rinse away this night, and whatever heartache resulted from it.

An empty gaze idly watched the commotion below, and the busy movement of the dutiful Zoras, never ready to stop until they were no longer needed. They were aching, tired and injured just as much as Link, yet they hardly paused to take a breath. Already, they were gathering their injured, their dead and aiding the pitiful trio of Sheikah who remained.

Of the Sheikah who still lurked below, Dorian alone appeared unperturbed and stoic. The two others were clinging to one another like they had no other way to process the overwhelming loss they’d suffered.

Like an aching elder with a hundred years worth of weight on his shoulders, Link descended the tower stairs, then strode across the hilltop property, his shoes sloshing with each step upon the blood and rain sodden ground. He walked as far as the edge of the hill, looking over the bluff at Hateno Village below.

All was quiet, above and below, but the Village was far from sleepy. With all signs of the fighting ceased, the villagers had begun to peek out of their homes, cautiously walking the streets to check on one another, not one, single soul quite sure what all had happened. They had all locked themselves inside their homes and prayed for protection, only now appearing like spring growth from beneath the snow, because the danger had finally passed. Link watched them scramble to make sense of this disaster and their miraculous survival, a bitter, writhing part of him wishing he could have said that all those prayers had fallen of deaf ears and gone unanswered, because if anything at all in this world was certain..

..They didn’t deserve any protection, divine or otherwise.
Chapter End Notes

What did I say? Was that or was that not a ride? Haha, gosh I really worked HARD this week! And even though this entire chapter was encompassed by the fight for Hateno Village, I do feel like I sprinkled in some interesting or intriguing bits between the action. But what about you all? Did it get your hearts racing? Let me know!
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

The young Zora Prince had expected to have his spirit downtrodden by the dismal work he'd undertaken. However, a dying, Undercity elder took it upon herself to refuse his pity and mourning, and instead bestowed upon him a fresh dose of perspective. The Sergent of Fort Boko was deep in a most brutal training session, delivering a lesson of her own onto the shoulders of a naive but gutsy, young guardsman. But business in the fort was about to become that much more of a handful, with the arrival of Undercity workers as planned and retreating refugees, which hadn't been planned for at all.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. This chapter is a smidge late, only because last week's chapter stole some of my time from this week's. So, I'll let you all get right into it. Enjoy! :]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the woman opened her eyes, she was still lucid enough to recall her dire situation, and so she did not bother to move. With creaking joints and an aching frame, she’d made the short swim to the Basilica as soon as the plague within her became apparent enough to be told apart from the usual pains that came with age.

She had nobody to turn to or count on but herself. She’d lived a long, difficult life, giving a strong fight to the very end, and perhaps she could say it had been worthwhile. At the very least, it hadn’t killed her in her youth.

The poisonous beast stealing life from the Zora people was given a name by the time she noticed that she was unwell; the Water Blight. She knew what it was and had gone seeking aid. If anything, she just hoped that she didn’t die inside her home where nobody would notice until nothing was left but dried scales and shriveled fins.

“Hello, friend,” came a voice as she stirred and the pensive elder rolled her head to one side, noticing that everyone around her had vanished, leaving only the elegant, towering frame of the Zora Prince. The voices that had previously filled the resonant chamber of the inner Basilica were now absent, but in her confusion, she didn’t immediately believe it, and her faded, yellow eyes flicked here and there, taking stock of the new emptiness of her surroundings.

“What is this?” the jaded, old woman harshly questioned. Part of her couldn’t help but assume that her sanity had slipped away, and this was some deathly fever dream. She’d always assumed that in her final hour, however, she might envision love lost, goals unmet, paths not taken in her life. So, it was difficult to conceive that her own head was capable of producing imagery as pointless as that which had come to regard her. She looked to the waiting royal, her head turned slightly to one side, to get the best look at him from around the sagging mound of her crested brow.

“Is this something you’ve done? Something inside my head?” she muttered, sitting herself upright.
with less effort than she would have expected from her old body.

“Oh.. indeed it is,” the Prince answered, nearly confused that somebody could be so quick to acknowledge his magic at play, especially considering that every person he visited was standing on the threshold of oblivion and often needed him to guide them while their mind drifted off into a deathly haze. “This is the effect of my magic, but I’ve come with the purpose and intention to aid you.”

The elderly woman listened with bitter intrigue, only to let out a gritty laugh in response to the Prince’s explanation. Her tattered fins puffed and her teeth were exposed in her apparent amusement, still shining and sharp, despite her old age. “You, a royal, has infiltrated the very space of my mind to aid me, an old, Undercity woman?”

“I have ventured here, outstretching my reach to you, yes,” Sidon pleasantly explained, everything about him shining and beautiful, from his smooth voice and glassy red scales, to his strong but elegant physique. His feet pattered softly when he strode nearer, bending down upon one knee to be more level with the much smaller elder. “But please, you needn’t put such weight into the differences between us. We are both here now, neither more nor less than the other. Rather, we are one and the same. May I ask your name, wise one?”

“Wise one, is it?” the woman tutted in disbelief, at the nerve of this royal son, then she clambered to her feet, refusing to remain seated like an engrossed child being educated by a mentor. Her body was absent of the familiar aches and pains. She felt almost like a young woman again, and would have enjoyed a nice, long swim, if such were possible. She quickly brushed that temptation aside, however. “Hmph. I have a much better plan, young Prince.”

The vivid red Zora blinked inquisitively and drew himself back to his feet as well, though he dipped his head low to hear the elder’s proposal, welcoming her to speak with his silence.

“I think I’d much rather be called ‘Wise One’ by you,” said the old woman, her voice and heart steeped in bitterness. “It makes me sound like some Apostle that might have been worthy of your regard and respect. But, it also helps to maintain the illusion that you don’t already know my name, as you wind the tendrils of your magic into the secret places in my head and dig your fingers into the one and only thing I’ve ever had in life, that I confidently knew could never be invaded nor taken from me- myself. The person I am on the inside.”

In a moment of melancholy recognition, Sidon found himself doing something that was unusual for him- he hesitated. The woman’s inner fire reminded him of somebody else who was near to his heart, someone who he was dearly missing in this long unwaking duty, which had claimed every restless moment since he fell into slumber. He wondered what his dear one was doing. He wondered if Link was safe, if he’d found a meaningful way to spend his time, if he was happy, sad, if he was lonely..

Sidon had never made an effort to stifle his dear friend’s burning fury, nor the deep darkness of hatred, which his soul seemed to be steeped in. He’d always believed that the Hylian had every right to those feelings, and that they were necessary for him to survive and heal.

But what about this discontented elder? If she passed with nothing but anger in her heart, could her soul truly find a peaceful end? Did she deserve to clutch at her anger, or would it aid her for the invading Prince to smother it with the powerful manipulation of his magic? For the first time since his work had begun, he wasn’t sure.

“Quite a confused look on your face now, young Prince.” The elder interrupted Sidon’s pause and his golden eyes drifted attentively back to her weathered face. “Go on then, why don’t you tell me why you’ve trespassed into my one and only private space?”
The Prince cleared his throat, shaking off his worries and speaking anew with a little titter of feigned amusement. “It seems there’s little that my magic can veil, where you’re concerned- as expected from one so wise,” he praised the woman, earning an unimpressed scoff from her in return. “Perhaps it is more appropriate for me to ask you then, why do you think I’ve come?”

Turning her head, the old woman studied her surroundings with a grimace that deepened the wrinkles of her features, then she gestured to the vast emptiness, shaking her head in disapproval. “This won’t do, young Prince. If you’re so resigned to withdrawing your illusions, why hide the reality all around us?”

“Oh,” Sidon hummed in surprise. That was not exactly a common request, and he’d typically guided the minds of the dying elsewhere by this point, to pleasant memories, to comforting spaces. But, he supposed that he couldn’t deny the direct request of this very sharp woman. “As you wish, Wise One.”

With a thought, the bustling surroundings returned. Sick and dying Zoras lined the floor, with Apostles darting here and there, making vain attempts to comfort them. The elder looked on in both satisfaction and disappointment. It was of some comfort, at least, to be surrounded by others, yet it tore at her aching soul to see primarily her people, the Undercity people, suffering and dying. Still, there was no comfort or peace to be had in ignorance.

“Do you fool all of these people into thinking they aren’t dying?” She gestured to the numerous Zoras surrounding her, all dusty pale with weeping, blackened gills, then she turned a leery gaze to the towering royal. “Is that how you ‘help’?”

“I’m afraid I cannot hide that aspect, nor would I wish to,” Sidon answered the woman’s query with gentle ease, like he was indeed speaking to a familiar, old friend. “It isn’t my intention to deceive, nor to trick, but merely to comfort, to take away pain and fear and to reassure my people that they aren’t alone, that this isn’t the end.”

“Hnn, yes,” a tired groan came out of the woman who stood near the Prince’s side, the sound predictably preceding a cynical comment, her voice lined with resent. “It must be of great comfort, to you, to see us succumb to our inevitable deaths nice and easy. It must be quite gratifying, for you, to reassure us that the harsh, joyless lives we led weren’t so bad, so long as there’s peace to be had at the end.”

“Pardon, Wise One?” Sidon titled his head, his forefins swaying, his narrowed, golden eyes fixing the elder with a skeptical gaze. “The lives I’ve seen might have been hard, but few I’ve encountered could be described as joyless. Surely you cannot claim that it is so, that your life was completely bereft of happiness?”

“Ohh, perhaps not,” she shrugged her slumped, rounded shoulders, certain that this spoiled Prince was bound to miss the point of her frustrations, as he lacked the proper perspective to truly understand. However, he was here in her mind, so maybe by the grace of their mental alignment, he could be taught. “Let me ask, where are you right now, Prince? Where does a young royal go when he decides it’s time to do his civic duty and graciously extend himself out to show those sad, dying Undercity Zoras pity? Go on, let’s see it then!”

“You wish to see me, as I am right now?” the Zora Prince questioned this request, having yet to consider that his own circumstances could become the focus of any terminally ill Zora’s attention.

“What? It’s fine for you to leer over those of us who’re meeting gruesome ends, but you don’t want to be gawked at in turn?” The woman placed her hands on her hips, her fins puffing again at the other Zora’s wish for privacy, which he clearly didn’t extend to others. “Surely that’s not what
you’re suggesting, young Prince!”

“No, I- of course not,” Sidon stepped back, raising his hand in a gesture of defeat; he felt that perhaps he’d finally met the match for Muzu’s constant critique of his behavior. Nevertheless, he continued onward in his genteel manner, folding his arms behind his straightened back, his voice a calm, smooth sound. “I only thought that such a thing would be a waste of our time together. However, if you insist, I shall appease you.”

Despite his claims, Sidon’s tail flicked in unease that he skillfully kept from migrating to his countenance while their surroundings shifted, the Basilica walls sinking into the floor like flimsy stage props, replaced with ease by the bright, elegant blue of his chambers.

“Ah ha!” the elder immediately exclaimed at the sight of the Prince’s surroundings, sounding as though she’d puzzled out the answer to some great riddle. Her tiny frame slowly hobbled here and there in observation, her head turning to and fro in admiration and interest that she couldn’t hide. At last, she meandered over to the occupied water mattress, where Sidon’s sleeping frame was reclined and unmoving.

“Look at that,” the Zora woman said with a little chuckle, one long fingerscale pointing at the golden Knight at his post, and then the veiled servant quietly moving about the room. “You’re guarded and attended to while you slumber in this fine, shining tower you call home. You and I are clearly no different at all, no sir.”

“Yes, we are different, I suppose.” The Prince’s wide shoulders softly moved in a shrug, his tone taking on something of a somber note while he endured the surreal reality of staring down upon his own physical form like a mourner of some kind. “However, what I had meant to express was that these differences don’t matter. It’s of no concern to me that your station is not equivalent to mine. No matter what, you are one of my own and I have a duty to you, a duty that I dare not abandon. I certainly don’t believe you to be less than myself.”

“Oh no, these differences don’t matter at all, do they?” the old woman chimed in, shaking her head as she mocked the young, naive royal’s idealism which conveniently turned a blind eye to a most glaring reality. “They don’t matter to you, because when you’re done doing your duty, you’re still a Prince in a tower. But I guess because you were gracious enough to pity us from your high place, that makes it okay that you’re here and we’re still beneath you, doesn’t it? Maybe these differences don’t matter to you, but believe me, they certainly matter to us.”

“Wise One,” Sidon spoke, calm enough despite that he’d begun to instinctively feel the urge to defend himself, “..if you are trying to imply that I’ve led a charmed life, free of all difficulty because I am a Prince, I can only assure you, you are mistaken.”

“That’s not at all what I’ve implied and you should stop trying to refute my points and listen up. Use those invasive powers of yours to fully feel and understand my perspective like it was your own!” the old woman hissed, taking a deep breath to regain some shred of patience. “If you so insist on hopping into the minds of your suffering people, to make their final moments peaceful, then make this time worthwhile and let me teach you something. It’s your ‘duty’, after all, right?”

Blinking, Sidon’s mouth fell open to utter a response, but he sharply thought better of it and shushed himself, offering a soft nod of his head, instead. In his silence, the woman continued.

“Maybe you’ve known suffering, maybe you’ve known difficulty, because life finds a way to make certain that nobody is spared from such things. But you would do well to recognize that, even so, your station has and will always lend you an advantage. You will always have more tools at your disposal. You will always have more comforts to turn to when something in your life causes you
“pain,” she lectured, waggling one finger at the towering Prince in the typical style of a disappointed elder. “Are you listening? Do you understand?”

“I am listening, Wise One,” Sidon attempted to reassure, yet he could feel the soft patter of her heart fading away, the glow of her mind dimming so that their connection was fading, requiring much deeper concentration for the Prince to maintain, even with his magic bolstered. “...but I’m afraid we don’t have very much time left.”

“Good, then listen closely to me, boy,” the elderly woman went on, utterly unperturbed by her nearing demise. “When you wake up from doing your little civic duty, don’t you dare brush it aside as a job well done and continue to sit upon your throne of complicity. Don’t walk around pretending that you’re some fair and righteous ruler because you were here to hold our hands while you put us out of our misery. Don’t you use this experience of our suffering to nurture your own guilt because your pity is utterly pointless. From now on, you need to make sure that it isn’t misery that you’re putting us out of any longer, that our lives are treated as though they hold as much worth as your own, and all those other people in the Uppercity thriving on our backs. You need to make sure that we are given all the tools and opportunities in our lives that you, and everyone like you, receives without question. And if you really want to act like there is ‘no difference’ between us, then you need to prove that you believe it and let us live as equals.”

“I see, Wise One,” Sidon nodded, not just accepting her words as though lending an ear was all that this last request entailed, but he actually allowed what she had said to soak into his heart, to be held there, to be retained. “I will remember your words and surely I’ve much to consider.”

“I hope so, young Prince,” the Undercity elder uttered, her waggling finger finally falling at her side, her head drooping like craning it upright to regard the much taller Zora was an incredible effort. Even if she felt no pain, she was tired, so tired.

“Now, put me back where I was,” the woman declared with a swat of her knobby hand.

“As you wish,” Sidon breathed, returning them both to where they’d started, just hovering nearby while the old woman settled back down on the thin mat of wool she’d risen from when the Prince first appeared to her.

Sidon supposed he’d done all he could, at present. He’d heeded the dying woman’s requests, and even now, he could feel the calm, fearless thrum of her distant thoughts, her mind going into the darkness without any hesitation. However, as he kneeled by her side, to see her off, she glanced up at him like he was a pestering child.

“I don’t need your powers to coddle me or to disguise the oncoming death, so there’s no need for you to linger,” she stated.

“But, Wise One,” Sidon hesitated, the pink skin beneath his brow wrinkling in confusion. This terrible Water Blight was not a pretty demise, by any means, and he couldn’t comprehend why anyone would wish to experience it. “...if I can make the end painless, why not allow it?”

“Nothing has ever been painless for me, so I’m not afraid now,” she growled, her fighting spirit steeled and ready. “Leave me alone to my final moments. I’d like to have my own mind to myself, if you please.”

“Very well, Wise One,” Sidon uttered, resigned to obey, but far from happy to do so. It stung for him to turn his back on someone in pain, to simply allow such a thing, even by request.

But her fate belonged to her and he dared not steal that by presuming he was more fit to make this
decision in her place. He withdrew his magic, his presence fading away, leaving behind all the pain and suffering as he went; the truth in all its cruel, bitter, ugliness.

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Spears hissed through the air, clean and precise. The guardsmen moved with newfound grace and discipline, a stark improvement over such a short period of time. Betaal called her orders out over the gathered ranks of inexperienced warriors and they obeyed with nimble quickness, each of them sharpening to perfection under her guidance and the intensive brutality of her training.

They might have already seen battle, and had fought to unexpectedly glorious victory once, but the Sergeant didn’t plan to allow her troops to become soft, neither from disuse nor arrogance. Just as they began to bend to her expectations, apprehending her commands like the very movements of their foes, she altered course, she pulled the rug out from under them again, leaving them to adapt, melding them like flexible steel.

She watched their struggles and drove them mercilessly, ever pushing, constantly raising the bar any time they finally managed to meet it, her own pride blooming somewhere underneath her armor with each little success.

Soon, the Undercity ‘fodder’ that had been recruited into the City Guard would surpass the Uppercity veterans in strength and skill. They all certainly bested the relatively complacent long time guardsmen in dedicated seriousness. They answered the demands of their Sergeant’s drills with swelling tenacity, as if they actually enjoyed being worked until it bordered cruelty, as though, even now, they were still beyond proud to be here taking Betaal’s orders.

One of the new guardsmen, in particular, caught the blue Zora’s single-eyed gaze. The young Undercity woman, Tetra, with her silvery scales and twisting, looping technique with a spear. She received her training with a lust to improve that was unmatched; always the last to falter under exhaustion, always the first to jump at Betaal’s command, and when she wasn’t on duty or training under her Sergeant, she further practiced, developing her original fighting style on her own time.

“Guardsman Tetra,” Betaal addressed the other Undercity Zora, her slow pace up and down the lines drawing to a quick halt before the young guardsman. The other woman was breathing hard, her scales shining with moisture and her body trembled to maintain perfect form under the threat of utter fatigue, but with success.

The gleam in the Sergeant’s one yellow eye was still that of scrutiny and intimidation, which was likely only enhanced by the smile that drew her lips back from her sharp teeth.

“You have quite an impressive talent, guardsman,” Betaal spoke slowly, walking a circle around the other woman, the movement meant only for observation and admiration, yet the harsh growl of her voice painted her like an opportunistic islander hawk, circling the skies in search of prey. “Allow me to personally demonstrate how you can further improve.”
“Sir?” the young guardsman breathed, her clear fins flaring ever so slightly in growing wariness and excitement, yet her aching body held position without a single flinch, as she had been ordered.

“Clear the training field,” came the sharp order of the Sergeant as she once more came to stand before the tired, sweating woman. The rest of her guardsmen answered her command with fast obedience, but also with budding exhilaration. To many of them, Betaal was not just their superior, but a famed Undercity warrior, who once came a scale’s breadth from entering the Royal Order, a feat never before accomplished by an Undercity Zora.

And though she had already personally sparred with every recruit to test their suitability and gauge their talent, it had been long before any of them were truly ready for battle, and it hadn’t been a real challenge by any means. Not for them, because Betaal could have broken them before breaking a sweat, and therefore she couldn’t have fought any one of them with true seriousness. And definitely not for her.

The onlookers murmured in anticipation as the Sergeant loosened the spear from her back, giving it a quick spin just to feel the familiarity of it against her palm, then she focused upon the guardsman she’d singled out, beginning her circular path around her once again, but with more dangerous intent.

Tetra could easily see the seriousness in her superior’s single eye, the threat presented while she was measured up by a woman who was, without a doubt, the greater warrior. She moved on her toes, her knees bending when she deepened into a fighting stance, though her thighs visibly trembled to support her weight. She kept her sights trained on Betaal, her own steps echoing those of her opponent, circling and cautiously skirting the edges of her range.

“You’re tired, guardsman. Exhausted. You know that this will be, by no means, a fair fight,” the blue Zora hissed, her sharp teeth gleaming with each word, the pace of her pattering footsteps increasing in dangerous warning. She let out a snide chuckle, playing the part of a jeering, cruel opponent, hungry for an easy victory. “Good. No serious fight is ever fair. No fight for your life will ever be. As you are now, you’re the perfect target to be picked off and your enemies will know that.”

When the last syllable fell from her tongue, Betaal rushed in, closing the small patch of distance between them; as fiery as this young woman was, she wouldn’t dare make the first move. The Sergeant went boldly into the range of the other woman’s weapon, her own fast and ready, blocking the first flailing strike that came out of the nervous guardsman and delivering a hard swing that Tetra blocked in turn.

The two Zoras’ weapons clicked together, hard and aggressive, like the antlers of mountain bucks. Their toeclaws scraped at the stone beneath their webbed feet, each shuffling quick with the pace set by the other.

Despite the silvery Zora’s exhaustion, a burst of spirit erupted within her, or else the adrenaline of facing down her superior in front of all of her fellow recruits. With a hard, aggressive hit, the shafts of their weapons collided and Betaal’s was pushed aside, creating the tiniest of openings for Tetra to thrust the sharp head of her weapon toward the armor of her Sergeant’s chest. She was doing just as she’d been trained, just as she’d been taught, everything in perfect form, regardless of how her arms felt like chu jelly and her body was absent of proper breath.

Yet with a reflexive shift of Betaal’s muscular frame and a few measured steps, she avoided the razor sharp strike and reached for the guardsman’s weapon, taking hold of it and giving it a strong yank, throwing Tetra aside along with her spear.

The young woman let out a cry of surprise, her feet clumsily pattering as she attempted to right herself. Betaal couldn’t see it, however, as she’d thrown the young woman into her own blind spot;
still, she kept going with the very force she’d used to shove the other aside, her body a blue cyclone of speed and power. Her weapon spun in her hands, twirling and raising above her head before sharply coming down toward the stumbling guardsman.

Tetra could hear the whip of her opponent’s spear slicing the air, and instead of attempting to regain her footing, she rolled into the fall, barely dodging the hard blow. Betaal’s spear slapped the stone, resounding and painful to imagine enduring, even in armor. The young woman used what she could hear to judge the distance she needed to put between herself and the Sergeant, rolling back to her feet, the head of her spear digging into the crevices between the stone for stability, then she vaulted into the air, twisting and coming to a graceful landing out of Betaal’s reach.

“You know you won’t win. You can’t. And there’s no means of retreat,” Betaal seemingly taunted the other, pounding the ground with the butt of her weapon in a show of aggression, using fear to pressure the defending guardsman, to turn her desperate. Only when somebody was cornered and desperate did they finally show an opponent what they were really made of; Betaal wanted to see it.

“What will you do?” the Sergeant hissed, her one, yellow eye gleaming like that of a predator closing in on injured prey. “What even can you do?”

Betaal allowed Tetra to take only a few little gulps of air, then she came for the young woman again, her running attacks like a rippling flash of blue, as though she had embodied the very water her people arose from. While her body moved with flexible, fluid grace and a tireless waterfall’s worth of limitless power, her weapon spun around her, controlled and impenetrable.

She followed up on her promise to leave the defending guardsman feeling helpless and small in spades, her jabs coming with merciless quickness, so that one might have expected that she was not fighting with one spear, but rather hundreds, all erupting toward her enemy at once. She pushed with continuous fervor, never allowing Tetra to gain an inch, not giving her a second to slow her actions, lest she’d suffer a failure most disgraceful.

The young guardsman was struggling not just against her opposition, but against her own fatigue, so that every physical inch of her was desperate to give up, to give in. She put what felt like the last dull flicker of her inner fire into a final jab, only for her Sergeant to block it with ease, parrying by pushing Tetra’s weapon upward, throwing her off balance again, opening up her center to a fatal attack. Yet Betaal showed some distant gleam of mercy, using her weapon to sweep the guardsman’s feet out from under her, rather than going for a finishing blow.

The silvery Zora toppled hard onto her back with a loud, metallic clank, the edges of her armor thrust against her flesh with enough force to bruise and discolor her scales. Betaal rose her spear again, and if Tetra had been bold, she might have thought to attempt a jab in the mere fraction of a second when the blue Zora was vulnerable. The reflex to flee came with greater speed, however, and she rolled aside, then back to her feet a bit unsteadily.

Tetra hopped onto her toes, moving with haste to keep distance between herself and her relentless opponent; Hylia’s mercy, she needed some time to think! Her shining, silvery gaze roved with desperate speed over her enemy’s approaching body, every flawlessly strong and flexible inch of it, analyzing the situation, hoping for an answer that could turn the tide of this losing battle.

She knew there was no answer to her Sergeant’s taunting questions, and that seemed to be precisely the point, unfair as it was. Breathing harshly, yet snarling in frustration, Tetra’s ever mounting lack of energy left her without even the strength to keep her fins flared in fighting aggression, so they flopped useless and flat against her head.

There was no escape. There was no winning. There was only the vain struggle and attempt to
survive.

“I’m not your commanding officer here, guardsman, I’m your enemy,” Betaal growled, a snarl of her own displaying the threatening sharp of her teeth.

Hurrying in, then diverting her path, Betaal spun on her feet, her weapon spinning with her to land a harsh blow on the guardsman. Tetra’s reflexes were slowing, her body failing to respond as it should, and the shaft of the Sergeant’s spear pounded into the side of her armor, ringing the steel like a bell and casting her aside so that her body rolled across the stone.

A quiet sputter of pain came from the battered, young woman, and for the quickest moment, her eyes raised just high enough from where she’d fallen to see her fellows recoiling at the sight. A unified hiss of pain, a wince of pity came from each of them, so the sympathetic clamor around her was audible.

But there was no time to observe, to dwell, because Betaal leapt to close the distance between herself and the toppled guardsman, her feet and spear coming down with a thunderous pound upon the stone, yet Tetra rolled away just in time, somehow still clinging to some impossible hope that she could prevail.

The young woman clambered back to her shuffling feet, using her own weapon to drag herself upright, and she faced her opposition with immediate quickness, despite how very tired she’d become. She expected the merciless onslaught to continue, yet Betaal offered a few seconds of undue pause, a tiny shred of sympathy in exchange for the hope that some grand epiphany may occur to the harshly beaten guardsman.

“There is an answer to this dire situation- you know there is!” Betaal spat, running in again to attack, not giving the other woman any more time to rest than that. Her moves were an impossible rush, one fast, brutal blow coming after another, each deadly precise and denting the guardsman’s armor. “You just have to stop fighting me respectfully in order to reach the right conclusion. Fight me like your life depends on it. Fight me like the fate of everything you know and all you hold dear depends on it!”

Taking another strike, Tetra teetered backward. She caught a flash of her opponent raising the spear to finish her again before her head tilted back, her body bending with her fall, her silvery eyes reflecting a quick glimpse of the ground beneath her, then she threw one hand back, her entire body springing, not once, not twice, but enough times to grant her adequate space to escape the coming strike of her superior.

She could hear Betaal’s spear hit the stone ground where she would have landed again, the promise of failure narrowly avoided. At last, however, the young woman felt that she understood what had to be done, and she was as ready as ever to go about just that. She hardly had strength left in her body for anything further, so either this would finish the fight in her favor, or not.

The butt of Tetra’s spear braced against the ground before she came to a final landing and her frame gracefully twirled around it, so that she was vaulted into the air, sharp and fast in Betaal’s direction. She tucked her body inward, rolling into a flip to fix her speed and trajectory. Her feet pattered and her spear clicked as she landed behind the Sergeant, then with whatever energy she could drum up in desperation, she darted aside before her opponent had proper time to turn around.

Betaal spun at the sound from behind her, reflexive and ready, yet once her single eye fell upon the space from which she’d heard the noise, she was unexpectedly left searching for Tetra with nothing to be found in her narrow range of vision.
The weapon spun, fast and aggressive in the younger guardsman’s hand and she rushed into her opponent’s range, this time on Betaal’s blind side. Tetra aimed a finishing strike for the Sergeant’s armored gills, knowing that she wouldn’t see it coming, just as she hadn’t when she fell in the Tourney. This was Tetra’s one and only chance. This was the move that would end the fight.

Yet just before the blow connected, Betaal’s weapon shifted to parry at the last moment. Without even turning her head to get a proper look, she took hold of the shaft of Tetra’s deflected weapon, her feet sliding further apart to ground her, the strength of her core and upper body as well as the force of the guardsman’s own blow giving the blue Zora all she needed to toss Tetra over her head, flinging the young, silvery Zora to her back with a harsh thud.

Betaal’s foot moved to pin the bested guardsman in place, one toeclaw scraping the steel, her spear spinning from its defensive position into a pointed and threatening one. Then, as it was thrust, the sharp head of the Sergeant’s weapon clinked against the fallen guardsman’s chest, in flawless finality.

Tetra shoved her own weapon away with a huff, exhaling sharply in disappointment. The end had come before she’d even recognized the failure of her final move. She’d found herself grounded sooner than she could mentally process the strike which had finished her. She had attacked from Betaal’s blind side, yet in those last seconds, she had been the one who’d failed to see anything at all.

Withdrawing her spear, Betaal reached down to help Tetra back to her feet. She took a deep breath of her own, then spoke up to critique the guardsman.

“Your’re too caught up in the appearance of the way you fight, in the look of it, in making sure that your every movement is pristine,” the Sergeant explained. “When you’ve become exhausted, perfection isn’t feasible. Use your knowledge of technique as a basic rule, but move in a way that feels natural to your body. You have to let your heart and passion guide your hand when you fight. You have to let the movements flow from you. For now, that is your weakness, guardsman, and the most important thing you can do to further your improvement is to find a way to compensate for these shortcomings.”

“Yes, sir,” Tetra uttered between desperate gulps of air, some of her edge dulled, some of her fire stifled.

“The conclusion you came to during our fight, however, was the right one,” Betaal uttered in praise, a soft smile tugging at her lips, exposing just the sharp edges of her teeth. “The win is rarely achieved fairly. You must quickly decide what it is that your opponent is lacking and attack with the intent to use that to your advantage. In what little time you had, you decided that my weakness lies in the fact that I have a very large blind spot in battle, which is true. However, I’ve learned how best to compensate for my own shortcomings and that is why you failed to turn my weakness into your advantage.”

“And this is the main point of our lesson.” Betaal now turned to address the excitedly spectating guardsmen surrounding the training field, though Tetra remained where she stood, at attention. “Understand where you fall short as a warrior and you’ll already know exactly what to expect from every enemy and how to prevail. In this way, you’ll become much more effective and you’ll live longer. You’d all do well to remember this lesson. Now, as punishment for Guardsman Tetra’s failure, you can all do laps around the upper perimeters”

The collective gathering all hissed in disappointment, having assumed that they would be dismissed from training after this final fight. Betaal smirked at their crestfallen response and stated, “I know, it isn’t fair, but perhaps there’s something to be learned from unfairness. Now get to it.”
While the guardsmen skulked off to run for an undetermined period, Betaal remained, still catching her own breath. She crossed her arms overtop of the shining steel of her armor, her single eye trailing across the procession of young, Undercity guardsmen with pride. She quickly noticed, however, that one among them was poised at the edge of the training field, unmoving.

She was standing absolutely still, arms folded, hips tilted to one side as she shifted her weight onto one foot. It was Dunma, and as soon as the Sergeant recognized that the other woman had been watching, she dryly swallowed, her own posture going from proud and straight, to something a bit more flustered and sheepish. Her hands turned suddenly clumsy while she fumbled to fasten her weapon back into place.

Dunma had this hungry, fiery look upon the pale of her features, like she would have adored the chance to measure herself against Betaal, who she admired and respected so deeply. Betaal, too, felt a flutter of passion at the thought of their bodies meeting in conflict, moving in heated tandem, both simultaneously breaking down and sharpening the other.

The Sergeant took a very, very deep breath for a suddenly different reason, then hurriedly pushed those images aside when she strode toward her Corporal, all too aware that she wouldn’t possess the mental clarity to speak like a normal person if she had those things in mind.

“Sergeant,” Dunma voice called out first, once Betaal was near enough to hear. Her tongue curved around the word with a kind of intimacy that Betaal could feel underneath her scales, her one eye catching a quick glimpse of how the violet Zora smiled in adoring familiarity when she addressed her. “I’ve come to inform you of the new arrivals.”

“Right,” Betaal uttered, straightening in seriousness. “..the workers who are here to bolster the fort’s food production. How many are we looking at?”

“Quite a few, sir,” said Dunma, her voice soft but promptly to the point. “I already ordered some of the guardsmen with lighter duty to set to work preparing a proper sleeping area for the workers.”

“Excellent,” the Sergeant nodded. “I’ll go to introduce myself, then you can show them around the civilian-appropriate areas, just to make certain that they’re settled in. With all that’s apparently going on back home, a warm welcome will be good for them. Thank you, Corporal. Come with me, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The violet Zora dipped her body in respect, no pretense in her movements. When she was on duty, Betaal was a superior officer and Dunma took the chain of command very seriously.

The two Zoras fell in stride with one another, though the taller woman’s pace was naturally a bit quicker. It was just as well, because Betaal was essentially following her Corporal’s lead, which took them to the area right inside the main gate of the fort and to where the large group of Zoras remained in the care of a few other guardsmen.

The entire collection of newly arrived workers were a painted blur, in shades of silver and pale blue, each and every face in the crowd that of an Undercity Zora. Betaal’s single-eyed gaze moved across the group in slow observation, sure that a shadow of disappointment was probably written across her own features for all to see. It was, of course, the Undercity people who had inevitably been utilized to shoulder and solve all the problems back home, though under the strict command of the City Guard and with some prissy noble who hadn’t lifted a finger touting credit for the ‘idea.’

“Welcome to the ‘Elegy Spire’. I’m Sergeant Betaal, head of the guard force here at the fort,” she spoke as she came to stand before the group, doing everything she could to disguise the hollow sigh of her tone. Some of them perksed up at the knowledge that she, herself, was an Undercity Zora,
whereas others were...neutral? “I doubt that many of you will have need to come to me, as the fort is generally peaceful and organized, but know that I am at your service, if you have need. Also, I’m sure you’ve all noticed that our fort hasn’t exactly been built into a spire of any kind, because our people presently lack the resources to senselessly beautify the place to match its name. As such, we typically refer to it as ‘Fort Boko’, much to the chagrin of those who decided the name. You are certainly all free to join us in this silly, little act of rebellion.”

Even despite their troubled circumstance, a few members of the crowd responded with soft, breathy laughter. They all knew, the same as Betaal, that Uppercity Zoras were responsible for the name, and every one of them took themselves far too seriously.

“I believe there are some familiar faces in the crowd,” Betaal went on, squinting slightly and turning her head a bit more than what would have been necessary for a person with two eyes to look at everybody present. “I can only guess that some of you have already worked the fort, likely on the team responsible for the disposal of all the monster remains leftover from the fight to claim the place. You have my sincere apologies for that mess. However, if I’m wrong and none of you are familiar at all, then I’m sorry for that, too. Even with two eyes, I was always terrible with faces.”

It was true, she was terrible with faces, but the joke at her own expense did serve to draw another little titter from the crowd and she was happy to lighten the mood, for everyone’s sake. Normally she was terrible with humor as well, but a good fight had gotten her blood pumping, which always offered a strange peak in mental functioning, rendering her less of an awkward mess.

Even more unusual, her one-eyed gaze paused upon one face in the crowd which was not just familiar, but recognizable to the point that Betaal could place a name to it, and just like that, her typical fluster stole away the social grace she’d been pretending to possess.

Clearing her throat, the Sergeant continued, “..So, because I know you’ve all been through an ordeal, our first priority will be to see that you’re all fed. We’re well supplied here at the fort and since you’ve all come for the purpose of making sure Zora’s Domain shares in that bounty, our first responsibility to you all is to give you the strength you need to do your jobs. Corporal Dunma will show you to the mess area, and after you’re all fed, she’ll run you through the rules civilians are expected to follow while here.”

With a gesture to the violet Zora still quietly hovering by her side, Betaal diverted the crowd’s attention to Dunma, and the Corporal raised one hand to further that cause, guiding the large group and leading them away as instructed.

But the one person among the crowd of others who Betaal was acquainted with remained, allowing the group to wander off, until she was no longer surrounded and actually had a chance of exchanging a word or two with the Sergeant. She stood, her pale scales gleaming a rosy opalescent in the light, the pearl of the Undercity.

“It’s been a while, Dalia,” Betaal murmured when she approached, her fins flattened, her head turned a bit awkwardly. She thought she was over being self-conscious about her missing eye- apparently not.

“It has, hasn’t it? I see that your career as a guardsman finally went somewhere,” the other woman said with a little laugh, only slightly teasing. “Good for you, sweet blue. I never thought your talent would ever receive the proper recognition, given that you’re just a lowly Undercity Zora like the rest of us.”

Betaal didn’t need to think on her response. A scoff came right out of her and she swatted her hand at the other, her one eye rolling. “Of course I had to work ten times as hard as any Uppercity Zora,
but I managed. Can I walk you to the mess area, then?"

“Sure, lead the way, Sergeant,” the other woman uttered with an amused grin; it must have been so weird for her to refer to Betaal that way because it was suddenly odd for Betaal to hear her say it.

“You know,” the pale-scaled woman began again, walking close to the other Undercity Zora’s side, their paces relaxed and evenly matched, “...after you were injured and lost your chance to get into the Royal Order.. I dunno, I didn’t think you’d ever come back from that low place. I’m glad to see that you’re doing better.”

“Maybe I still haven’t fully recovered, but..” the blue Zora trailed off, her rough voice dropping a bit lower while she shrugged over the entire matter. “..you know, I’m getting there.”

“Ohh. I remember just before we, um,” the woman at Betaal’s side hesitated, her rose-tinted fins flaring slightly, “...well, just before we broke up, you’d kinda lost all confidence and all of your talents fell to the wayside, too. You clearly got your fighting edge back, but what about that.. Other thing? You’re still secretive about it, right?”

“I, um, I am still secretive about that, yes!” the Sergeant hissed, turning her head to look over one shoulder before she continued. All the while, the pale Zora at her side laughed at her seemingly silly behavior. “And I’m not sure if I’ll ever get it back, not like it used to be. It’s been so long since I’ve been inspired. It just feels like the vision I used to have is.. Absent. It’s odd, I suppose, because I feel like it used to be vital for me to survive each day.. the escapism of it gave me the strength to persist. I have been trying recently, though. I’ve been telling myself that if I just keep trying, I’ll overcome the rust.”

“Keep it up, sweet blue,” the other woman purred, pressing one hand to the Sergeant’s arm for a quick instant. “You know that I believe in you, even after all this time. I never stopped.”

“Right, thanks. That means a lot,” Betaal mumbled, averting her gaze in order to hide the warm violet burning at the pale of her cheeks. “So are you still.. doing the same thing for work?”

“Tch. It looks like for now I’m stuck working as a fisherman for the crown,” Dahlia hissed, her tone drastically changing with the shift in subject. “When the news about the food shortage hit, I was one of the first ones in line for rations. So, because I received the crown’s oh-so-merciful assistance, I was drafted into this work without being given a choice.”

Dalia’s lips formed a tight line and she gestured to the group walking a bit ahead of herself and the fort Sergeant. “Where are all the Uppercity Zoras? Hylia knows they received rations. All of their people received them, while some of our people never got anything at all. Ugg,” she groaned, her puffed fins flattening in exasperation, then she let out a rather dramatic sigh. “I’m sorry, my sweet blue- I only just got to see you again after years of silence, and here I am, already complaining. Just like old times, I guess.”

“It’s alright, Dalia,” Betaal reassured, though with a light-hearted titter. She now outstretched her hand to the other, laying it upon the other woman’s shoulder, her fingertips brushing the crimp of Dalia’s shoulder fin membranes. “You know that I agree with you. I always did.”

“Yes, I know,” the pale Zora smiled, her pretty fangs shining. “You’re still the sweetest Blue that I know, even beneath that tough exterior. Oh, but to answer your question, yes, I’m still doing the same work. There’s just something gratifying about it, you know? When I’m sent to do labor for the crown, I’m just an object under their control. When I lay with the Hylians for their rupees, it’s by my own choice and I like feeling in control of myself and my life.”
“I never judged you. I hope that’s not what you think,” the Sergeant mumbled, her own vivid red fins puffing slightly, her tail swishing against the back of her shoulders. “I was just too weak to handle you and my own problems made everything that much worse.”

“You were jealous and needy, let’s be honest,” Dalia teased, grinning and looking over at the other with mischievous, shining eyes. “...but I understand, Blue. My lifestyle isn’t for everybody and it can even be too much for those around me to contend with. It’s probably for the best that we split.”

“Yeah, probably,” Betaal chuckled sheepishly, then let out a quiet sigh, gesturing as they arrived at the now crowded mess area. “I know being here wasn’t really your choice, but I am glad I got to see you. So, I guess you better go before there’s no food left.”

“Right.” Dalia smiled and nodded, her eyes roving across the chaotic scene. “Thanks, Blue.”

Evening fell over the fort, along with the final hour of Dunma’s shift; it had been a chaotic day with the new arrivals, but not overwhelming. She’d aided the workers in getting situated, seen to it that they’d all received their own work schedules, and shown them to their sleeping pool. It was a bit of a tight fit, but considering the small spaces most Undercity Zoras were known to occupy, she figured there wouldn’t be a problem.

For now, most of the workers had ventured into the bazaar, which had swollen to take up much of the floor space near the main gates. The majority of them didn’t exactly have rupees to spare, but the sights were apparently intriguing enough to be of interest, at least that was the Corporal’s hope. She’d come to know the Undercity Zoras who served the guard alongside her as allies, but these newcomers? Dunma didn’t know them, so she felt that a fair amount of suspicion was due, for the sake of caution and security. From a slight distance, she kept an eye on the comings and goings in the bazaar area, wanting to make certain that these newcomers from home didn’t make waves with the Mercay Islanders, who the fort soldiers had established a peaceful bond with.

For the most part, all seemed to be going well, which left the violet Zora with soothed concerns, and an overall sense of calm. She was certainly happy enough to end her shift on a pleasant note.

Then, just as Dunma was about to let out a sigh of relief, the warning bell let out a few sharp pings which reverberated throughout the fort’s stone walls. For a moment, the violet Zora froze, every muscle in her body going tense so that she couldn’t respond to the warning chime, no matter how she willed herself to do so. She took a breath, steadying herself enough that her frozen frame loosened, then she shot toward the front gate.

The gate was still wide open, as the sun had yet to go down, and the Mercay Islanders were still freely coming and going. When the Corporal reached her nearby destination, she upturned her gaze to regard the sentry stationed upon the upper wall, who was in control of the gate crank and the warning bell.

“There’s a group approaching,” the sentry called down to Dunma, “Looks’ like a lone guardsman with a bunch of civs from back home. We weren’t expecting them, were we?”

“We were not,” the violet Zora uttered in concern, loosening her spear from her back, just in case there was some kind of trouble. She waited for the group to enter, meeting them at the gate in order to address them; she recognized the one guardsman of the group as Tottika, a young man around her own age.
“Guardsman?” Dunma spoke brusquely, her eyes showing her confusion with ease. “We weren’t expecting your arrival. What happened?”

“Sir,” Tottika straightened, giving a curt nod of his head to his fellow guardsman. “We met with the Hylian Champion at the checkpoint as instructed by Guard Captain Bazz. However, when we arrived, the Champion mentioned some sort of trouble in Hateno Village. Guardsman Torfeau ordered me to retreat to the fort with these civilians.”

“We need to report this to the Captain,” the violet Zora uttered with immediate seriousness, her yellow eyes flickering across the worried faces of the group. “What kind of trouble did the Champion describe, exactly?”

“He said that Hateno Village was under attack by raiders, and that the Sheikah of Kakariko Village had arrive to assist.” The young, black-scaled guardsman recounted the short meeting, his own gaze faltering in thought. “The rest of our guardsmen and even some of the civilians marched for Hateno to provide backup to the Sheikah.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I couldn’t help but overhear..” came a smooth, but concerned voice from nearby. Dunma’s sharp gaze quickly turned to see a young Sheikah merchant who was, apparently, on their way out. The stranger approached with a certain degree of wariness, their feet moving more softly than Dunna would have thought was possible. “Did you say that the Sheikah were fighting in Hateno Village? I apologize, it’s just that.. I have family from Kakariko,” they explained, their hands wringing nervously while their deep, red eyes flickered between the pair of armored Zoras.

“I understand,” Tottika responded dismally, his voice soft and heartfelt, much more boyish than someone might have expected from a trained warrior. “The guardsman who led the reinforcements to Hateno is my twin sister. I’m deeply worried for her, so I can empathize with what you must be feeling, hearing this news. ..I’m afraid that’s all I know, however.”

“You’re Guardsman Tottika, did I hear that correctly?” the young Sheikah inquired, taking one more tiny step in the sympathetic Zora’s direction. “If you hear any news from Hateno Village, would you mind seeking me out and letting me know? I’m Sheik, of the Mercay Island camp.”

“I.. suppose I could do that, yes,” the black Zora muttered gently, his want to help genuine enough, though there was little he could do to stifle his own personal worries in order to come across more optimistic.

“For now, we need to go to the Sergeant with this news,” Dunma interrupted the exchange, unsure whether or not it was outside of the usual protocol to discuss these matters with random civilians; she was assuming it wasn’t, for the sake of safety. She gestured for Tottika and the rest of the group to follow her, supposing that her shift was bound to go longer than expected. “Come.”

When the entire procession of Zoras had ventured out of sight and traffic flowing from the gate proceeded normally once again, it was the lone Sheikah who remained, unmove. Merchants bustled around them, their goods packed onto the backs of their donkeys and into small, wooden carts. Soon the sun would set and the bazaar would be cleared out, only to resume once again in the morning.

For now, most retreated to Mercay Island. Sheik, however, lingered, one fingertip pressed to their lips in quiet concentration.

“Hmm..” they hummed, idly speaking to themself in a soft, hushed tone. “The Hylian Champion and the Sheikah have engaged the Guardians of Hyrule in Hateno Village. Interesting.”
I'm genuinely sorry that Link wasn't in this one, because I'm sure you all were excited to find out what's going on with him. However, I hope this chapter was still enjoyable and perhaps intriguing? Also, we got to see Sidon again, which I enjoy, regardless of how serious his scene was.

So- I have some shout outs! A lot, actually. Gosh, it's been a great week. A BIG thanks to Mild-Owl and Madame-Kiksters for the awesome artwork. Crazy Girl basically has a fanclub at this point, because drawing horses in my opinion is super hard, but the both of you liked her enough to do it anyway. That's incredible, truly. There's one other friend who made some AWESOME art of Estuu, Brivere and Betaal. I'm not sure if they want their name mentioned, but trust me, their work was spectacular. <3

Alright friends. If any of you would like to follow and support me, I'm basically BanishedOne across all platforms, but I'll go ahead and specify anyway. I really do appreciate every little kindness sent my way. Thank you all so much.

My Tumblr: BanishedOne
My art Tumblr, and the place where I reblog Coma Baby fanart: BanishFics
My twitter: BanishedOne
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

The battle for Hateno Village had swiftly given the Hylians who made their residence there a new outlook on the Zora presence—most of them, anyway. Link, meanwhile, was still waging a battle of his own, one that he could only grapple hopelessly with. He struggled and fought to overcome his innermost turmoil, quickly finding it to be a greater challenge than facing off against the Guardians of Hyrule.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. Just a warning for this chapter; things really continue to stay kinda dark so prepare yourself before you read on. And enjoy. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hour was early, so early that the sun had yet to rise over the mountains of Lanayru, but it scarcely mattered, as the residents of Hateno Village had hardly slept since the battle that ravaged their village. A skittish bunch was gathered around the table of Reede and Clavia, speaking in hushed voices so to avoid waking their son.

The youngster had been huddled by his parents’ sides throughout the night, fear stealing any chance to sleep, so that only now had he been tucked into bed, little whimpers still coming out of him in unsteady slumber, his cheeks pink and tear-stained.

“No matter what we decide, it’s almost certain that we have hard times ahead of us. There’s no way to avoid that reality and I think we all need to come to terms with it,” came the soft voice of Reede, a deep, somber tone. “We may be destroyed, one way or another, or we may survive, but either way, the difficulties to come are gonna change every one of us, as people. We have to decide whether to be changed for the better, or not. Because if we die, then what we did in life will be all that’s left for others to remember us by. And if we live, we have to live with all we did or didn’t do.”

Voices hummed dully, with some of the villagers idly nodding their heads in the dim light of a few burning candles. Others quietly gazed ahead, unmoving apart from dirty, shaking hands, their nerves still frayed from all that had happened; the thought of further violence was impossible to comprehend or face. It was a grim reminder that almost every person present was alive today because their ancestors had been left relatively unscathed by the Calamity of a hundred years prior. These people were all that was left of soft, weak, sheltered Hylians.

And the Guardians of Hyrule were the children of Hylians hardened by disaster and born into chaos. They might as well have been a different species altogether.

Reede let out a deep, mournful sigh, one hand rubbing at his dark beard in thought. “I have Manny and a few others gathering the bodies of the killed raiders. It’s on us now to decide what to do with their remains.”
“You mean now that the Champion is done pickin’ them clean of anything valuable?” one of the men standing near the table commented, his arms folded over his chest. Reede’s olive eyes regarded the other with quiet disappointment, the look alone enough to dismiss the comment as inappropriate. Had he been listening at all?

“I know that we’re hurt and we’re angry,” Reede began again, trying to squeeze out whatever patience still existed in himself. “But I personally don’t think that we should proceed in a way that disrespects our fellow Hylian people, even if they were our enemies. They were people and now they’re dead. It harms nobody to treat their remains with respect.”

A grumble of deep resentment cut through the uncomfortable silence which followed Reede’s words. Tamana’s hands were angrily bundling the blood-stained apron she’d been wearing since the raiders invaded their village. Her fingernails were dark with her own child’s blood and her face was chapped from smoke and weeping. She only barely managed to speak through the breaking waver of her tight throat.

“You wouldn’t be saying that if it was your son who was killed in the crossfire,” the normally shy woman hissed, unable to hold back further tears. “Pile every one of them up and burn them to ash. Let their worthless bodies fertilize our crops, I don’t care, but don’t act like these monsters deserve respect.”

“Tamana,” Thadd spoke up, every word cautious. He quickly pulled the straw hat from his head as he looked first toward the woman near his side, then at the others seated around the table. “This loss has wounded me as much as you, but.. I just can’t help but worry that it might not have been the entire group that was killed. What if there are others and they want the remains of their people returned?”

“The ones still alive are monsters just the same,” Tamana bitterly muttered, doing all she could to keep her voice low, despite how she was screaming on the inside. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing from Thadd. “Why should we make an effort to appease them or treat any of them with any decency?”

“It isn’t decency I’m worried about, it’s those of us who’re still alive,” Thadd responded with a shrug of his shoulders, his gaze faltering. He’d spent every day with his eyes turned toward the path leading into Hateno Village, always sure that the next second would bring danger. He’d taken a blow to the nose for daring to block the path of those Guardians of Hyrule when they rode up that very path, and of all people, he’d probably suffered the most from the attack. He felt justified in his wariness, and couldn’t bear to let his own personal losses jeopardize the entire village. “If they come back for their people and find out we burned them all, they might just burn the whole village and kill every one of us for it.”

“If someone is willing to find a way to contact these Guardians of Hyrule, to give them the chance to reclaim the remains of those they lost, it saves effort on our part,” Reede finally cut in. To him, the notion of returning the dead was a reasonable one. “Otherwise, I think the best option would be to see them buried somewhere outside of town. They won’t be laid to rest beside our people, but they will be laid to rest. Can we at least agree on this?”

“I’ll try to contact the group,” Nack spoke up, raising one roughened hand to accept the task. He’d been standing a bit aside from the group, caught up in his own thoughts and unsure which of those very thoughts he could chance speaking. “I ain’t afraid of them, so I’ll see it done. If I can’t find them, then yes, bury their people.”

“In favor of this plan?” Reede asked, his gaze reaching across the faces of those near him, all the way to those who were right at the edge of the light. Some, in bitterness and anger, refused to agree.
Others, whether in fear, indifference or genuine respect for life, raised their hands to the level of their faces in agreement; these people were the majority.

“Good enough,” Reede breathed with a gentle nod of his head. Clavia was seated at his side, her hands cupping her arms, her eyes turned aside, yet still she nodded along with her husband.

“Now..” Reede began anew, his pointed ears twitching at the slightest sounds from where his son laid, sleeping, “.we should probably address this subject again, as I’m sure the situation has drastically changed now. The Zora refugees- they didn’t have to come to our aid, especially after our initial rejection. They could have easily turned their backs and went home to deal with their own problems, but they helped anyway. Because of that, I do think we should reassess our decision.”

“I’ve already seen how many bodies were being prepared for the trip back to Kakariko,” Seldon murmured, his voice low and solemn, his eyes easily reflecting the deeply troubling things they’d seen. “The Sheikah wouldn’t have held off the raiders on their own and we would have been under raider control now, if the Zoras hadn’t come.”

“Would that have really been so bad?” Nack finally built up the courage to speak what was on his mind. At his words, everything went even more silent and still than they had been before, and every face at the small gathering turned in his direction. Even the man’s wife took a step away from him, as though she didn’t want to be perceived as standing with him in these suggestions. Still, he remained unperturbed and guiltless.

“I can’t believe you would dare to utter such a thing in my presence,” Tamana growled, her voice shaking now in budding fury, though her gaze couldn’t be lifted any higher than the tabletop.

“Think about it though,” Nack stated bluntly, a bit too calm and confident for anybody else’s comfort, “.what they were offering wasn’t so bad and the cost they asked in return was reasonable. Their methods of obtaining what they wanted could definitely use some work but the Guardians of Hyrule actually gave us a choice, whereas the Sheikah came out of nowhere and started firing, unprompted. If they hadn’t, Tamana, your boy would still be alive right now.”

“It wasn’t a choice the raiders gave us, it was an ultimatum under the threat of violence,” Reede stated, his sharp eyes narrowing. He wasn’t sure how anybody who’d been there, gathered in the street like a flock of sheep bound for slaughter, could have actually believed that the raider group had been ‘reasonable.’ “.and the Sheikah came to protect us. Tamana’s loss wasn’t on them. It was a raider arrow which took her child’s life.”

“I’m just saying, there’s more than one way to think of this. There’s also the fact that..” Nack persisted, “they might still regroup and return in greater numbers, just like Thadd said. And if we’re housing the ones responsible for killing so many of their people, we’ll look like enemies by association.”

“I don’t want to hear this!” Tamana at last lost her ability to keep her volume down, and she pointed one accusing finger across the empty space between herself and the man suggesting that the villagers were anything other than enemies to murderous raiders. “You ought not utter one more word. If you think those beasts were so ‘reasonable’, why don’t you just go ahead and join them. But don’t you dare act like the rest of us should be associated with them!”

“I think you’d best leave, Nack,” Reede said with finality, his head softly bowing in the direction of the door.

“Fine,” the other submitted with a little huff and the flick of his hand. “I’ll just go ahead and set out for the nearest stable. Maybe someone will know how or where to find the rest of the group, if
there’s any of em’ left. I’ll let em’ know we have their dead if I can find em’.”

The other man strode toward the door, exiting and shutting it behind him with a soft click. Once he was gone, it was Reede who breathed a deep sigh, his head momentarily falling into one palm in exhaustion. He quickly straightened, however, and addressed those who remained.

“At this time, I’m personally in favor of the Zora presence,” Reede said, bringing the discussion back to the intended topic. “If what the Champion said when last we met still holds true, and their being here stands to help us rather than hindering us, it might be worth hosting them.”

“No, I don’t think so,” another villager hesitantly spoke up, a certain wariness painting their furrowed features. “I don’t have anything against them, but.. Well, nobody asked them to intervene. They should have just minded their own business. We don’t owe them anything.”

“What are you saying?” Clivia finally spoke up, a sharp glare belying her softened tone. “We owe them our freedom and possibly our lives.”

“They’re here to stay, regardless,” the formerly quiet Bolson commented, offering the single voice of dissent something of a disapproving side eye, then he sighed in mounting frustration. “We might as well make the best of the situation. There’s nothing to be gained from being so damn hostile.”

“Then how about this; any of the shop owners who personally don’t agree with the Zora presence are still justified in not selling to them. It seems foolish to me to turn away business, but it isn’t up to me. However, they will still be welcome to exist among us, to use our public spaces, to come and go as they please,” Reede explained slowly, his voice a dismal, tired sound. “A show of hands- all in favor?”

Those from the previous town meeting who had been in favor of hosting the Zora refugees now held their hands high, without hesitance. Others had reconsidered their stance and now decidedly supported the Zora presence, whereas those who did not stood aside bitterly, all too aware that they were no longer the majority.

“That settles it,” Reede stated with a nod, one roughed palm patting the table’s surface before himself. “I’ll personally inform them of these changes, after sunup.”

In the quiet of the morning, there was little to be heard but the calm lap of the surf and the slow, steady tap of Link’s boots upon the path. The air in Hateno Village was typically fresh and pleasant, a soft mixture of ocean salt, meadow grass and the icy wind that drifted down from the Lanayru mountains. Not even a night of rain could rinse away the stink of gore now, however, and only by venturing down to the bay was it possible to escape.

Escape wasn’t exactly the point of coming, though. Regardless of his exhaustion, the Hylian Champion had failed to rest as of yet. He’d been much too busy assisting his Zora friends and Sheikah allies, as well as stripping the fallen raiders of valuable weapons and armor. It was now his intention to harvest new supplies for potion making, and he knew of just the perfect camp of bokoblins to lend him all the gruesome parts he needed. He’d already killed this particular group three or four times, but like himself, their lives were tenacious things that the world simply couldn’t get rid of.

Knowing that the Zoras would eventually be making trips down to the bay for fishing, it satisfied Link enough to make sure it was safe for them.
The group that lurked down by the beach was relatively weak, so Link had little concern that slaying them would be difficult, even after an entire night of battle. If anything, his body was already in the killing rhythm, warmed up to the necessity of fighting.

There were about five or six bokoblins and one moblin, all visible in the distance, the red hue of their skin deepened by the sun rising over the water. They’d constructed one of their typical sloppy tree forts, and most of the creatures were still sleeping about the upper levels, while a couple of dutiful early risers poked at the nearby campfire, where a handful of porgy were slow-roasting over the embers.

The dry sand shifted beneath Link’s shoes, causing the muscles of his calves to ache in reminder of how used up his reserves of strength really were. His head just needed to inform the rest of his body that he was perfectly capable of running on frustration and bitterness alone.

Once Link neared enough for his footsteps to catch one of the big, flappy ears of a single bokoblin, the beast wasted no time leaping to its feet, sounding the alarm and successfully waking the rest of the clan. The Hylian’s own ears flattened at that awful sound, the ring of it a painful echo in his chest, a thrum inside his skull. He hated those goddamn horns and hearing it had his hands itching all the more to take hold of the weapon at his back.

With no need to deny his killer instincts, the Champion drew his spear from where it was fastened. The steel was still crusted with the blood of enemy Hylians, yet even so, it shined dangerously in the pinkish morning light, and Link ran for the two bokoblins who’d been seated by the fire before they even had the chance to retrieve their own discarded weapons.

The creatures met quick, squealing ends upon the Hylian’s spear, then Link rushed for the tree fort, beginning up the sandy, creaking stairs only for a very unusual thing to occur. His sharp blue eyes focused up at the gathered creatures upon the top landing, but as he stared them down, they made no move to attack; that was way beyond his range of experience.

Impatiently, Link turned the shaft of the spear in his hand, the sharp head spinning slowly, newly wet with bokoblin blood, which dripped upon the bleached wood beneath his feet. The beasts from above measured the situation in what appeared to be nervousness, if the Champion were to judge. From where they stood, with the high ground and spears in hand, it should have looked like an easy win, so why were they so seemingly unsure?

The remaining bokoblins were quietly snorting, their wet noses twitching, their big ears flat in some kind of expression that almost resembled fear. Even the moblin was panting from the sudden strain upon its nerves.

“Well?” Link called up to them, his own aggression prodded at by how they were just standing there, staring at him. He couldn’t handle the weight of their eyes on him, because even without the jeering, all he could see were the faces of the ones who’d tied and tortured him.

At the sound of the Hylian’s yelling, the entire group at last lost what little nerve they had left, each of them dropping their weapons aside while they bolted for the opposite end of the construction in an attempt to escape. The wooden spears clacked and toppled here and there, but Link gave chase like a predator whose instincts were spurred by movement.

With a quick jab, the Champion caught one of the bokoblins in the back of its stumpy leg, so that it fell flat and was left attempting to crawl away in panic. He hurried past that one, to disallow the escape of the others, easily slashing the legs of two more, leaving cuts deep enough to take them both off their feet. The moblin actually made it to the edge and was about to jump when Link made a running dive, burying his spear in the beast’s back. The Champion’s hands slid further apart where
he gripped the spear and he anchored himself where he stood, dragging the monster away from the edge and back toward him, like any other prey one could catch on their spear.

A twist of Link’s weapon brought the moblin down to the creaking floor beneath its feet, where it laid writhing and gasping from its wound. It would be dead soon enough, so now all the Hylian had to do was kill off the bokoblins he’d rendered unable to run. It wasn’t like they were going anywhere, so the whole, nasty business could all be finished up at a leisurely pace.

For a moment, though, Link just watched them all, bleeding and struggling to escape. He placed the butt of his spear against the ground and leaned into the weapon, a pensive expression buried somewhere beneath all the grime. “So, the lot of you learned not to steal sheep from Hateno Village and you all clearly remember exactly who I am. But here’s the thing that’s bothering me- why didn’t you all just leave?”

Link let out a sigh, shaking his head in disappointment as he strode toward one of the desperately crawling monsters. He sharply stamped one boot upon the creature’s back and it squealed like any other pig he might kill in the forest, its body curling defensively, its hands covering its head while it cringed.

One jab of Link’s spear quieted the monster’s cries and his sensitive ears thanked him for that little bit of extra peace. He thought that maybe it would have felt different, killing it without even a fight. He thought that perhaps the sight of it cowering as it suffered a brutal death might guide him to some trembling ray of light left in the darkness of his soul, but it didn’t. And if he was honest with himself, it made him that much more angry, watching the damn thing pretend to fear, to suffer, to feel anything at all, because Link knew the truth. They were nothing but filth, beasts, a plague on this very world, and if he had been a hapless, helpless passer-by, they’d have overwhelmed and slaughtered him without hesitation.

The Champion was, by no means, happy to be the hand of Hylia in any given situation, but when it came to slaying monsters, fuck it, he supposed he probably should have offered them her regards. After all, this was her will, right? Their blood was on her ‘benevolent’ hands. Link was just the belligerent messenger.

Link bent over one of the other injured creatures, hissing the words, “Why come back to life if you aren’t smart enough to learn from your death?” He hadn’t even uttered the last word of his sentence before he stabbed the beast to death, and it was questionable if he even cared whether or not it heard him. He knew better than to assume they could understand language.

“Why come back to life when you so clearly don’t deserve to live?” he growled, straightening and slowly stalking over to the last of the crying, squealing monsters. Its silence couldn’t come soon enough, and if only that silence could last, then Link’s job wouldn’t seem half as impossible as it did.

It wasn’t even intimidating any longer so much as it was aggravating. When these awful creatures returned to life, it left him with a sense that his existence amounted to a pointless endeavor, an endless cycle, something he could never be done with, a never-ending exhaustion with a sword that could never be sheathed, a hand that would always be fighting, struggling. It was frustrating, maddening, infuriating.

“Why come back?” the Champion spat at the last bokoblin, his blood-stained hands trembling and tight upon his weapon. Part of his aching soul showed itself in his voice; he was accusing, pleading, his breath short, his sharp gaze not seeing a cowering creature but a merciless imp beating him, tormenting him to the limits of possible suffering then dragging his broken body away, an axe in hand, hovering over him with killer intent, no hesitation.
So he did just the same. He slaughtered the troublesome creature with a few quick blows, perhaps two or three too many. “Why do you have to keep coming back?” he growled his words between a couple more needless stabs. “Why can’t you just stay dead!”

...Link...

Gasping, the Champion withdrew his spear from the motionless husk of dead bokoblin at his feet. The weapon was raised in defense while he moved on his toes, glancing over his shoulder in this very sudden, distinct feeling like he was being watched and judged, or like some previously silent force had overstepped an unknown boundary and now he was in danger from something he couldn’t see or hear or touch.

Was that Princess Zelda’s voice calling to him? He blinked, his vision growing dim, hazy, one moment focused and seeing nothing but the oceanic scenery around him, the next moment shrouded in darkness broken only by a growing spire of flame, a battle against the Guardians of Hyrule- no, it wasn’t them. It was the Yiga Clan. Hundreds of warriors surrounded him, stalking from the shadows as though they had spawned from that very blackness. No, it wasn’t them. It was a hoard of bokoblins, the kind which were pale and skilled in combat. There were moblins with clubs and swords scavenged from the ruins of Hyrule Field, all closing in on the Champion. No, it wasn’t them!

..Link..

“Who is that!!” he screamed, his feet shuffling back, his body searching for something to ground him in the darkness before his face. It was empty and suddenly he was alone. The woman’s voice calling to him was disembodied and distant, her tone fearful, urgent, and perhaps it sounded like Zelda for all of a moment, but the more it resounded and echoed through Link’s skull, the deeper it went, morphing, changing. Who was it?

Who was it? Why couldn’t they just answer his damn question?

Two searching, red beams cut through the darkness of Link’s mind. That was a threat he immediately recognized, and he dipped low to hide himself in the shadows. He could already hear the distant clanking of the Guardians’ claws against the stone, the ground, whatever solid surface was beneath them. Their gears whirred, their iron hulls grinding with the turn of their ever searching heads. On foot, Link knew he had no chance to escape if they locked onto him. He’d be blasted to death again and again and again. If only there was some cover for him to duck into, but there was nothing.

Inevitably, the searching beams cast their crimson gazes across his bundled form in the smothering dark. The machines’ gaits changed and they hurriedly spider-walked toward him, but he did nothing. What could he do? These things never stopped once they’d targeted you and they would track you to the ends of Hyrule, relentless and terrifying, impossibly fast, impossibly resilient.

The ground shook beneath the Champion when they came for him, their beams flickering in deadly threat. He closed his eyes in the expectation of death, only to find a quick flash of something else behind his lids; Princess Zelda stood before him, battered and tearful. She spun to face the threat, her hand thrust outward as she cried out the word, “No!”

There was a blast of blinding, golden light and Link blinked until it diminished, staring up in confusion to find that it was no longer Princess Zelda standing between him and the approaching Guardians, but Prince Sidon. The Zora slowly turned, his lovely golden eyes regarding the cowering Hylian with sympathetic pity that painfully stung at the budding darkness of Link’s soul. Of course, Sidon merely smiled down at his most beloved, something mournful in his expression, something
staining his features with regret so much like Mipha’s own when she looked upon the one, pathetic surviving Champion.

Slowly, the beautiful red of the Prince’s complexion paled into a soft, deathly blue that shined in the shadow like luminous stone, but so much brighter.

No, no, what was happening? What was happening to him? Link clambered to his feet with haste, stumbling onto his knees in his rush, then picking himself up, running toward the Zora, one hand outstretched to reach for him, but before Link had any hope of closing the distance, the image of Sidon began to dissolve, scale by scale, falling apart and fading away.

“No, no, no!” Link cried aloud, his voice echoing in the emptiness of the void. His hands grabbed and desperately clutched at the scales that fluttered free in the absence of the Prince’s form; all that was left of him. The scales pricked the skin of the Hylian’s palm while his fingers tightened around them. They were like softly glowing embers casting light between his fingers, cold and blue, their shine quietly fading until there was nothing but darkness once again.

“No..” the Champion uttered, his very being quaking, cracking, crumbling. Everything in him trembled, aching, breathless, gasping, breaking. Everything around him was gone, and he was the only one left in the bleak, hollowed remnant of the world. Even Sidon had been swallowed up by it. Link’s hands stung while they shook and he bundled them against himself.

In the distance, the searching Guardians were still there, the blue circles of their eyes turned in Link’s direction yet they hovered, unmoving. No, they were blinking, blinking like a person did, blinking at the same time as Link as he stood, staring in confounded questioning.

...Link...

The voice calling to the Champion was but a deep, dark whisper now, gently imploring his attention. Against his better judgement, he slowly proceeded toward the lights from the Guardians in the distance, his feet making careful, hesitant patters, each step a dull echo in the wide open space of the void. As he neared, he expected the eyes of the Guardians to appear larger and much higher off the ground than he was, himself. The deadly machines towered over even the tallest of Hylians, so why were they seemingly on his level? Maybe these were the smaller ones, such as the Champion encountered in shrines?

He drew ever closer to the two, lone lights, feeling very much like a foolish moth fluttering in the night. He went closer, closer, ever closer, until the distance felt short enough that he could reach through it, that he could lay his hands upon the shining eyes, and indeed, he did just that.

Link’s hands found a solid surface in the dark, and the blue of the Guardian’s eyes shined brightly enough to illuminate his shadowed form. There, before him, was an endlessly stretching, silvery mirror that was cold beneath his battered palms. On the reflective surface, the vivid light of the Guardians’s eyes revealed his own image, the circles of threatening blue not belonging to any corrupted machine, but himself.

Link.

This time, when the voice called out to him, he watched in abject horror as his own reflection’s lips curled around the word, uttering it in beckoning. He gave a sharp tug to draw his hands away from the mirror, only to find his reflection’s blackened fingers had emerged from the surface and laced around his own. He was ensnared by the darkness which had formed itself in his image, but he fought and yanked back in the desperate hope of freeing himself, his body slowly sinking into the mirror while he struggled.
His shadowed image’s hold was impossible to escape, to the point that it didn’t feel grasping or tight or binding, but rather like the reflections hands had melded together with Link’s upon contact, and they were one, so the Hylian’s attempts to pull away were as futile as trying to pull off his own arms, his own legs. Like a malice bog, it swallowed him slowly, drawing him in until it was around his wrists, his elbows, his forearms, until his chest was flush to it and dipping steadily inside. His head turned aside and he gasped for breath, panicked and expecting there to be no air available to him once he was at last consumed.

‘Why do you keep coming back?’ uttered the voice from the mirror. The words were so softly pronounced, yet they boomed within the confines of Link’s cracking skull, every little echo bringing another pounding wave of pain.

‘Why come back to life when you so clearly don’t deserve to live?’ it mocked, a quiet laugh coming from it like the growl of a Maraudo wolf, blood-thirsty and threatening. Link’s face was pushed against the mirror, the surface hugging tightly around his chest, piercing him so that he could feel it wrinkling beneath his breastbone, slithering up and around his spine, and he cried out in pain, indistinct words spilling from him and pleading for mercy.

‘Why can’t you just stay dead?’ the voice hissed, pulling his body in, his head sinking into the blackness so that it infiltrated every inch of him, rushing down his throat, into his ears, lacing into the synopsis of his mind, tearing away his skin and replacing it with murky shadow, stealing everything that made him who he was, ripping him to shreds, burning him, melting him, a pressure closing around him, reforging him.

Or.. Had he done this to himself? Had he, unknowingly, chosen this?

...Link...

At the sound of Princess Zelda’s voice, another golden flash sliced through the pain and darkness, and Link shot upright, opening his eyes to find himself laid out upon the beach near the bokoblin construction, with the sun burning and bright against his face. His body was dusted with a layer a bleached sand, and he upturned his gaze in confusion, thinking.. He must have stumbled and fallen off the wooden structure?

He wasn’t feeling at all well. The aching, turning pit of his gut had left him softly panting, trying to resist the sudden sense of illness, but he swiftly failed in that. His body rolled to one side, bending over in heaving spasm as he vomited upon the sand. His eyes were blurred with tears that he tried to blink away while he coughed, but for a single instant, he swore he’d left a puddle of murky black before himself.

Link wiped away his tears, seeing clearly that his imagination was still playing cruel tricks, and there was no sign of the viscous black but rather a nasty, frothy white. How long had it been since he’d eaten or drank anything? Maybe a few days? He wasn’t sure. Everything had blurred together in his head, and he couldn’t properly recall. The fatigue was almost certainly beginning to get the better of him.

His body was heavy and sore with every movement, but the Hylian managed to crawl over to where the bokoblin campfire had dulled to embers, and their meal was left forgotten with their deaths.

The Champion was going to eat every last bite of the waiting food, then poke at the waning flame in hopes that it might burst back to life and soothe the pain of Link’s entire existence with its seemingly healing warmth. Hopefully the slain monsters wouldn’t fester too much in the mean time, because the Champion still had a lot of work to do, cutting them apart and collecting all that was valuable.
There was no time for rest.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone. Sorry this chapter was so incredibly short. I had intended to write a lot more than I did, but.. well, some pretty bad stuff has come up in my real life and I've been extremely stressed. I don't wanna go into all that here, because this story is here to give you all enjoyment, not as my pity party. I'll probably write a little blurb on my personal tumblr to explain what's going on, if any of you are really concerned and want to know about that. Also, I might need to take a week off at some point, but I'm not sure when yet. I'll most likely announce it over tumblr, though. If anybody was holding out for the perfect time to offer me their love and support, haha, here it is.

But, of course, what did you all think of this chapter? Did you enjoy it? I hope so. :) 

My Tumblr: BanishedOne
Art Tumblr: BanishFics
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

When one has broken and descended to the lowest point possible, when their spirit is downtrodden and their heart can take no more, that will inevitably be when they make the first step toward healing. The destruction of all they were will ultimately be what forges that which they will become. For Estuu, his world was destroyed and his beasts were unchained, and he let himself fall to pieces to match his surroundings. For the Hylian Champion, he'd survived the terror of his innermost fight and stuck himself together with odd ends and anger, all for the sake rebuilding some bridges with the remnants of those left destroyed in his wake.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I'm sorry to say that this chapter will most likely be a bit shorter than you all have come to expect. Also, here is a little warning for an autistic meltdown. Be safe and enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were still droplets of water resting upon his scales after the swim back home from the Basilica. Each drop was a tiny world dancing across him, a fingertip brushing against him without permission, so apparent that he could have accurately counted every, single one. He wanted to ignore the feeling, or at least lean on the hope that it could provide a distraction from the pain ripping its way up the stump of his right arm; it didn’t, it only added to his suffering.

Estuu quietly pattered through the doorway to his home, his golden eyes searching the remains for even a hint a familiarity but there was none. His fingers tightened on the satchel where his potted flower had been tucked away, the sharp of his fingerscales leaving tiny furrows as they went.

Brivere had visited him prior to his release. It was probably by the elder brother’s request that Estuu had been permitted to leave the care of the medical Apostles so early. The young boy was certain that he’d overheard his sibling’s smooth voice quietly explaining that the environment of the infirmary was sure to be too stressful, and that Estuu could recover more easily at home.

But this wasn’t his home. This was nothing like his home and already his tail was flapping sharply against his back in distress.

Estuu didn’t exactly recall the event which had taken his arm, but Brivere had brought explanations and answers when he visited. Ever so gently, he’d warned the younger Zora that their house had been damaged, that everything they’d ever known was in chaos. Brivere had recounted the disaster and exactly how Estuu had been injured. He must have known the boy well enough to understand the way his stressed mind brimmed with questions when he began to drown in his own uncertainties.

But warnings only further prodded Estuu’s anxieties, and that burning anticipation of the worst was finally coming to its precipice, steadily blooming into full-blown stress that threatened to become
destructive. The boy set the satchel aside, still counting the droplets of water slowly trickling along his frame. There were at least fourteen or fifteen and it made him itch, made him want to take off his skin and become something less physical, less solid.

The most intact area of their home was the tiny nook where Brivere often stood, preparing meals. Though Estuu rarely had reason to venture here, he now found himself drifting into the space, because at least it was relatively unchanged. He hid there, like it was a place to hide from the truth, to defend himself. The shelves were untouched, but empty of food, and had instead been stuffed randomly with this and that. The prep counter was undamaged, but lined with further disorganization. Assumably, as the rubble was cleared, Brivere had made an effort to salvage any of their belongings still in one piece, though many items were muddy or ruined from becoming too wet. Haphazardly stacked piles formed a mess of clutter anywhere the ceiling was intact, safely tucked aside from any exposure to the weather, yet still it was a damned mess.

Amidst the random piles atop the prep counter, there was a small basket that Estuu had never seen. He inched nearer, standing on his tiptoes in order to reach for the object and draw it near, quickly discerning that it was their rations.

The young Zora was certainly hungry. The Apostles had offered him little bits of food after he awakened in the Basilica, but he’d wordlessly refused and they hadn’t pushed very hard. Now hunger had turned into a self-consuming void in the pit of him, but further disappointment drew back to mercilessly strike when he examined the foodstuffs.

Pungent smoked porgy, uncooked Hylian rice, a handful of sun shrooms, and a hearty durian; each of these things was so repugnant and offensive in taste and texture, just the thought of them going anywhere near Estuu’s mouth had a twisting creep crawling up his spine. A little whine came out of him as he shoved the basket away from himself.

The sun beaming in from the damaged ceiling was harsh and vividly bright, like the shining star had perched upon the cracks in order to sting right at the boy’s eyes. It felt as though the light grew in intensity while Estuu’s pounding heart rapped faster and faster in his growing stress. It had even rendered his home warmer than usual, or so it felt that way. The air had turned suffocating and dry and there was no soft stream of water to cool the Zora’s surroundings. It even smelled different.

Where once the young Zora felt safety in his space, now it was unsettling. Where once he could calm himself with consistent familiarity, now his home was the complete opposite of that and he was left with nothing.

Where were his books? Had they been destroyed? Had they been lost? Everything was out of place, and he had no way of finding anything. His entire world had collapsed, upended, fallen into a swirling void that he, himself, was steadily being sucked into. He could feel it spiraling in his chest, swallowing all thought into a chaotic abyss where nothing made sense.

Estuu’s back was pressed to the wall, like the steady surface could somehow ground him while his body was overcome by this overwhelming awareness of everything. The air felt solid, his surroundings so bright that images were as sharp as blades, and his blood was pounding with painful, deafening force. His frame was drifting, his soul a container without form, filling up with overwhelming emotions while his crawling skin abandoned him, and he had no choice but to relinquish all control.

The boy slid down the wall, crumpling to the floor in a tiny bundle. His one hand grabbed at his forefin, tugging at it so that his head was forced to one side, then he dragged the fleshy fin across his face, opening his mouth and biting down on it. The pain was a bright flash, a distraction from the frustration and fear overflowing inside. It was something real while Estuu, himself, no longer was.
His mouth opened and closed again and again upon his fin, his fangs piercing his flesh, his hand yanking uncontrollably while his webbed toes tightly curled, one leg kicking at the wall, yet that much was going unnoticed to the boy. He couldn’t stop. This part of him was a beast unleashed, his own personal Calamity, bursting free from all restraints and rending his world apart.

It couldn’t get any worse, anyway, so why not let the beast take whatever it pleased?

The haze which had fallen over his delirious head began to subside somewhere between a meal and leaving the mesmerizing lap of the waves far enough in the distance that he couldn’t hear it any longer.

Yet the Champion couldn’t say that he’d fully recovered from that bizarre episode, nor that he even had a proper grasp on what exactly that was, apart from exhausted delusion. He might have thought to be concerned, maybe even worried, if he hadn’t completely expended the capacity to feel anything at all in his needless, imaginary panic.

Things still weren’t right, because every thought and action remained in slow motion, a fog descending over him so that he was out of his body, watching himself thoughtlessly accomplish one task after another. Half-conscious hours passed while he mutilated the bodies of his monster quarry for medicinal ingredients and maybe that was for the best. It was little better now that Link had found his way to the public washing area. He was asleep on his feet, eyes open, but all the more tired for persisting in this way. He doubted that his episode on the beach really counted for a ‘nap’.

Link’s hands were awkward and sluggish, every finger joint stiff from a night of battle. He took his bundle of clothes and dumped them into the basin once the salt soaps began to froth. Very quickly, the deep emerald blue of the soapy water turned murky violet-gray with the blood that washed free of basically everything he owned. He left the mess to soak, turning instead to another wooden pail brimming with soapy water, which he’d put aside for himself. It was difficult to judge which was more filthy, his body or his unfortunate outer layers.

A distant sound cut through Link’s washing; the deep rumble of someone clearing their throat. The Hylian turned his head just enough to find Reede standing nearby, his countenance almost completely neutral, apart from the small tinge of pity to be found in the gentle crease of his brow. Even after all this time, Link still couldn’t stand being looked at like that, and he hurried to shift his gaze, his pointed ears tilting downward, his hair falling across his face in bloody clumps.

“Hylian Champion?” the bearded man spoke gently, his tall frame bent with the weight of disaster, heavy on his shoulders. “Is this really.. appropriate behavior?”

“Hmm?” Link muttered, not immediately responding, not immediately processing the words being spoken. His bare, scar-marked shoulders eventually raised in a dismissive shrug, then the croak of his tired voice was forced out. “You said that the Zoras were barred from public spaces, not that I was.”

“That’s not quite the issue..” Reede remarked, his eyes narrowing to match the immediate confusion in his tone. “..you’re in your small clothes.”

“Yeah,” the hollow sound came out of the damaged Hylian, a desolate wind across abandoned ruins. They were lucky he’d even decided to conceal himself that much. Truly, he’d gotten spoiled by how little the Zoras cared about public nudity. Still, Reede’s persistence was a bother, and Link was already rolling his eyes in annoyance while he rubbed himself down with a wet, foamy cloth. Clothed and gruesome was apparently fine, but naked and clean? An insult to all that was civilized.
The Champion breathed a sigh, his pale gaze venturing to the sight of a young man just a short distance down the path who was busily heaving the bodies of dead raiders onto carts, three of four of them already overflowing and drawing more flies than the manure in the stables.

"With all the corpses laying around, I doubt my small clothes are a huge deal right now," Link answered at last, though his response clearly wasn’t enough for the persistent village leader. His tone hardened impatiently, the skin of his nose wrinkling like a snarling mutt. "All of my clothes are either torn apart or covered in blood. I don’t even have anything I can put on in the meantime. I’m washing what I have. It’s the best I can do right now."

"Alright, alright," Reede surrendered, raising his hands to disengage from this obviously losing battle, though he hadn’t wanted to make a fight of it, anyway. He shook his head with the same the kind of disappointment an overbearing but tired parent might express, then he softly breathed the words, "..that laundry soap is very bad for your skin."

"I’ll survive," the much shorter man dully replied, his muscles straining while he raised an entire bucket of soapy water over his head and dumped it.

"I actually needed to speak with you about the refugees." The village leader spoke clearly, unsure if Link could even hear him over the rush of water cascading past his ears. "Could you let them know that they won’t actually be barred from public spaces. They are welcome here among us. Some of the shop keepers might still put up a fuss, but.. They may yet come to change their mind."

"..I think you should speak with them, not me," the Champion grumbled, shaking his head free of excess water, so that his wet hair was left damp but tousled. Link wasn’t sure how this man had gotten the impression that he was the emissary responsible for the Zoras or his communication with them. More than anything, something vicious in the pit of him wanted to lose all control, because really? The Zoras had rushed in to save this entire worthless village, and some of the villagers were still going to ‘put up a fuss?’ What could Link say to that? Nothing good. He’d have to leave it to someone bold and much more morally pristine than himself.

Pointing in the direction of his cabin, Link spoke the words, "Walk up the hill to my house and ask for Guardsman Torfeau. She’ll know what answer is appropriate to give."

"..very well." Reede still sounded a bit hesitant, and Link’s ears twitched in apprehension. The man took a step nearer, and for a hopeful moment, the Champion thought maybe he would walk past, but no, he paused right near Link’s side, his voice low and sincere, “Champion, I did want to thank you.”

“For what?”

“I noticed that you were there when the raiders took us hostage,” Reede recounted, suddenly humbled by his new knowledge of how it felt to be absolutely helpless. "..I thought you had turned your back, as you’d promised to do. But then you came back with reinforcements and made the effort to aid us, though you surely didn’t feel we deserved it. I can’t thank you enough for that.”

“Don’t thank me.” The tone of Link’s voice quietly concealed a burning fury, something between shame and insult, something he couldn’t properly express, not even to himself. He took a deep breath, his hands falling upon the wooden wash station, tightening there for steadiness. Before he uttered a response, however, he sharply turned to the man at his side, blue eyes bright and burning beneath his wet fringe. For an instant, the image of his shadowy self with his glowing, Guardian eyes flickered to the forefront of his mind.

“I told the Zoras to turn back,” Link hissed unapologetically. “They are the ones who decided to risk
their lives for all of you, not me. So walk up that hill and acknowledge them to their faces, give your thanks to them. Don’t thank me. I’m not your Hero. They are.”

For a moment, Reede said nothing, but his unreadable gaze remained fixed on the bitter Hylian before himself. He might have been fearful, resentful, or even disappointed, sympathetic.. Link didn’t know, didn’t care to know. The farmer’s stubbled throat visibly moved with a swallow, then he nodded his head softly and left the Champion in peace.

Already, Firly Pond had become a safe, calming shelter for tired Zoras to reclaim their lost hours of slumber. One sleepy guardsman was nestled upon a perfect lookout point in the center of the peaceful pond; an outcropping of rock which was flat and moss-covered. She sat, watching over her slumbering fellows who were softly drifting beneath the glassy surface. Her own toeclaws dug into the edge of the stone, anchoring her in place while her head drooped low, lulled by chirping frogs and gently swaying shade trees. There was no sign of monsters nearby, and it was doubtful that there would be, so it was safe enough for the single lookout to idly nap, even on duty.

Link’s cabin was not in the fairest shape, but the destroyed furniture had been cleared in favor of making space for all who were injured. The Hylian had been surprised at the luck of his dear allies, though maybe he shouldn’t have been; he knew all too well how tenacious his Zora friends were. Of everyone who had followed him into battle, several had sustained injuries, but none had perished. The most badly injured of the lot, a young guardsman who’d taken a shallow slash across the middle, was still well enough to chuckle over his enemy’s laughably light hand.

These were circumstances that the Champion was all too gracious for. He’d been in a bad way when he finally returned home from his washing, only for Torfeau, who had also yet to eat or sleep, to chastise him for pushing himself too hard, then send him straight to bed. He gave a weak, ‘yes, sir,’ and followed her command.

Now he had a few peaceful hours to his name, and had awakened to find his clothes dry. Everything was stiff and scratchy from the soap, but the cloth would soften up again with a bit of wear. Rest had left Link with a renewed sense of patience, and as odd as it was and as much as he hated being swallowed up in crowds, even with his house filled to the roof with Zoras and other people, he was presently calm and content.

Link spent a few minutes dressing himself in his Champion blue and attempting to arrange his mess of collected weapons in a way that both saved space was better organized. He stashed everything he wanted to keep underneath his bed, while a large pile of swords and armor claimed an entire corner of his loft bedroom. Mipha’s broken trident was still quietly gathering dust atop a bedside table and the Hylian offered it a mournful glance. He left it where it was as a reminder to himself to have the thing repaired eventually. He probably owed Mipha that much.

The Champion planned to stay in Hateno Village a bit longer, to make certain that the Zoras were settled in and to aid the other half of the refugee group in making their way here. However, he had already begun to pack his bag in preparation to return to Zora’s Domain. Being ready for anything in advance was out of character for him, but for some darned reason, this time he found it necessary. He told himself that it certainly wasn’t because he was beyond anxious to see his idiot Prince awake again.. Then he readily admitted it to himself, because there was no room to deny it. He was aching to be reunited with Sidon. His heart had turned into something feeble, fragile and empty and it couldn’t be warm nor contented until his Zora lover was there to render it abound with love and comfort.

With these minor tasks complete, Link sauntered down the stairs in order to ascertain as to whether
Torfeau had taken care of her own needs yet, or if she was still busily over-extending herself. He’d planned to order her to rest in turn, but upon his investigation of the hustle and bustle going on in the lower floor of his cabin, he’d discovered that she had, indeed, retired to Firly Pond, leaving another guardsman in control; that was just as well.

The door to Link’s cottage was destroyed and the splintered remains had already been removed, leaving essentially an open doorway that a single Zora was keeping guarded. Inwardly, he found it a bit amusing, because while he might have considered his house to be missing a vital component, it probably made his amphibious friends feel right at home.

The newly opened line of sight provided by the missing door, however, gave Link early indication that a guest was approaching from across the bridge. He took a few steps outside to meet the gaze of Bolson, who offered a tiny wave of greeting that did little to disguise the horror written all over his face, most likely in response to the poor condition of the house.

“Seems your guests have already settled in, despite the circumstances,” the Hateno man smoothly spoke, one thumb gesturing in the direction of Firly Pond, which was easily visible from the bridge. His hand quickly unfurled and shifted to be held out flat, referring now to the cottage, while his other hand settled on his hip. “Look at all this fire damage, though. That’s no good at all. And the furniture- ruined. What a waste.. damn raiders.”

“Yeah,” Link breathed, definitely sounding like he’d only just woken up. “Right as I’d finally gotten everything looking nice, too.”

“So..” Bolson’s gaze drifted aside, his tongue making a quiet clicking sound against the back of his teeth. “..how about if I have my people get to work repairing the place? The cabin and the furniture. No charge- it’s the least I can do.”

The shorter Hylian crossed his arms, one brow twitching upward in disbelief. Sure, Bolson was a nice enough guy, but he wasn’t the sort to offer something for nothing. If so, he wouldn’t have proven himself very successful as a business man.

Rather quickly, the man swatted one dismissive hand at Link, if only to rid his face of the dubious expression present there. Little did he notice, the Champion had just as easily caught sight of the guilty furrow on his face and was opting to hear him out.

“Actually, I feel bad for not backing you up before, at the town meeting,” Bolson confessed with a little sigh of regret. “I’m sorry about that. It just seemed like.. there was nothing I could do. Then again, maybe it was cowardice. Either way, I want to do better, and I want to make up for it.”

“Thanks, Bolson,” Link replied with ease, uncrossing his arms and nodding his head. Maybe he was typically one to hold a grudge, but he could let this one go. “I appreciate it.”

“Then, we’re still friends?” the Hateno man asked, wary yet playful, not wanting to overstep any boundaries, but hopeful enough that they might not have been as strict as he assumed. The back of one hand gave Link a gentle bump and a charming grin lit Bolson’s face so that the shorter Hylian couldn’t help how the corners of his mouth upturned as well.

“Of course,” the Champion breathed, nodding again.

“Oh, what a relief!” Bolson let out a deep sigh to further highlight that very relief, brushing his bandana back ever so slightly to rub at his forehead, then he began to chatter at the first sign that he and the Champion were on good terms. “I offered to help repair the lab on top of the hill, too. The director’s assistant kept insisting that the people of Kakariko would see to the repairs. I don’t know
why they would want to wait for Sheikah carpenters to travel all the way here, and it’s such a hassle to ship the supplies, but you know, this is coming from the person who requires all of his employees to have names which end with ‘-son’.”

Bolson let out a breathy laugh, his hand drawing upward to cover his mouth as he did, whereas Link quietly chuckled to himself, his own hands rested at his hips.

“Do you also require possible romantic interests to have ‘-son’ at the end of their name, too?” Link questioned, though perhaps it was more of a sly comment and he stared up at the other Hylian with a narrowed, knowing gaze.

“What? No, don’t be silly!” the older man laughed with another sheepish flick of his hand.

“You and the blacksmith, then?”

“You heard all the gossip already? You’re a true Hateno resident aren’t you?” Bolson half chastised, shaking his head and tsk tsk-ing. He turned aside for a moment, his gaze becoming dreamily distant while he considered his response. “I always thought that adventurous, younger guys were my type. I’d fall head over heels for every new, rugged thing that passed through. I thought one day I would tame one of these wild adventurers with the allure of financial stability and a nice life of domestic gayness but well.. I guess not.”

“Oh,” Link hummed a bit awkwardly. “You make it sound like you just settled for someone.”

“I’m not disappointed, not at all!” the older man hurried to correct the inaccurate impression his wistful behavior had left in its wake. “I suppose I just.. found out something new about myself when I befriended him. Maybe at first it felt like I was settling for whatever I could get, because let’s face it, I’m not as young as I used to be, but.. When I got to know him, I felt so silly for thinking he was somehow not as good as those idealized, imaginary men from my daydreams. He’s also a businessman, which is automatically studly, but the way he works the forge.. His big, strong hands are permanently darkened with soot, his arms and shoulders look like they were sculpted and fired in a kiln of perfection. And perhaps it’s because of the time he spent training in Goron City, but he’s got this hard, steady masculinity. He’s quiet and intense, but when he does speak, its like he took the time to melt down the raw form of his thoughts, refining them, hammering them, folding them until they’re strong and flexible and sharp.”

Link gave an impressed whistle when at last Bolson’s lovestruck rambling faded into silence, but he didn’t miss a perfect opportunity to tease. “You’re really going out of your way to make blacksmith metaphors,” he commented, though he was fairly sure that firing objects in a kiln pertained to potters, not smiths. But Bolson was a carpenter, so he couldn’t judge too harshly.

“Oh ho, yes. I am, aren’t I?” the older man tittered. “..Well, it’s true, I’ve fallen for the man.”

“There’s probably a joke to be made here about swords and sheaths, but I’ll refrain,” the shorter Hylian intoned, his voice steady and belying the smile on his face. That joke actually did pertain to smithing, so he was kinda proud of himself.

“You are a cheeky one,” Bolson swatted his hand again, a little giggle coming from him as he did. Link was only surprised that he wasn’t blushing like a tween with their first crush.

“You deserve to be happy, so I’m glad that you’ve met someone,” Link stated, feeling strangely like he was suddenly invoking Sidon’s levels of genuine sincerity. “Are the two of you close enough that you discuss business together, yet? I’d imagine so, right?”
“It’s what we’re both all about,” the Hateno resident replied with pride. In this world, running a stable, honest business was something of a virtue. “And I hear those Gorons really are shrewd creatures when it comes to finances and business, so he can’t help being the exact same.”

“That works for me,” Link said gladly, standing a bit straighter. “If you want to help me out, I have something of a business offer to make, and you could either present it to him or perhaps introduce us so that I can have a word with him, myself. I scavenged way more weapons off these raiders than I could ever need, so I’d like to sell to him, if it interests him; 3000 rupees for the lot. He could use them for scrap or he could make improvements and sell them back to the Hateno Villagers. They don’t seem to know their way around any given weapon, but it’s clearly due time for them to figure it out.”

“I agree that we should learn, after everything that’s happened,” Bolson uttered with some degree of concern newly staining his tone. His eyes immediately went some place darker, reflecting the new levels of fear he’d become newly familiar with. He quickly shook off the shadow of worry, however, and continued, “Well, that and his business could only be boosted by an increased demand for weapons. All he makes now are farm tools, cutlery, and all the nails my guys could ever need.”

“Talk to him,” Link spoke with a nod. “One of the Zoras in the guard, Torfeau, mentioned offering some lessons to the villagers. It’d be good for them to be ready, in case the Guardians of Hyrule return. The one leading them did escape, so it’s a possibility at this point.”

“Right,” the taller man agreed, though he was immediately wary over Link’s warnings. He didn’t have the look of a man who would fail to take the Champion seriously ever again. “I’ll run it past him and get back to you.”

“Thanks, Bolson.”

Chapter End Notes

How was it, my friends? It’s amazing how different Link is around certain people, isn't it?

Alrighty, so I have a little note. I think I might have given you all the wrong impression last week when I mentioned some personal stuff? I did say that I'm going through some rough stuff right now and that I might take some time off, which is true! However, I believe I might have wrongly given you all the impression that continuing to work on this story is adding to my stress, which is absolutely not true. No way- working on this story and hearing from all of you makes me so happy. If anything, it gives me a little extra strength to get through the bullcrap I'm dealing with right now. All I really meant to say was that, because of the stress, the length of my chapters are being effected. And also, I may need to take a week or two off from updates, but only because I won't actually have the time to complete them. I won't go into detail about my situation here, but essentially I'm going to be packing up and moving from where I live presently.

As of right now, I will probably have a little time this week to work on the newest chapter, but it won't be done by this weekend. However, I should have a couple of days next week to continue working on the new chapter, and I will release it that weekend. (Next weekend.)

Thanks for all of the kind comments last week, and the reassuring comments. I'm WAY
behind on replies, but I hear and adore each of you. Thank you to everyone who sent me encouragement, and those who've offered praise for my story. Thank you to everyone who commented on my personal journal about my situation; I appreciate all of your kindness. Thank you to Leathertello for the really awesome artwork of Link! The piece you did is really fantastic and everyone else deserves to see it, so check out my art Tumblr, please! Thank you to HeartBrokenGirl for continued awesomeness and SO MUCH moral support. Thank you to all of you who have either been here from the beginning or joined in this journey somewhere along the way, those of you who comment every chapter; you all are the MVPs. You keep this machine running. I appreciate all of you. Thank you all so much. <3

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Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Even those who believe themselves to be alone in the darkest of times will find that careful hands are always available to help put the pieces back together. Brivere was doing his very best to be strong for his younger sibling, but he felt that even his best had failed Estuu. The lost Champion had innumerable problems of his own, yet even so, he spared time for an equally troubled young Hylian who, like him, had dared to love a Zora.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. I'm back from my 'break', and happy to be back. This chapter is not only later than I initially planned but it is also very short. It seems I didn't have as much time as I first estimated, so you have my apologies for that. Nevertheless, please enjoy. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The hour was late when Brivere’s shift came to an end, but he supposed that it wasn’t so burdensome now that trips back and forth to the Basilica were no longer required. He hoped that his younger brother was equally relieved but he had his doubts, of course. Much of his day was spent wondering how Estuu was doing now that he was back home, and over-thinking the negative possibilities as Brivere so often tended to do.

To any other person, the chaotic state of their home might have been a stressful inconvenience that could be abided until repairs were made. However, Brivere knew better than to think his brother could simply tolerate the disordered state of things. The arrangement of their furniture and organization of their belongings hadn’t changed since Estuu was very young. Both brothers placed equal effort into maintaining that pristine, unchanging environment, Estuu out of necessity and habit, Brivere out of melancholic sentimentality.

Even now, the golden Zora still vividly recalled the day his mother rearranged their house for the very last time. He thought it was whimsical and unnecessary, but the way his mother made a cute game of it for her youngest son wasn’t something Brivere could object to. It was difficult enough to wrangle any vibrant expression of joy from Estuu, but even their mother also seemed carefree that day, which was rarer, still.

Back then, Brivere naively assumed that, despite everything, his shamed family would eventually be okay and that things would get better. Shortly after, his mother’s death taught him precisely how foolish it was to cling to something as nonsensical as hope for a better future. So now, he held tightly to anything that may remind him of happiness which laid in the past.

When at last Brivere’s night walk from the Prince’s tower to his own residence was done, he pattered through the curved entryway and immediately sought out the sight of Estuu, hoping he could quell hours of worry. Instead, his anxieties only came to be reaffirmed by what he found.
The scarlet-scaled boy was bundled in the kitchen nook, covered in a blanket surely meant to shroud out his stressful surroundings. At some point, he must have searched through the cluttered mess that was their salvaged belongings, as he’d located his most prized books and stacked them around himself like guard walls for security. Just within Estuu’s reach lay a silver bow, a weapon that was clearly adored by the young Zora, yet likely mocked him as he’d been forever rendered incapable of shooting it again.

“Estuu,” Brivere spoke softly, hoping the calm of his voice could serve to soothe his sibling, rather than further prickling at his already hyper-sensitive state of being. The boy beneath the blanket gave no response, though, so the elder of the two approached with quiet caution. If his brother had entered into shutdown, any interaction at all was more likely to exacerbate his condition.

A little whine eventually came from Estuu when Brivere knelt down next to him, careful not to disrupt the book fort the younger Zora had built around himself. The golden Zora reached to gently coax the blanket back, unveiling Estuu like he was a stalfos shrinking away from the harsh sun of the morning.

Looking on the already injured boy gave Brivere only more reason for concern, and even his most subtle of expressions hardened into something more visibly troubled. Maybe it was because Estuu had yet to recover from the blood loss of his wound, but his scales had an unhealthy pallor and lacked their usual sheen. His forefins had tiny puckers were his flesh had knitted from puncture wounds, and his mouth was stained with the evidence of the self-destructive behavior. Even the bandaged stump of his arm looked as though it had been scraped at until his wound reopened, and the boy hadn’t recovered enough from the episode to heal the injuries he’d inflicted upon himself.

Brivere quietly sighed, filled with regret that he’d been absent during his sibling’s overwhelming emotional overload. It wasn’t the first time, but it wasn’t something he ever brushed aside.

“I’m sorry, Estuu,” the golden Zora breathed, unsure which of his numerous offenses he was actually seeking forgiveness for- being unable to protect his only family, whether from falling debris or from his own inner demons, or being constantly busied with the duties of his Knight position.

Their mother had known so well how to comfort Estuu, and with so little effort. The boy was different and by the definition of some others, ‘difficult’, yet even so, she found ways to soothe him. Brivere only wished it were as easy as patting him, holding him, offering some physical reassurance that he cared, but Estuu couldn’t tolerate such things. He was drastically unlike the clingy child Brivere had been, to be sure.

Instead, the golden Zora did the only thing he really could- he saw to his brother’s immediate needs, which were probably more important than affection, anyway.

“We have this small supply of drinking water,” the Knight explained, almost casual in the way he spoke, hoping that his own seeming ease might effect his sibling in a positive way. After getting to his feet, he reached for the blue jar nestled between this and that on their disorganized countertop, then he dipped out a small cup of water. It was a precious resource, so he took care not to spill any unnecessarily. With the cup in hand, he knelt beside Estuu once more. “Have some. Your scales are still very pale. You look dehydrated,” he coaxed.

Slowly, Estuu dragged himself upright with a little huff, still clutching at the blanket to keep it from sliding away. Yet he could not successfully keep it around himself when he reached for the offered water, though at first he just held onto the cup, feeling it in his hand. Brivere did little more to pressure, knowing his brother would do things at his own pace. The golden Zora went back to the counter to investigate the rations which had been delivered.
Making certain that Estuu was properly nourished was the only way to see to his further recovery, and Brivere was trying very hard to think of that. Yet, while he sifted through the rationed food, his sharp, yellow eyes carefully watched the boy and the way he sipped slowly while wistfully staring at the silver bow which lay nearby.

It was difficult to keep only the younger Zora’s recovery in mind, with the question of what he must have been thinking. Estuu had always been a mystery; a silent presence with thoughts and feelings, none of which could be expressed. There had always been some degree of wondering involved for Brivere to discern what was on his brother’s mind, but at the moment he was all too aware that it couldn’t have been anything good.

Brivere could only think of Kree and of the insight he gleaned from his time with her. He hated knowing that his sibling must have been in an equally dark place, on top of the isolation that came with his inability to speak.

“Estuu,” Brivere began anew, his tone soft and compassionate. He waited until his brother’s gaze lifted just a bit higher, so that he knew he had the boy’s attention, then he continued. “You know that I don’t like to presume things nor speak for you, but at this very moment, I want more than anything to reassure you. I can’t help but think that you must be feeling that you’re somehow less than you were before and I want you to know.. That simply isn’t true. You’ve lived all of your life with things that could be perceived as limitations, yet still it’s been a life worthy of living and you’ve proven that you can be excellent, even so. And on days when you can’t manage as well as some others, well, what you can manage is still enough, or at least I believe so.. I just want to make certain that you believe it as well.”

Estuu only let out a little sigh, hardly moved at all by his elder’s efforts with how deep he was in the pit of his lost self-worth. The cup was slowly spun in his one, tiny hand and his golden eyes wandered downward to be focused on it. He had always struggled with this notion that lives did have inherent worth, and that some weren’t truly worth anything at all. He had tried to defy the apparent lack of value of his own existence, as defined by the world around him. He’d allowed the ‘Cursed Girl’ series to fill him with hope that maybe, just maybe, he was worth more than what others assumed..

But what good had it done? No matter how hard he tried, nothing ever changed, and just when he began to believe that, actually, maybe my life really is worthwhile, something else was taken away from him, leaving him less than he was before.

Estuu sometimes envied how much easier it was for his brother to prove himself. He envied his brother for being strong and capable.

In the lingering silence, Brivere continued to look upon his rationed food with hopelessness, though he didn’t let it show. He’d never had any success in convincing his brother to eat any of the foods which had been provided, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try again. “Would you like for me to prepare something for you to eat, Estuu?”

Weakly, Estuu gave his head a shake when Brivere looked on him for an answer.

“I know that you don’t like any of these foods, but you are aware that our people are facing a food shortage right now, yes? I’m afraid that this is all there is,” the golden Zora made a further attempt at encouragement. For so long he’d merely allowed Estuu to eat whatever he desired, within reason, but now there was hardly room for pickiness. “You could just try it, maybe? It can’t hurt to try.”

The scarlet boy turned his head aside in refusal, his tail beginning to flick at even the consideration of having to consume those foods. He didn’t want to be overwhelmed all over again, so he simply
couldn’t do as Brivere was asking. The elder brother let out a quiet sigh of uncertainty, but didn’t push the issue any further.

Bolson hadn’t at all taken his time in presenting Link’s offer to the smith, and before nightfall the man sent for the Champion in order to discuss his deal. There was a short verbal exchange and a little bargaining, then an agreement; both Link and the smith were very firm about the entire business. Link could certainly see why Bolson liked the man.

Now, night had fallen and Link found himself headed back home with a much heavier rupee pouch than before. He and Nora’s older brother had carried the excess of pillaged weapons to the smith’s forge, while Bolson’s men began setting up the scaffolding needed to make repairs to Link’s cottage. In all, it was a rather successful day, despite the bizarre drifting of the Hylian Champion’s mind during the morning. He was doing his best to block all thoughts of that episode. It was the result of exhaustion and nothing more.

Link crossed the wooden bridge to his home, the structure creaking softly in the quiet of night. There were no more crickets and frogs to sing into the darkness, as it had turned too cold without the sun. However, there was still movement outside of the Hylian’s home, even though the chill had chased everyone else indoors and lulled the cold-blooded Zoras to easy slumber.

The rosy horse which belonged to Finley had been taken from the stable, and was standing in the shadow cast by the house, itself. It was apparent enough to see that its back was loaded with a fair supply of luggage, while a young man darted about to make sure everything was secure.

The horse noticed Link first, and in fact appeared to remember him from the one time he’d ridden it. Its ears perked and turned toward him, then the horse’s head shifted, too, in his direction when he approached. It puffed softly, shaking its head and jingling the bridle, while the other Hylian was still too busy tightening straps to take any notice of Link.

“Where are you headed in such a hurry?” Link asked, the sound of his voice visibly startling the other young man. In a moment of panic, the taller Hylian spun around, his freckled face turning as pale as the moonlight.

“I, um..” Sasan mumbled, his gaze flickering anxiously across Link’s features until his eyes shone with recognition. Within a few quick moments of consideration, his expression shifted into something less fearful but much more downtrodden. “Link.. I can talk to you, right? After all, you’re the one who reassured Finley that I was a decent guy and encouraged me to make the trek to Zora’s Domain, even though I didn’t believe I could weather the dangers. You never steered me wrong, and you always gave me honest advice. We can talk frankly with one another, right?”

“It sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself of that..” the Champion uttered with a quiet scoff, “..but sure, we can talk frankly. What’s going on?”

“I can’t stay here any longer,” the young man groaned, his voice low and tight in his throat, his eyes downcast while he spoke. “I just can’t.”

“Because of the attack yesterday?” A single brow quirked in confusion. Link hadn’t known Sasan to be exactly valiant, but he had faced plenty of things which frightened him, regardless of how fearful he’d been. “It isn’t much safer anywhere else, Sasan. You’ve traveled Hyrule; you know what it’s like out there.”

“It’s not that,” Sasan shook his head, flicking one hand. “It’s the people of this village. It’s the way
they stare and talk. I’ve been having this problem for a while now and I can’t deal with the stress, the judgement over my relationship with Finley.”

Almost immediately, Link’s ears pressed flat, so that he looked like a cornered grassland fox in his insult. “You mean they don’t approve of a Hylian and a Zora being together?”

“No, no,” the nervous man shook his head again, glancing toward one of the foggy, candlelit windows to make certain nobody was within eavesdropping range. “It’s her size, her appearance. I mean, she’s older than me. She’s a woman in every other way, but because of how Zoras age, she still looks like a child. In Zora’s Domain, people seemed to understand that.”

“Hmm,” Link nodded thoughtfully, his gaze refocusing elsewhere as he considered the situation. He, too, had assumed Finley to be a child when first they’d met, but his awareness that Zoras aged slower, as well as the sharp, adult way Finley spoke and behaved quickly clued him in. “She is much more mature than her size lets on. Though, I also know other Zoras who’ve outgrown her, yet they’re clearly younger.”

“Right, she’s a late bloomer,” Sasan said with a sigh, uttering these words like he’d heard them a dozen times. “That’s what she keeps telling me, anyway. Any time I bring it up, she just brushes it off and says, ‘Are you really in such a big hurry to have a girlfriend twice your size?’”

The taller Hylian booted a tiny pebble with the very tip of his shoe in frustration, so that it rolled to the edge of the property and down to the water below. He reached over his own shoulders, lacing his fingers behind his neck while he let out a soft whine.

“Everyone here in Hateno Village just sees what appears to be a little girl with a grown man, and they think I’m some kind of pervert!” he hissed, trying his best to keep his voice low. “They think I must be manipulating her, or abusing her in some way, when realistically she has way more backbone and nerve than I do. I’m the one always going along with whatever she says, not the other way around. I wish I could just tell them that when Finley and I started exchanging letters, and I saw the beautiful, mature way she wrote, I assumed she was this tall, elegant, graceful woman. I didn’t know she was the size of a child. I fell in love with her mind, not her appearance. Then, when we met and I saw what she really was, I was taken aback, sure, but I figured, love is blind, right? Plus, it wasn’t like she’d made an effort to deceive me, whereas I had her believing that I was some kind of muscle-bound hunk. She accepted me with only mild teasing, so it only seemed right for me to do the same. But now? I don’t know..”

While Sasan unloaded his formerly bottled troubles, Link quietly listened, nodding now and again. He was equally guilty of thinking that Sasan and Finley were a pretty damn odd couple, but that was before he’d fallen in love with Prince Sidon. He honestly felt that now he owed Sasan more consideration, if only for how inwardly judgmental he’d been. When the other Hylian quieted again, Link posed the most obvious of questions.

“Did you discuss this with Finley?”

A look of guilt furrowed the other Hylian’s features, his previously rambling tongue now falling still in hesitation.

“..no,” Sasan quietly muttered after a pause.

“So you’re just going to run away from her, without a word, because you’re scared?” Link asked, not sounding nearly as accusing as he could have, yet even so, Sasan shrank at the words, his ears tilting lower. Link had his own guilt to contend with, because he was little different and certainly no better. He’d run away without a word when his Prince asked only for space.
“How can I talk to her, Link? She doesn’t listen like you do,” Sasan implored, his own hurt feelings audible in his voice. “She would talk over me, or talk me down, or make me feel like my own concerns are just.. silly.” He let out a doleful sigh, his head drooping further, concealed within his palms. “I wish it was like it used to be, when we were exchanging letters. I had time to think about what I wanted to say, and I could compose my reply and deliver it. That was the only way she ever really listened to me. She even fell in love with me over those letters.”

“How has she not noticed that you’re leaving?” the Champion asked quietly, looking toward the window now, himself. “Where is she now?”

“She’s busy tending to Nora. She hasn’t left her side since she was injured, and I just don’t feel like I can interrupt.” Sasan dropped his arms at his sides. He was a young man of greater stature than Link, but he only shrank more and more with each little confession. He looked and felt small, unimportant, unneeded. “My problems compared to Nora’s injuries would just seem stupid and selfish.”

“I think you’ve had your own voice ignored for so long, you’ve started to tell yourself that it isn’t worthwhile to speak up, or that you can’t do it, or that you shouldn’t.” Link spoke these words from somewhere deep and dark within himself. “But, your feelings and concerns should matter to someone who cares about you, regardless of how stupid they are.”

“Sasan- take your stuff off the horse,” the Champion uttered in finality, though his voice was hollow and tired as he did. “Look, if you want to go without saying goodbye, I won’t stop you. I think it would be a huge mistake because Finley is somebody you care about and if you do this, you’ll be hurting her in a way you can never mend nor make up for. But, not only does she seem to love that horse, it also belongs to her, so I’m not gonna let you take it.”

“She’d probably miss the horse more than me,” he sighed, dejectedly turning back to the rosy equine, his hands slowly, hesitantly moving to the buckles and straps, unfastening his luggage from its back as Link had instructed.

“Maybe you should try writing your feelings out to her in a letter, if that works better for you and ask her to respond with one of her own. If that helps the two of you to communicate better, then do it.” Link suggested. He honestly wished he’d thought of this solution for his own use, but surely Sidon would still talk circles around him, even in written form. “I’m sure that the two of you will travel back to Zora’s Domain eventually. Just ignore these Hateno people. Trust me, they’re judgmental of everything.”

“Yeah, okay,” the other Hylian weakly agreed, heaving one pack of luggage from the horse to the ground. Link would have walked away, if not for how sure he felt that Sasan didn’t sound convinced, and could still run as soon as the Champion turned his back. But then, the other Hylian turned to face Link once again, his demeanor sheepish yet perhaps a bit hopeful.

“Link? Can I ask a favor of you?”

“I suppose,” he uttered hesitantly. People were always asking favors of him and he didn’t have the slightest clue why that was. Did he look particularly trustworthy? Kind? Compassionate? He couldn’t have.

“Would you mind teaching me a bit more about potion making?” Sasan asked, twiddling his fingers shyly, like he was ashamed just to have asked; somehow, that made Link feel a bit better about agreeing, because at least Sasan wasn’t the kind of person who believed Link’s time was unquestionably owed to him.

Sasan went on to explain further, saying, “I didn’t know what I was doing yesterday while I was
caring for that injured Sheikah, but it made me feel like I was doing my part. It made me feel.. A little less useless. And maybe if I possess a useful skill, the villagers will reconsider their initial judgements.”

“That’s.. actually a really good idea, I guess,” the Champion replied with a shrug, softly gesturing for the other to continue what he was doing. “Yeah, get the horse back into the stable and come inside. I’ll go over some ingredients and recipes with you.”

“Really?” the taller man blinked in momentary disbelief. Maybe Link didn’t look so easy to sway, after all. A little smile of relief brightened the freckled Hylian’s features and he gave a grateful nod. “Thank you, Link. Not just for the potion thing, but for listening to me, and you know, giving me honest advice without being too critical. I appreciate it. You’re a good friend.”

“Sure,” Link answered, his voice quiet in his own sudden sense of uncertainty.


Chapter End Notes

Just a couple of short dialogue and character development scenes, I know, but I do hope you all liked it.

If you all are concerned about my situation, I’m happy to say that there have been some improvements, and it is no longer as dire as it had been. All I can say is that, once you’ve lived for so long in survival mode, it does become pretty natural. If you’d like further updates on what is actually going on, I plan to post a little personal note on my tumblr.

If you enjoy my work, please follow and support me. I appreciate all the love the lot of you give. <3
I’m BanishedOne on Tumblr. My art/fiction Tumblr is Banishfics.
I’m BanishedOne on Kofi and Patreon, links in my profile.
Thank you all!
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

At the Fort, Dunma was finally being given reason to believe that her previous trust had been utterly misguided. Meanwhile, Brivere was being reminded all too harshly that his own lack of trust in others, while justified, could only serve to wrack up further penalty.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. This chapter is a bit on the short side because of how the last chapter ran into this week's work time. It's a side character chapter, but I still feel like it's kind of exciting. Action is rising, tempers are flaring. And Link will return in the upcoming chapter- I promise it's gonna be good!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Aunt Gaddison!” came the sweet voice of Dunma, calling out over the hustle and bustle of the fort mess area but a few hours after peak evening mealtime. Numerous off-duty guardsmen lingered, nursing their drinks and interacting almost casually with those who had been sent to bolster food production.

Gaddison lurked at a table very near the cook fires, her pale scales reflecting the yellow light. Unlike most others, she’d been sitting alone right up until the moment that Dunma approached. The younger Zora could see with ease that her Uppercity senior was having a difficult time fitting in with so many others who were utterly unlike her.

Either that, or she was being stubborn about it. That seemed much more likely.

“Hey little plum,” the older of the two women turned her head at the sound of Dunma’s voice, a smile pulling at her lips and belying the contemplative slyness of her gaze. She feigned surprise and uttered a playful tease. “You actually work this fort? I’m surprised to see you around.”

“Aunt Gaddison..” Dunma grumbled like a kid, her pale cheeks flushing in dull violet, “I’m technically your rank superior here, you can’t just call me ‘little plum’ like I’m a child. And while I realize that you’re making a joke, you should know that I work this damn fort like it’s my own family business.”

Dunma placed one hand on her hip and held her head high, her posture a mix of strength and sass, and just a bit of lighthearted silliness, leaving Gaddison to gape in wide-eyed surprise. The lavender Zora leaned away, like the younger woman was hotter than the nearby flame, rendering it painful to be so close. When the younger girl took a seat across the table, the two of them laughed in unison.

“You’ll always be little plum in my mind,” Gaddison purred, her laughter quieting, her head shaking. She slid the bubbling, glass pitcher across the table for the younger woman to reach, though she narrowed her eyes before taking her hand away. “That reminds me- are you even old enough to drink this?”
“You’re insufferable,” Dunma giggled, her sharp fangs brightly shining as she did. She’d been old enough to consume alcohol for years now, and the other woman knew that. “What is it, though?”

The pastel Zora hovered in silence for a lingering instant, a clever grin upon her face while her eyes shined like citrine gems.

“You’re kidding,” she said at last.

“You’re kidding!” Dunma hissed in excitement, her tail flapping softly against her back. She recalled with ease her very first drink of anything alcoholic being Apple Bright, on the anniversary of her hatch date, when at last she was of legal age to consume it. Most other Zora youths managed to sneak such beverages before they were of the proper age, but Dunma, being such an honest, rule-following girl, saved it until later without regret.

Apple Bright was a crisp, smooth, expensive drink made for members of the upperclass, and while Dunma’s father might’ve once been considered a true noble, he’d shed much of that thanks to apparently shameful choices. As a result, a single bottle of the indulgent drink made quite a wound in his city guard stipend, but he bore the expense gladly, because it was a gift for his dear daughter.

He also joked about wanting to make certain that his child’s first taste of booze was the absolute finest product possible, if only to ruin all others for her, thereby keeping her from ending up like Uncle Bazz.

“It hasn’t been available in Zora’s Domain since before our trouble with the Divine Beast began,” Dunma lamented after a melancholy pause, finally pouring herself a glass.

“I’ve certainly missed it,” Gaddison commented. Few beverages possessed the same, warm, soothing effects. “There’s supply enough here to brew it, so I’m not complaining. Though I’m willing to bet we weren’t supposed to indulge. That absolute shark who manages Zambezi’s Cantina probably saw to the production and the entire supply will likely be shipped to him soon enough. The place must have been losing profits like mad, with the lynel moving into the apple grove and now this Water Blight and food shortage.”

The older woman conversed, her words dragging on, sweet and slow while she watched and waited for the other Zora to get a few good sips in. Once she had, Gaddison spoke up again to swiftly change the subject, her voice casual and as smooth as the drink, itself. “And you know, I was starting to think you were MIA. You never seem to be off duty at the same time as me, so I never see you around.” She smiled, taking another drink from her own glass, then added, “..You’d almost think mysterious forces were conspiring to keep us apart.”

Dunma just scoffed, leaning into the table and peering across it with a very serious expression. “The forces of me being the only one who takes work seriously and always being needed for something. I am a Corporal now, so it’s a lot of responsibility.”

“I got that,” the older Zora replied with an amused chuckle. She was glad to see Dunma so proud of herself, at least. The girl always was such a perfectionist and used to find it much more difficult to be happy with herself. Gaddison’s gaze drifted with her thoughts, thoughts which had wandered to memories of Rivan. She hadn’t been there when he died, nor when they held the funeral for him and the others who fell that night. She’d only recently visited his pyre circle, and her heart was heavy. “Congratulations, by the way. I’m sure your dad would be proud of you.”

The violet Zora hummed softly in hesitant reply, her eyes darkening, her mood immediately shifting at the mention of her father. “Yeah maybe,” she agreed weakly, though a bittersweet smile came to brighten her features softly, slightly. “..or he would double down on the jokes about me being Bazz’s
daughter.”

“I suppose it’s not too late. Bazz is still crying over wanting kids. We could just adopt you and that would settle everything, wouldn’t it?” Gaddison gave a little titter, and took another sip of her drink when the joke didn’t appear to lift Dunma’s spirits at all. It wasn’t her intention to further remind the young woman of the fact that she was parentless so early in life, so Gaddison quickly filled in with an explanation meant to soften her previous statement. “Rivan never joked that I could’ve been your mother and I’m still a little burned over that. You’re not nearly as dreary as Bazz, so your personality is more like mine than his, plus shades of purple run in my family.”

“He might have made that joke, if not for the fact that you’ve never been the ‘motherly’ type,” Dunma commented, playful yet oddly muted in how she expressed herself, a somber veil over her which she couldn’t cast aside. “I thought ‘Cool Aunt’ suited you?”

“Maybe,” Gaddison shrugged. “So how are you doing, Corporal Dunma?”

“...I don’t really know,” the younger woman said softly, one hand waving in a dismissive gesture, the other tightly bundling in growing discomfort. She didn’t have the heart to say it, but this was one of the reasons she hadn’t wanted to go home. “It’d be a lie to say that I’m fine, but I’m doing my best. Honestly, it helps not to talk about it. I’d rather get on with things than brood.”

“Well, see? Another reason you couldn’t possibly be related to Bazz,” the lavender Zora joked, her voice softened. “And if you don’t want to talk, then I won’t make you. But Big Bad Bazz was worried about you and sent me in to make sure you were getting along fine. It can’t be easy living and working in the place where your father died.”

“It is, in a way,” Dunma replied, her eyes focusing on the bubbles collecting over the inner surface of her glass, then she pulled it into her grasp, displacing them and sending them all floating to the top. She took a deep breath, feeling as though it had become knotted in her chest, keeping her from saying the words on her mind. “He gave his life in taking this place, so I’m... trying to make sure it was at least worthwhile, and that this fort was worth that kind of... investment.”

Sometimes Dunma even thought of the fort like her father. It was the same, in a way, and that helped her to feel a little less alone. Sure, maybe her father’s soul had entered into rebirth and he’d already begun life anew, but... There wasn’t any comfort in that, not while she was still missing him. Even if he was alive once more, he’d never, ever be Rivan again. He’d never be her father again, no, everything he once was had been erased, like he’d never even existed at all.

This fort was the same. What had it been before the Calamity struck? A trading post? Barracks? A supply store for the nearby garrison? Whatever the answer, it wasn’t that any longer. It had been reborn; its old purpose, function and occupants were long gone, erased. Now it was Fort Boko. Maybe one day it would be the Elegy Spire. Or something entirely otherwise. Dunma surely didn’t know, but she did know that by having a hand in rebuilding this place, somehow, she did feel a little closer to her father. Or at least the memory of him.

“He didn’t do it for this fort, Dunma,” Gaddison asserted after a quiet moment, trying to be as gentle as possible, though it had never been characteristic of her and didn’t come with ease. “...He did it for y-”

“No!” the young woman hissed, smacking one hand against the top of the table to prevent the other from finishing that sentence. The commotion caused a minor stir, so that voices quieted and the heads of those nearby turned in the direction of the two Uppercity women.

Still, despite her outburst, in Dunma’s mind she’d as good as heard the intended words, in knowing
what was about to be said. She wished she hadn’t. She wished the Goddess had time enough for a
lowly Zora, that she could descend from whatever far off heaven where she lurked and kindly
remove the memory that stung in Dunma’s mind, growing only more painfully clear with time; the
sight of the bokoblin aiming from the tower above, its features a dancing, watery blur of blood red
and crackling, yellow light. Then, just as it set its arrow free, Dunma could recall one final instant,
the last sight of her father alive, the deep brown of his scales, like a tranquil river bed suddenly
white-water fast when he burst from the moat to block the shot.

Before saying anything more, Dunma raised her glass and gulped down the drink, in desperate need
of whatever numbing calm it had to offer.

“Please, just,” Dunma muttered, taking a trembling breath. Her eyes were shining with tears she
couldn’t bear to shed, because she was so goddamn sick of always being the sad woman, crying in
front of everyone. “Don’t say that, please. It’s... It’s easier if I don’t have to think about the fact that..
I was responsible.”

“Dunma.. I know you don’t really want to hear this, but,” Gaddison began, yet as she did, Dunma’s
watery gaze slowly raised to meet hers, everything in her eyes pleading with the older Zora not to go
on. “Maybe what’s easier isn’t really what’s best? Ever since you came into this world, Rivan gave
up whatever he had to, in order to make sure that you were taken care of and happy. The way he
died was no different than how he lived... So if you really want to invest in something worthy of his
sacrifice, be sure it’s yourself.”

By the time Gaddison finished speaking, Dunma’s tears had fallen, but she swiped them away from
her cheeks with a quick gesture. She could see that she couldn’t count on her close family friend for
the mercy she sought, so she found another way to mask her sadness- by replacing it with anger. Her
golden eyes still shined, but now with frustration and growing resentment, instead.

“..Gaddison, why did you really come here?” Dunma hissed, her tongue sharper than her fangs. “We
both know Bazz wouldn’t have sent you, willingly.”

“I may have some reasons of my own,” the older woman calmly intoned, lifting her glass to her lips
for another drink, her eyes fixed on the Zora across from her. “Why do you ask, Dunma? Have I
given you some reason to be suspicious?”

“I just want to know,” said the violet Zora, her tone hardening further when she did not get the
answer she desired.

“That tone sounded awfully suspicious,” Gaddison replied, now equally dubious and just short of
accusation. “Are you sure?”

“Well, I’m definitely getting there, because you’re obviously hiding something,” Dunma snapped.

“Am I hiding something?” the lavender Zora repeated with a little laugh, “..or are you hiding
something?”

“..Of course not!” the younger woman blurted defensively, her breath caught in her throat at how
sharply Gaddison had thrown that back at her. “I just asked a question. You’re the one who won’t
answer.”

“Hmm..” Gaddison hummed quietly, pensively, her honey-colored eyes studying the young woman
before herself, the frustration, the anger written on her fiery countenance. She had the same snarl to
her features as Rivan, whenever he was at last driven to anger. It had always been a difficult thing to
accomplish, in all regards but those which had ensnared his most deeply hidden passions. At last, the
older Zora dropped her feverish pursuit of guilty admissions, having to remind herself to be more familial and less of a guardsman attempting to solve a heinous crime.

With a melancholy, little sigh, Gaddison gave her head a shake, and softly stated, “All jokes aside, you’re definitely your father’s child.”

Dunma was left clueless and confused; of course she was, because she didn’t know what Gaddison was talking about. The older woman upturned her glass, finally finishing off the crisp beverage with an, ‘ahh,’ of satisfaction, then she slid it aside.

“Let me tell you something..” Gaddison began anew, her deep, rich voice gentler than before. “When Rivan met the woman who laid your egg, who I dare not refer to as your ‘mother’, Bazz warned your father not to get involved with her. But despite the warnings, Rivan did it anyway. He tried to play like he wasn’t seeing her for months. He was always so good at that aloof, guiltless act. He’d deny it any time we brought it up. Then, low and behold, a bit later that woman suddenly had fertilized eggs and they were his. Bazz was furious, but Rivan kept ignoring him; he was in love, so what did Bazz know, right? Rivan offered to get soul-bound to that woman, but she wanted nothing to do with that and she didn’t want to keep you, either. So Rivan decided to raise you by himself, even though having a child outside of marriage is utterly taboo and everyone said you would be cursed. The Guard Captain of the time threw Rivan out of the guard for his shameful, deviant behavior and it wasn’t until Bazz replaced him that Rivan was allowed back in.”

“Is there a point to this?” Dunma muttered bitterly, her gaze downcast, plastered to the table before her where her hands laid tightly bundled. She knew precisely what the point of this was and it left her both disquieted and guilty. Guilty, because she knew now that she owed Betaal an apology for her previous doubts.

“Don’t be disingenuous little plum,” the lavender Zora breathed with a soft smile that showed only the very tips of her sharp fangs. “Maybe you’re not ready to confess to your little secret, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t already know. Bazz and I stood aside while Rivan made the same kinds of mistakes, so we know better than to stand aside, now.”

Unwilling to listen further, Dunma stood from where she’d been seated. She despised the feeling that she was playing the part of a child, running away from a lecturing elder, but she simply couldn’t endure any more.

“It’s no wonder I’m so much like you,” the younger Zora bitterly commented, wanting to get one final word in before she retreated. “It sounds like you were my mother, all along.”

“I would like to exchange the rations I received,” Brivere uttered, maintaining a steely kind of confidence that only he could have managed in the wake of such raging uncertainty. He was grateful, at least, that the lengthy lines filing into the barracks had waned in the evening hours, so that this endeavor would only be a waste of a couple insignificant hours, should it result in failure.

Both guardsmen assigned to handling distribution of rations to the Uppercity merchant class peered back at Brivere in confusion when he presented his basket of untouched food, sliding it gingerly across the table and toward them. “Surely it can’t hurt to swap these items for something else, preferably fish that hasn’t been smoked or salted,” he reasoned. “..You see, my younger brother has a difficult time eating food so strongly flavored as this and he’s very weak.”

“Your brother?” one of the armored Zoras commented, an unconcerned sound to his voice that already had Brivere clenching his jaw in preparation of what would come next. “You mean that
soulless little healer that shot Guardsman Betaal in the face?”

“Watch it-” the other growled before the golden Zora had a chance to utter anything in reply. “The Captain is already cross enough. He even forbade everyone working the Basilica from calling the Undercities ‘bottom feeders’.”


“Well, save it for off-duty,” the slightly smaller Zora replied, shrugging. “I don’t want another reprimand.”

Heaving a deep, heavy sigh, the large, blue-scaled guardsman turned back to the waiting Knight, yellow eyes regarding Brivere like he was a mere inconvenience to be brushed aside. He softened his tone regardless, though his voice rang somehow that much more patronizing as a result. “The kid may be upperclass by default, and you may be in the Royal Order, but your family has no real power nor sway, so I’m afraid there’s no grounds for your expectation of special privileges, Ser.”

“Take it from me, Ser Knight,” the shorter of the two guardsman spoke up when his partner finished, a toothy smile on his face like it softened the apparent dismissal. “You’ve never actually had kids of your own, but I’m a father. Trust me, hunger is the best spice. Let the picky kid go without for a bit and he’ll change his mind.”

“I’m afraid that simply won’t do,” the deep, velvet rumble of Brivere’s voice persisted despite the rejection. He took a slow breath, maintaining the cool, calm demeanor that had always been his armor in these difficult situations. The people queued behind him had begun to tap their toeclaws in impatience, muttering words of mounting frustration while the Knight held up the line. “It isn’t quite a matter of simple pickiness. As I stated before, he has sensitivities that render certain foods intolerable and inedible. Please, I only want to exchange this food for something else. It isn’t like I’m asking for more.”

“Unfortunately, the answer is no,” the shorter guardsman calmly stated, a fake smile still spread awkwardly across his face, so that his lips stretched thin and his gaze was dull. He gave Brivere a little flick of his hand in the hopes of finally ushering the stubborn Knight off, only for him to continue his resistance.

The larger of the two dipped his armor-crested head down into the waiting shelter of one palm, his own patience wearing thin. When he raised his head again, he looked as though he’d been hoping not to find Brivere still standing before him. When he did, his yellow eyes leered from beneath the cold steel, and he newly addressed the Knight in a hardened tone. “Have you even seen the Basilica? There’s hundreds of Undercities just waiting around for food. They’ve been waiting for days now. There’s nothing else for you.”

“Respectfully, there can’t possibly be nothing,” Brivere commented, brushing one of his long forefins over his shoulder. His hope was diminishing, while a dreadful feeling of imminent failure was ringing over him in turn, leaving him suddenly too physically aware of himself. He cleared his throat, continuing, “.Members of the Aristocracy have been receiving regular rations, so there is certainly still a regulated supply. It has merely been set aside to ensure the ‘important’ classes have enough to last until emergency supplies arrive. Furthermore, there’s no loss in doing this small favor. If I can’t have these items exchanged, Estuu will simply refuse to eat, altogether. He was severely injured during the quake, and lost a lot of blood; he needs to eat in order to recoup.”

“I don’t have time to restate our answer, and I don’t know what delusions you’re suffering from that convinced you that it wasn’t final,” the larger Zora grumbled, frustrated but controlled. He reached across the blue, stone surface that stood between himself and the nuisance Knight, taking hold of the
basket of rations and setting them aside. “If you don’t want the food, somebody else will.”

“What?” Brivere muttered, his sharp, yellow eyes going between the two unapologetic faces in disbelief, refusing to accept that they could truly choose to be so unreasonable and heartless. “You can’t simply take my rations altogether. I’m Knight Captain of the Royal Order, Knight to Prince Sidon. Do you really wish to jeopardize the security of the Royal Family over senseless stubbornness?”

“You’re the one who didn’t want the food, Ser,” said the smaller of the two guardsmen. “You’re the one responsible for jeopardizing security, not us.”

“Not only that,” the other armored Zora began, everything in his demeanor brimming with authority which was bound to overflow into anger with every second Brivere spent questioning it further, “you’re actively attempting to cheat the system and causing a disruption. It’s almost certainly outside of the conduct restrictions expected of those representing the crown. You had best walk away now, or else the First Knight of your Order might receive some very damning reports regarding you.”

“Move along,” the shorter guardsman finally said aloud, rather than with a brusque gesture.

“I’m afraid that..” the golden Zora began, his body stiff, his voice smooth despite the tremor of desperation he was feeling down to his bones. Monsters couldn’t invoke the panic welling up somewhere deep and dark, and he’d long been immune to the sting of insults, yet here he was, succumbing to budding fury that burned beneath his scales, threatening and unfamiliar. “..without my proper rations, I cannot.”

The backed up crowd had gone silent in apprehension, scarcely breathing in the quiet moment where Brivere remained, resolute and unmoving while the two armored guardsmen had yet to react. They waited, thinking their stares were enough to break him down. When they did not, both reached for their spears, prepared to remove the troublemaker by force.

The Knight, for what felt like the very first time in his life, listened for the whisper in his mind, analyzing his situation, measuring possibilities, only to be greeted with silence. In that silence, instinct flared up to guide him and he hardly noticed that he’d already taken a fighting posture, his stance widening, his hands rising in defense.

“What is the situ-” another voice abruptly set the unraveling scene on pause, capturing the attention of all present. The tone of it was that of a tired man, utterly inconvenienced that he was being forced to investigate why the ration line was so backed up, when it was meant to be capped and closed off for the night.

Guard Captain Bazz’s voice trailed off when he laid eyes upon his guardsmen with weapons at the ready, and a particular prickled, golden Zora.

“Well then, Knight Captain,” the sleek, black Zora hummed with familiarity, but little fondness to be found. “What ever can we do for you?”

The Knight’s apprehensive gaze went to Bazz in turn when he was greeted, and his hands dropped warily to his sides, though his widened pupils did not yet contract.

“I would like to exchange my rations for something else, please.” Brivere spoke very slowly, very clearly, placing any shred of patience that remained within him into reflecting sincerity, imploring sympathy. “My younger brother has difficulties with certain types of food and won’t eat anything that we received. Please- this is all I’m asking.”
The much darker-scaled Zora gave a curt nod to Brivere’s request, his own yellow eyes drifting in what seemed to be a look of thoughtful consideration. Bazz’s feet pattered against the stone floors and his armor clinked as he approached the other Zora, then when a small gap of space remained between them, he set his hardest gaze upon Brivere.

Bazz’s voice was low, a softened growl that rolled smoothly off his tongue, just barely wrinkling the skin beneath the point of his brow. “When I came to you and the young healer for aid, I said to you, ‘You have the means to help, so why would you simply choose not to?’ And do you remember what you said to me? Because I do. You said that your brother would ‘have his choice of desperate offers and plenty of room to be picky.’ It looks like you were wrong about that; too bad you didn’t have your so-called father’s ability to see the future.”

Already, Brivere could feel his gut twisting, his fingers resisting the urge to ball into tight fists, his face reflecting little of his innermost turmoil save for perhaps a faint reflection of the warring state of emotion, bitterness and sudden, broken humility waging a blood feud inside his mind. He shook his head, wordlessly pleading with Bazz not to do what he knew all too well he would.

The black Zora, on the other hand, tipped his own head back ever so slightly, a fire of challenge in his eyes, an unspoken prayer to the Goddess, ‘I beg you, let this man throw one, single fist at me, please.’ His mouth held a shape not unlike a smile, and though it was slight, it very clearly expressed his amusement, his absolute pleasure in being given this opportunity to enact just retribution.

“I came to you when my friend’s life was hanging in the balance, and the two of you just decided to do nothing. If the healer had come to aid my friend when I requested his assistance, my friend might be alive now.” Bazz uttered every word with the gravest of loathing. “So now it’s my turn to openly choose to do nothing.”

Confidently, Bazz leaned himself in a fraction nearer to Brivere, so the points of their brows nearly touched, then he breathed the words, “Move along.”

Chapter End Notes

How was is, friends? I’m honestly saying that at the end of every chapter for the sake of tradition, now. :) I do, however, still adore hearing from each of you, and even though the chapter was short, I truly hope you all enjoyed it.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

With tensions rising and tempers flaring, numerous rivals at last came forth unveil their warring intentions toward their foes.

Gaddison was the Heroine could could not stand for the sickening thing happening right under her so-called superior's nose, and so she made a point to promise the divine justice of her wrath onto Betaal; divine justice, or else utter destruction.

The Prince's Knight had been pushed into a corner where he was helpless in all aspects, but by Hylia, he would no longer be helpless to protect the man he loved. So when he laid eyes upon the troublesome Hylian who had done so much to harm Sidon, Brivere could no longer shelve his inner rage.

And as food ran short, little instances of prejudice which the Undercity people had merely tolerated for years finally peaked into an outright war upon them. They had no choice now but to fight back, at last. Or at least survive as best they could.

Chapter Notes

I know that you all don't really hold it against me, but I'm still very sorry about how late this chapter is. I PROMISE though that it's gonna be worth the wait. I won't talk too much, because I want to let you all dig right in. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It certainly wasn’t the best idea for Gaddison to rush into things, half-cocked and utterly frustrated as she was, however, she brushed that consideration aside, choosing, instead, to think of it as pure passion. That had always been her way, to fight each battle with every ounce of her spirit, her heart the immutable, unyielding servant of justice.

She could not overlook this wrong, and she could not let it stand.

With enough force to announce the arrival of a true foe, Gaddison burst past the flap of the fort Sergeant’s tent and into her dwelling, her typically warm gaze now burning like hot coals, seeking out the Undercity woman and boring into her.

Betaal had been settled in one corner, her own attention having drifted so distant as to leave her unsuspecting in the safety of her canvas quarters. At the abrupt intrusion, she leapt to her feet, her bright red fins flaring in alert, her own single eye turning immediately to her new ‘guest’ with fearful understanding.

That knowing, guilty look, so perfectly readable on the blue Zora’s face, gave Gaddison reason to allow the corners of her lips to upturn. Breaking this woman down was sure to be as easy as wringing truth from a lying child, and as such, punishment could swiftly follow.
“Since we’re off duty, I’m going to go ahead and speak freely,” the Heroine announced, the tip of her tongue tracing the sharp edge of one fang while she sized up the other. “I don’t really like playing games, so let me present my concerns. You’re engaged in an inappropriate relationship with one of the guardsmen serving beneath you; Corporal Dunma.”

“Guardsman? That’s..” the shorter woman stumbled over a reply in her perplexed surprise. If the color green described envy, this Undercity Zora could have very easily defined guilt to be written in a shade of blue. And how terrible for her that the errant archer had left her with one good eye, because it betrayed her attempts to think up a lie, reflecting the imminent death of her career, which Gaddison could see as well as Betaal, herself.

Yet within those fretting moments, Betaal curtailed the unsuspecting vulnerability which her foe had ensnared her in, reminding herself that she was a commanding officer, and even if Gaddison had somehow discovered the relationship in question, without proof it was still little more than hearsay, which could just as easily reflect badly on the Uppercity guardsman, should she pursue any action on these ‘unfounded hunches.’

What if Dunma had confessed to it, though? What if she had accused Betaal of taking advantage of her position?

No, she couldn’t think that way.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Betaal calmly replied, approaching the much taller intruder and standing very straight before her.

“You’re a poor liar,” Gaddison uttered with a little laugh, her eyes gleaming with amusement over the fact that the Undercity Zora was determined to make this a challenge. “You remember what I said to you the day I showed up for duty? About relationships between two people at different levels of power? Of course you do, because you clearly understood that what I said applied to you. Then, you sent Dunma to shake me down about my ‘reasons for being here.’”

The pastel-scaled Zora shook her head, a ‘tsk tsk’ noise coming from her in the wake of the other woman’s utter predictability. One hand raised before her and she idly examined the sharpness of her fingerscales while she began walking a slow circle around the other. “Well, Sergeant, if you weren’t a coward, you could have just asked me yourself,” she purred, the golden embers of her eyes flicking back to the other Zora, wandering slowly over every inch of her, measuring her up like the enemy that she was. “I’m here to put an end to what’s going on between the two of you. And if I can’t, then I’ll just put an end to you and your career.”

With every word Gaddison uttered, Betaal’s fins flared more, the pretense of innocence melting away to be quickly replaced with aggression that had been bound but couldn’t be hidden. And the lavender Zora idly wondered, how long could an Undercity Zora truly resist their savage, uncivilized nature?

“What did you even think you were doing?” Gaddison hissed once she stood again before Betaal, glaring down on her with disappointment and disgust. “…going after a girl so much younger than yourself?”

“Dunma is a mature, adult woman,” the Sergeant snapped in reply, her own tone steely and gruff, her will to fight rising up to meet and match Gaddison’s own, “..and you clearly don’t know her well enough if you think she requires your protection.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the taller woman brusquely commented, nearly bemused that someone could be so dreadfully incorrect, yet so confident that it wasn’t so. It would not deter her, however. “I
know her so well that I saw the trouble she was getting herself into from all the way downstream. And you can tell yourself that Dunma is an adult all you want, but you’re still older than even her father.”

At those words, Betaal’s fins flattened once more, the quiet shroud of true guilt, true doubt falling over her; she looked like a woman who hadn’t even realized the depth of her mistakes until they were clearly defined for her. Gaddison drew her hands up with a quick movement, pressing her palms together directly before her face so that the edge of her fingerscales brushed the petal softness of her lips. The blue Zora’s single eye followed the motions of the other with such wary quickness, it stood in place of a physical flinch, as the rest of Betaal’s frame was still and controlled.

Yet despite how the Sergeant stood at the edge of expectation, thinking physical confrontation was inescapable, the pastel Zora softened her tone, wanting to make at least one sincere attempt to persuade the other to cease with this awful nonsense of her own accord. “Look, if you really cared at all, you would want to keep Dunma from making this mistake as well,” Gaddison said, her fangs flashing with her sharpened pronunciations. “You’d only need an ounce of morality to see how wrong this is.”

“I do care about her,” Betaal replied with unquestionable certainty, folding her arms behind her back as she spoke. “Dunma and I are friends, and I’ve offered her nothing but comfort and support. I’ve guided her and helped her make the most of both her time here, as well as her incredible talent.”

Feigning guiltlessness, Betaal leaned upon her authority to project confidence with which she would conceal her lies. She swallowed, breathless and suddenly unsure, but unwilling to show such weakness to a clearly defined enemy. Had she been wrong to pursue the younger woman? Was she disrupting her, damaging her? Maybe she hadn’t believed so before, because Dunma so evidently needed some kind of support, but had she taken it too far? Had she deeply wronged a woman she care for, no.. loved. Maybe.

But she would let that be handled between herself and the one she so adored.

“You can accept that or not,” Betaal hissed, stern and unshaken, “but either way, I’m still your commanding officer and I absolutely don’t plan to be threatened by an underling. So I would suggest that you get the hell out of my tent and do not cross me again. Is that clear?”

Slowly, a faint smile itched at the corners of Gaddison’s mouth, her answer to her ‘superior’s’ command naught but the challenge that came with silence, an unspoken promise to tear Betaal’s entire world asunder.

There were overhanging ledges and ancient trees of plenty to conceal what was going on just outside of Zora’s Domain. The smallest of fires were tended, baby embers poked and encouraged yet not allowed to burst into great flames that could draw attention with dark plumes of smoke. The scent of various foods were woven throughout the thicket, from an uncounted sequence of days filled with constant preparation and dutiful cooking.

Tight knitted family groups and lone individuals moved in and out of the area, stamping down the tender grasses with their pattering webbed feet. Parents did their best to keep young children hushed, because while the innocent might not have understood, maintaining perfect secrecy was all that assured the continuation of their survival in these dark times.

There were even wooden basket traps secured to surrounding trees in a careful perimeter, each one containing an ensnared lightning keese. The tiny creatures were very dangerous to Zoras, yet in this
case, a necessary risk. The electrical interference they created cloaked the group from detection via the electrorreceptive senses of their own people.

It had begun with one or two reckless Undercity Zoras who’d had their bravery bolstered with hunger-borne anger and budding mistrust. They’d stealthily crossed the borders out of Zora’s Domain in the dead of night, swimming downstream without being noticed, all for the purpose of staking out the newly established guard routes. It hadn’t taken them long to discover that rations from the fort had already begun to pour into the city, shoring up the apparently dwindling supply of food, yet still the people of the Undercity were being denied access to them.

It came as little surprise to them; they were used to being lied to, mistreated, abused. They were used to adapting, to seeking other solutions for their own problems, when an unsympathetic upperclass dismissed them and left them to suffer.

Word quickly spread to the hungry masses who otherwise existed quietly out of sight; the food wasn’t gone at all, they merely had been deemed too unimportant to receive any of it, despite the fact that it was by their forced labor that it was being gathered. Resentment had been sown and tended, but they were too weak yet to do anything about the poison fruit ripening in their hearts.

However, they also knew that they couldn’t depend on anyone but themselves, so they resolved to survive as best they could. A few stray Undercity Zoras began sneaking out of the city to gather food that had been otherwise denied to them. A few soon became several, then several more as they learned of the betrayal committed by their ruling class.

So now it was, the people of the Undercity had come together in secret, outside of the Domain they regretfully called home. It had always been on their backs and by their hands that food and any other necessary raw materials were supplied. Now, they were only doing exactly what came naturally to them, but they were doing it to ensure their own survival; an unforgivable sin, to be sure.

Numerous silver-scaled Zoras went out in parties to hunt for game which hadn’t been tainted by the yet unresolved Water Blight. Various others prepared meals with the gathered supplies, distributing it to desperate fellows who’d been days and days without a bite.

Among those whose hands were delivering merciful sustenance, two women lingered quietly side by side. They had been complete strangers not so long ago, yet now they could not be pried apart, an alliance sparked between them, comfort offered by mutual trust. One calmly sliced fish to be added to a cold soup regularly eaten by their kind, while the other rolled bright orange dough for acorn dumplings, an autumn staple.

One of the women did not fail to notice when the other’s busy fingers began to slow. She drew her gaze upward, over the deep gray frame of the one at her side, tracing the dark bands which marked her body, then ending upon the pale silver of her eyes. Her expression was distant, her thoughts surely captured by some kind of worry.

“What is it, Vasai?” asked the woman cutting the fish, her blade clicking softly against the cutting board as she spoke.

The other Undercity woman’s head snapped up at the sound of her name, her black-ringed eyes vibrant when the light returned to them. She quickly shook her head in response, her delicate shoulders moving in a shrug. “It’s just getting harder to enter and exit the city each day. The guards hassle me more and more each time. I’ve been trying to come back with something every day to make it look like I’ve been gathering. . .”

“Hm,” the more blue-scaled of the two women nodded knowingly. She’d been making an effort to
sneak out every other day to make it less obvious how often she’d been leaving. “It won’t be long until they stop allowing us to go in and out altogether. They’ll eventually find out what we’ve been doing, and they’ll disband us. Violently, no doubt.”

“Moira,” said the dark-colored Zora, her hands falling still, her head dipping lower as she was reminded of the very last time they’d narrowly escaped the forceful hand of the City Guard. “Back in the city, in the Basilica. You didn’t have to stand up for me. You put yourself at incredible risk and your chance of success was low. It was a miracle that we walked away from that. I chose to stand up. I didn’t ask anyone else to do the same.”

“If more stood up, we might actually have a chance one day,” Moira breathed, the fiery will that lurked inside her small body rising up.

“What are we going to do?” asked the dark gray Zora, a tight desperation in her tone. Sure, she’d had her moment of bravery, attempting to stand against one of the city guardsmen, but she was so tired, so exhausted from being brave each and every day. When would it end? She wanted nothing more than to live just once without the need to be brave in order to merely survive.

The older, blue-scaled woman placed her cutting knife aside and wrapped one arm around the other Zora’s trembling shoulders. Her motherly instincts wouldn’t allow her to stand aside while Vasai was overwhelmed, just the same as she couldn’t stand aside the day Vasai was struck by that brutal, unsympathetic guardsman.

“I have a daughter stationed at the fort downstream,” Moira uttered in a hushed tone, like she was speaking the darkest of secrets. “She tells me that there’s a village going up in the wetlands, on Mercay Island. I say we spread the word and we all take our families there.”

“A mass exodus?” Vasai hissed in surprise, her silver eyes widening, her heart jumping in her chest from sudden, fearful exhilaration. Even so, she only shook her head, not wanting to allow herself to have hope that was meaningless. “They’d never allow it.”

“We can’t trust our corrupt rulers any longer.” The older woman’s tone was darkened from years of mistreatment and the bitterness which came with it. Her fins were boldly flared, her words carrying bold ideas as she spoke them. “It’s time we stopped bowing to them and letting them decide what is allowed and what isn’t. All they protect are their own interests, so it’s up to us to protect our own.”

“I agree, but how would we get our people out of the city?” the younger Zora asked.

Suddenly, Moira hesitated, her mouth falling open so that her pointed teeth were exposed, yet her tongue went still. She’d been sitting on that very information, sheltering it like it was her own brood. If she shared it at last, and the Undercity people went through with the plan hatched in secret, there would never be any turning back; knowing that made it a difficult burden to carry. Still, the jaded Undercity woman had to assure herself that it was for the best, no matter the cost.

“My daughter has a contact from Mercay Island. This person is apparently sympathetic to our cause,” she explained, every word wary and slow. “They told my daughter that an ‘event’ is going to take place in Zora’s Domain very soon. The event will provide a distraction which will allow our people to flee.”

“And the catch?” Vasai mumbled with equal wariness, her eyes peering straight into the other woman’s in questioning, wanting reassurance, needing truth all the more. “...It sounds too good to be true.”

“There won’t be much time. We have to be ready to drop everything and go, soon,” Moira stated.
darkly, hoping her tone was enough to express how serious this matter was. She desperately wanted to be transparent with the other young woman, who trusted her so completely, but she also couldn’t bear it. Knowing that people of all walks could and likely would die, Undercity, Uppercity, innocent and guilty, heroes, saviors, tormentors, it was too much weight to carry.

Knowing that, after it was all said and done, the conspirators would be sought out and blamed for whatever lives were lost; that was even more of a burden, and Moira didn’t wish to put that on Vasai.

“We just have to live with whatever comes after.”

; 

It was near Zelo Pond that the Yiga footsoldier found themself waiting, a new disguise donned, though nobody was about during the late hours to see it. Tonight they wore another Hylian’s face, some young woman who had died years ago.

They remembered her, thinking back on it now. She’d lived a few houses down from them, in a small village outside of Castle Town. She walked down to the river each day to fish and sometimes the two passed one another, but no words were ever spoken between them. It was painless enough for the footsoldier to reconstruct the woman’s appearance using their Sheikah Slate for the purpose of hiding themself beneath it. They had no attachment to the memory, and even if they had, well, she was just another Hylian anyway.

There was something odd about it, however, walking down to the river like she always had and basking in the light of the shrine across the otherwise dark, rushing water. She was a ghost that the footsoldier had rendered and brought about in pointless melancholy, perhaps even homesickness? Living among the Hylians was less of a ‘home’ and more of a ‘sickness’, though.

But because of how deeply they were immersed in these pointless ponderings, and thanks to the hiss of the river rapids, the footsoldier did not notice when another finally approached.

“This wasn’t the assigned meeting point,” came the deep, stern voice of the Blademaster who oversaw all Yiga Clan movement in this area. “You’re out in the open, here.”

“My apologies,” the footsoldier hurriedly spoke up, turning on heel to find the other waiting in the darkness of a tree-lined area, like a living shadow. “I’ll erase this disguise immediately after we part ways, just to be safe.”

“The other operatives are in position. All we’re waiting for now is the arrival of the target,” the Blademaster explained. “You brewed the poison, yes?”

“I did,” the footsoldier answered, the Hylian face they wore as a facade furrowing enough to speak their own unease. With a few easy strides, they stepped from the moonlit river bank and into the shadow of the trees, producing a small bottle from one of the numerous hidden pockets that existed just beneath their clever disguise.

The bottle was small but weighty in their hand, and though it had been requested, the footsoldier did not make the immediate gesture to hand it to the other. As usual, they’d become caught up in one of their ever-troublesome moral dilemmas, and even direct orders couldn’t dissuade them. It had been their belief that, with the ultimate goal of forever destroying the Hyrulean monarchy in mind, some sacrifices were necessary. When some had to be dispatched for the sake of the many, it was justifiable, right?

They had believed so. And yet-
“I’ve been gathering intel on this Zora Prince,” the footsoldier began, the bottle of poison still tightly clasped between their gloved fingers. “...from all I’ve heard, even for a royal, he seems a fair and decent young man. Maybe even a man that could very well go on to stabilize the unjust system of the Zora people.”

“The Zora upperclass are servants of Hylia and therefor, our enemies,” the hooded Blademaster replied with stoic finality. “Their royals cannot be trusted.”

“That may be so. However, by killing this Prince who appears to have a virtuous soul, do we not risk placing somebody less just into power? I simply must insist that you consider the ramifications,” the footsoldier spoke with rehearsed finesse, as surely these thoughts had echoed over and over in their mind, prior to this very moment.

“If the Hylian Champion surrenders upon his return, there will be no need to kill the Zora Prince,” said the Blademaster with a disappointed sigh, tiring of this footsoldier’s rebellious conscience. “...and unless your intel is flawed, he’ll surrender.”

“He’s in love with this Prince. That nearly guarantees success,” the footsoldier asserted with renewed confidence, more sure of their own intel than anything else. Still, their hands tightly clung to the bottle of poison that they’d slaved over for the past few days—gathering the ingredients, carefully preparing and combining them. Their work was quality and that was precisely what made this so difficult. With a relenting breath, the footsoldier passed the bottle into the waiting hand of the other Yiga clansman. “If not... this toxin will kill a Zora very, very quickly.”

“Excellent,” the Blademaster uttered in satisfaction, tucking the item away for safekeeping.

“Am I needed for the mission or shall I hold position at Mercay Island?” asked the footsoldier, a tremor of wariness echoing in their mind, but they chased the feeling away quickly enough that their voice remained steady. One hand drifted to idly touch the careful stitch across the front of their suit, though the mended gash couldn’t be seen or felt. Even when it was out of sight, however, that brush with death a difficult matter to forget.

“Master Kohga seems to believe you aren’t trustworthy enough to accompany us on such an important mission,” the Blademaster answered, unapologetic and with a certain distaste that could never be fully concealed. “...especially considering how often you question orders, as well as your last failure.”

“..understood.”

Things weren’t exactly ‘in order’ in Hateno Village, but they were well on their way and that was as much as Link could ask. Bolson’s crew had begun their repairs, the Zoras had already fallen into a comfortably organized state of existence, and the villagers were apparently prepared to be more welcoming than first expected.

Link never thought he’d feel his presence so unneeded, and honestly, he couldn’t be more satisfied with that. His ability to act like a real person around other people was rapidly melting away, like the delicate frost of chilly mornings, when at last the sun came to afternoon height to provide temporary warmth.

The exhaustion left behind wasn’t such a pleasant feeling. There was some familiarity to it that came with a sense of dread, leaving Link hollowed and empty on the inside, sanded and dull on the outside. It was so like all those times before, when he came to Prince Sidon to have his own life
flame rekindled with warmth and compassion. He vaguely wondered if he was still just a parasite, leeching off the abundant energy of the Zora Prince.

Maybe.

But it was easier to place those thoughts aside now, because whereas once Link cringed to think about Sidon’s personality, his exuberance, his enthusiasm and positivity, now the Champion missed everything about him, even being annoyed by him.

Link couldn’t deny it; he longed to see those vibrant, doting smiles, to hear his velvet voice, to exist only as far as his wake and ever so close as his embrace. Sidon was a physical need now, and Link felt his absence like starvation, like exhaustion, painful and sad and neverending.

But it wasn’t just the span of days he’d spent without the Zora’s presence that had Link so weak. No, there was something deeper, something more, something that painfully clenched in the Hylian’s chest. When he’d first met Sidon, he’d easily accepted that the Prince’s optimism could never be tarnished, not even by the world falling apart around them.

And he’d been wrong about that.

He’d watched Sidon wilt, like a plucked Silent Princess tucked into a vase on a sunny window ledge. He’d been so beautiful before- patient, happy, hopeful, strong. Then ever so slowly, he’d drooped, weakening, losing his petals one by one, until there was scarcely anything left by which to recognize him as ‘Prince Sidon.’

The Zora’s determination not to show weakness made it all the more difficult to see the demise of his beautiful fervor as it slowly overcame him. This world did, in fact, possess the awful will to break even someone as wonderful and pure as the Zora Prince.

Link had seen it happening even before Sidon went into his magical hibernation. He’d seen events unfurl that chipped away at him, and by the Goddess’s mercy, Link understood how it felt to be jaded, to be broken, to be missing probably more than half of what even made him who he was, maybe all of it.. and that was the last thing he wanted for Sidon.

He scarcely liked to call himself a ‘Champion’, because in his mind, that wasn’t him but somebody else. He hated the obligation to fight his Goddess’s never-ending war, but he’d already accepted the most difficult truth involved- the knowledge that he was the only one who could put things back into order, and for the one he loved, he was willing to shoulder that burden.

The only unanswered dilemma was this; how was he ever going to be capable of such an insurmountable task? It wasn’t a question of bravery, but strength. His fighting instincts, his will to survive, his accursed immortality? They were all farces, facades, because the truth of the matter was that he was as weak and complacent and apathetic as the rest of his people.

It was no wonder he’d hated them for so long. It was all just an extension of how much he hated himself. The only thing he didn’t hate about himself was the part of him that loved Prince Sidon. There was nothing in him that could regret that.

Sidon was his only strength.

So how, how, how could Link save this world without him?

Link tried to clear his mind while he ascended the steps from the shrine tucked away in Zora’s Domain. It had only been a couple of days, and already it was so much colder than he remembered. The Fleet Lotus blossoms were gone and the plants had turned dormant. The sky was as dark as the
void, seemingly consuming the light of the stars and much of the light from the glowering city, leaving it a dimly lit sculpture of frosted glass.

It was regrettable that Link had yet to make it further out west, because he’d heard that the Rito made splendidly warm garb, which he would have appreciated right about now. His arms were folded near himself and crossed over his chest, and the click of his boots echoed into the still of the evening. It was odd to hear Zora’s Domain so quiet, so absent of crickets or frogs.

A puff of foggy mist came from beneath the Hylian’s hood, his breath as quick as his rapid pace. He was aware that Zoras didn’t mind the cold as much as Hylians, but they still made some effort to retain warmth into the evening, for the sake of keeping their energy levels maintained until time to sleep. That gave him enough motivation to make haste to his destination, the Seabed Inn.

The archway being blocked was a new experience for Link. A heavy curtain was draped across the threshold that took some deal of effort for him to push aside so that he could enter. It billowed shut behind him with a heavy flop, drawing the immediate attention of many who lurked inside.

The Inn was lined to capacity with displaced Uppercity Zoras, so it appeared that repairs from the quake were going even slower than expected. They were huddled in the front room, sitting closely side by side at the dining table, perched upon the window ledges with folded legs, and a few stood together near the fire which blazed with heat, though the cooking pot had been placed aside. Link rubbed his gloved hands together, then joined the idle Zoras, placing his palms out to welcome the fire’s warm touch.

While the air was warm and welcoming to the Hylian, the dryness of it had many of the Zoras out of sorts. They’d been unable to swim, or sleep in a way that came naturally to them, and the dry heat was only making their scales that much more uncomfortable. They looked as rough as lizalfos, their constant itching further proof of the Water Blight wearing them down in every possible way. And while Link understood them to have much slower metabolisms than Hylians, many of them had already become noticeably gaunt from the loss of richness in their diets.

That easily, the persistent guilt in the Champion’s heart reared its ugly head. This is my fault- that was all he could think.

“Linny?” Kodah’s voice called out in surprise when she at last took notice of the oddly short presence standing alongside the much taller Zoras. He turned from the comfort of the fire to face her, taking a few tiny steps closer, only for her to swat one hand at him in discouragement.

“No, no, Linny, you stay right where you are,” she uttered insistently, her spirited personality somehow still intact, despite everything, though Link had to wonder if she’d merely begun to lean upon her sweet, energetic charm to mask everything else. “You look absolutely chilled. Stay there and warm up.”

Link brushed the hood back from his head when Kodah approached, forcing a tiny smile to his face in greeting. His cheeks and nose were pink from the night air, which caused the Zora woman to dote all the more, saying, “Oh, let me get something for you.”

“No food, please Kodah,” the Hylian hurriedly stated, putting up his hands to politely reject whatever it was she had in mind to give him. Normally, he was ecstatic to be constantly fed like an orphaned child by all these Zoras who were so adamant about taking care of him, but knowing that they needed to look out for themselves much more, it now fell to him to care for them in turn by making certain they didn’t hand him their last scrap of food. “I came from Hateno Village, so I’m fine. I don’t want to take anything away from you.”
“There’s maybe a shortage, but most of the people here, myself included, have been getting regular rations,” Kodah reasoned, ever the worried mother when it came to such things. Still, she let out a defeated sigh, then commented, “The food may be poor quality, and we all have to wait in line for hours, but we’re getting by. It won’t hurt me to share a bit.”

Link peered up into the Zora woman’s face with the subtlest traces of dubiousness etched into his expression, his quiet response more stubbornly resolute than any words he could hope to utter.

“I won’t insist if you’re so adamant, Linny,” the pink-scaled Zora grumbled in resignation, only sounding like a frustrated mother whose child was refusing to eat what was healthy for them. It wasn’t long before a little smile brightened her features, however, and she pattered into the back room to retrieve something, chattering brightly all the way.

“I do have a non-food item to offer!” Kodah called out while she flicked open the top to a blue trunk and began to rummage through it. It looked very much like a chest that Link would find out in his own explorations, and he drew nearer in curiosity, his face still furrowed in questioning. “I’m afraid it won’t match very well with that green doublet that you’re wearing, but it should help keep you warm. Here you are!”

A lovely scarf made of a soft, but thick blue material was held out to the Hylian, while Kodah continued to encourage him. “It has three small rubies stitched into the design. When they’re worn close to your body, they warm up. Zoras love these sorts of things, so hopefully you will, too. The fabric is also waterproof, so even if you get caught in the rain, it’ll stay warm and dry. Go on, Linny, take it.”

“Kodah,” Link mumbled in uncertainty. He didn’t want to be rude, as rare an occasion as that was, and the item was very tempting, without question. However, something about it struck him as very troubling. “Did this belong to Kayd-”

“It belongs to you, Linny,” the woman asserted, not pausing any longer to allow the Hylian to reach for the item on his own. Instead, she simply placed it around his neck and gave it a fluff, despite the fact that it was actually a bit oversized on him, enshrouding his chin and cheeks in soft, comforting warmth.

“Umm,” Link uttered, his voice a bit muffled when he did. He hooked his finger in the scarf now fastened around his neck, and he gave it a little downward tug so that he could speak over it. “thank you. I do have something for you, too, actually.”

“Oh?” The Zora woman watched Link’s hands in wide-eyed anticipation while he slid his rucksack over one shoulder and dug around in his disorganized collection of supplies for the intended item. It had gotten pushed to the bottom, beneath the more clunky objects stuffed into the overloaded backpack, so it required a bit of effort before Link finally put his hands on what he was looking for and drew it free, thankfully mostly undamaged.

“I brought this letter from Finley,” Link softly spoke, holding the slightly crinkled envelope out to the Zora woman. Her quick hands snagged the item like she expected it to be drawn back at the last second, so that the Hylian was damn near startled by her haste. He understood, of course.

“Oh, thank the Goddess, I thought that girl would never get around to it,” Kodah cooed, her voice both tight and tremulous, her entire being seeming to overflow with emotion at just receiving the letter. She was somehow thankful and relieved, while still irritated that it had taken so long, joyful to have the item clenched between her fingers, while also morose that it was a letter standing in place of her daughter’s presence.
“She used to carry those letters for Sasan to the Bank of Wishes every day, but it figures she’d take more than a week to write her mother,” Kodah explained like she needed to give an excuse for her suddenly unmanageable emotions. She didn’t tear into however, unable to bear the thought of reading it in front of someone, with the knowledge that it would only send her even deeper into her emotional spiral.

After observing the item, and seemingly reassuring herself that she had indeed received it, her watery golden eyes trailed back to the Hylian still standing before her, swallowed up by warm, blue fabric. She tried to wear a smile on her pale lips when she looked at him, but it was obvious, even to Link, that the muscles of her face didn’t wish to comply.

“...did you tell her.. about Kayden?” Kodah asked with quiet hesitation, fighting herself just for the strength to utter her own husband’s name.

“I told her, yes,” Link replied, his own tone low and somber. He was bitterly reminded of the day Kayden died, and of how Kodah collapsed beneath the weight of her sorrow. He just stood aside and watched helplessly that day, unable to do anything, the very same as now. It wasn’t that he felt nothing, but.. he lacked any clue as to how to respond, even with Kodah now waiting in silent expectation.

“Um..” the Hylian’s gaze ventured elsewhere, “...she’s distraught, obviously, but she’s been very strong through everything. Or she’s trying to be, the same as you seem to be. How are you holding up?”

“Me?” Kodah repeated quietly, like she honestly hadn’t expected Link to ask; something about that prickled at the Hylian’s growing guilt. “I’m staying busy and just.. trying not to think about it too much yet. It feels like I can’t yet, you know?”

The Zora woman shrugged, her body bending helplessly beneath the weight of such a question, so that her head dropped low and her shoulders slumped, her tail hanging bonelessly against her back, flat and lacking expression. “I’m trying to be strong. Everyone has problems right now. Everyone has lost so much. I just want to help however I can, so there’s no time or place to dwell at the moment.”

The skin around the base of the Zora’s rounded brow furrowed while she fought herself, her shining eyes finally setting free the tears that she’d been trying to hold back, then she pressed the envelope she’d received close to her chest, sniffling before she spoke up again, “I’m sorry, I’m just so happy to hear from Finley. I miss her terribly. Thank you for bringing this, Linny.”

“Yeah, of course,” Link muttered, nodding but otherwise standing completely still. “You’re welcome.”

“Oh, you’re probably off to visit Prince Sidon, aren’t you?” the Zora woman let out an awkward, little laugh, sniffing again and wiping at her tears before she reached out and gave Link’s shoulder a little pat of encouragement. “Go ahead, don’t let me hold you up.”

Everyone in Zora’s Domain knew about them.

With a rather awkward nod of his head, Link began to back away, uncertainty rippling through him despite the fact that he’d been excused.

“Thank you for the scarf,” he said again, trying hard to sound as sincerely grateful as he felt, unsure whether or not he pulled it off in the end. It must have been her motherly instincts, but Kodah knew precisely the most practical thing to offer to the soft, helpless Hylian and it was also just what he’d
wanted. The plush material squished even more tightly around his cheeks while he pulled up his hood once more and brushed aside the curtain in the doorway to leave.

On the way to Sidon’s tower, Link’s pace quickened for a reason other than the cold, though the cold was still a fairly decent reason, of course. He recalled it being mentioned that Sidon’s magical slumber had short moments of waking scattered throughout the process, and the Champion couldn’t help but smile to himself in excitement that was almost nervous at the thought of being present amidst one of those breaks in his hibernation. He was aching for his lover’s presence in a way that bordered embarrassing, but for some reason he was also.. afraid?

The smile dimmed away while Link attempted to examine his own feelings. It wasn’t something he was typically good at, and until recently he’d often felt that his experiences, whether from outside or from within, couldn’t be trusted. He still resented Purah more than anything for making him feel like he was fucking crazy when he wasn’t. It was taking an incredible amount of work just undoing the damage she had caused, but he was attempting to trust himself again, though it was proving to be difficult.

And it wasn’t only the Sheikah scientist who was to blame for the fact that the Champion couldn’t trust himself. No, he knew just as well that he carried most of the fault, but it was.. troubling to admit it. It was unfamiliar for him to allow himself to take credit for his own fuck ups, and if anything it probably was more healthy for him to shove the blame onto others, but.. No, he didn’t want to any longer, if it could be avoided.

The heels of the Champion’s boots thumped all the more resoundingly when he began across one of those long stretches of bridge that was common in Zora’s Domain. The sound echoed from the arching structures far above, to the water-filled caverns below, a pounding drum to chorus a gentle, lonely trickle.

The end of the narrow corridor would open up to a small courtyard preceding a well-guarded gate, however, Link didn’t quite make it that far before he encountered a stray warrior. This wasn’t just any warrior, oh no, because passing a person by without a word or glance would’ve been too simple. Instead, when Link’s sharp, blue gaze upturned to acknowledge the person traversing the bridge in the opposite direction, he found himself looking upon the Prince’s appointed Knight.

If that smile hadn’t dulled away from the Hylian’s face before, it sure as shit did now.

It could be said that the Zoras were typically lithe in build, with a powerful but lightweight musculature. There were certainly plumper ones with soft, streamline bodies, however, the vast majorities’ visible mass had withered and Brivere was no exception. He still had the look of a capable warrior, yet the imposing, robust bulk that he once carried in his shoulders and chest had begun to diminish, leaving his flesh tight across his frame, every fibre in him now taut with extra effort. Or perhaps that was because his entire demeanor had always been overly tense and eternally brooding.

Link vaguely wondered if that Knight wanked to his own immense sense of angst, but that would’ve relaxed him too much, so perhaps not.

“So you’ve returned, have you?” The Zora stopped and spoke up in greeting, though his voice was like the wind blowing down from the mountains: distant, doleful, and spiting all things with its bitter cold. “I assumed you’d finally lost interest in us, with how little we have to offer now.”

“Well,” Link scoffed, his sensibilities immediately pushed to hair-trigger fragility under the insinuation that he only hung around for the sake of gaining something. He’d been to hell and back attempting to provide aid to the Zoras and for as minuscule as his own capacity for empathy was,
he’d found it within himself as though it had simply come dislodged and been forgotten, all for these people. Link’s gaze turned away from the golden Zora like he was ultimately unimportant as he drifted past, unhindered. “...Much to your disappointment, I’m sure.”

A moment of hesitant quiet passed between the two while Brivere’s perplexity melded into severe, intolerable offense. Normally he’d bottle those feelings like hapless, fluttering fairies and shelf them in his mind, but on this particular cold and miserable evening, he’d found his cluttered shelves full not just to capacity, but beyond that. They creaked beneath the weight of all the things he’d held inside, the pressure mounting to an undeniable breaking point.

“Don’t just keep walking. Stop and hear me, Hylian,” the golden Zora hissed, spinning round to glare upon the retreating Champion’s back, his long forefins swinging outward with the speed of his movement.

As demanded, Link came to a halt, the toe of his boots making a tiny squeak from the misty wetness which had fallen upon the bridge, tiny droplets and hazy moisture drifting from the trickling fall and onto the dangerous still of the Hylian Champion.

“Why have you returned?” Brivere questioned, his request only now a true demand, woven from both anger, as well as a state of being really, truly confounded. “Surely you must realize that our Prince has not stirred and cannot ‘entertain’ you at this time.”

“Entertain?” the Hylian repeated, slowly turning back around to set his coldest stare directly upon the one and only Zora which he had ever managed to truly despise.

“You heard me right, and I do hope you realize, as Sidon’s protector, I have no reservations when it comes to shielding him from danger,” the Knight called out in his own snide, enraging manner, his tone so calm and still that this interaction might have seemed otherwise insignificant. His own stare hardened with the severity of his words, however, as it turned from insult to threat. “...regardless of the source. Remember that well.”

But despite the golden Zora’s sharpened words, Link found himself folding in bitter amusement, laughter bursting from him, the delicate froth upon an otherwise pressurized rage. He could barely believe the audacity of this idiot, and the apparent forgetfulness that had come along with it.

“Is that right?” Link spat when he was finally able to still the humor that had attacked him in the sheer, fucking irony. The skin of his nose wrinkled with the snarl of his words when he continued, “Because if I recall correctly, just before Sidon took that spirit potion, he’d been distraught over some shit you’d said to him. If you want to protect him, then protect him from yourself while you’re at it, rather than guilt-tripping him over the fact that he didn’t choose you.”

Reading the shift in Brivere’s emotions was no simple task, yet the Zora visibly recoiled in a way that was obvious, even to the Hylian, when Link’s accusations hit their intended mark.

“And personally,” Link went on, his demeanor somewhat softening when his remarks so clearly cut the Knight’s bold manner back down to size. With a quick shift, the Hylian turned from anger to mockery, beyond sure that this little verbal exchange marked a victory in his favor. A smile sliced across his face, belying the absolute hatred in the cold of his eyes as he uttered, “...your little fits of jealousy are getting old for me, too, so are we done here?”

Link didn’t give Brivere time to answer, because the question required no response. They were done. The Hylian turned his back to the Zora, once again facing in the direction of his destination and striding off.
Yet Link had taken nary two steps before his path was forcibly blocked; the sound of Brivere’s
toeclaws scraping the stone surface beneath his feet was all that betrayed his movement when he bent
his knees then leapt into the air, his body light and graceful, flipping with acrobatic ease at the height
of his jump. He was a brightly burning star fragment, his golden frame bursting past the trickling fall,
vividly shimmering with stray droplets when at last he finally landed, shaking the lonely bridge with
the aggressive force of his impact.

“We aren’t finished, actually,” Brivere growled, a kind of vicious furrow to his features that was so
misplaced, Link was taken momentarily aback. “You may be right, my actions were out of line and I
hurt somebody I care about, yes. However, I’ve made an effort to amend that grave wrongdoing and
it remains to be seen whether or not I will ever be friends with Sidon again, a reality that I’ve
accepted. But you? Don’t speak to me as though you’ve done no wrong, when you’ve left nothing
but damage in your wake, and still pretend that it was never so.”

“What are you even talking about?” the Hylian chuckled, edging nearing the other to indicate his
own refusal to back down. His tone regarded the Knight like someone who was confused and
embarrassing themself by making such obscure, nonsensical accusations.

“You think I don’t know what you’ve done?” the Knight hissed, his back straightening to further
highlight the stark size difference between himself and the Champion. He was a pillar of righteous,
protective fury, focused and precise when at last he resolved to speak the words he’d been holding
inside himself, like a poison he’d swallowed for the sake of his Prince. “You took our Prince to bed
and pushed him into acts which he’d soundly objected to. Then, as if that wasn’t enough, you called
upon the healing power of his fallen sister to remedy the wounds you’d forced him to inflict.”

An aching, bitter silence swallowed up Link’s ability to speak with each word the Knight levied
upon him, bringing his most devious and wretched of sins to light. The physical response was
immediate; a sickening turn twisted the Champion’s gut with guilt and shame, while other
immeasurable, unnamed emotions caused a violent shift from static to storm inside his mind.

“..How did you..” was all the Hylian could force from himself, while words and language leapt into
the cyclonic storm wind in his heart. Sidon had actually recounted these events? Brivere had known..
all along?

“My lord told me all about it, of course,” the golden Zora stated firmly with both a nod of
confirmation and a deep sigh of discontentment. His typically pinched features were furrowed with
true pain and anger, the failure of this entire situation blooming expressively on his face.

“I may be his Knight, but I’m his trusted friend of many, many years. He confided in me while he
was still suffering and uncertain. He..” A trembling breath escaped the Zora, his head shaking now at
the very nature of the man he loved so dearly; too forgiving, too compassionate, too naive and eager
to blame himself for every wrong that was done to him. “He had to implore me to excuse his poor
performance during a spar, explaining that these events were so weighty on his mind, as if he needed
forgiveness for such a thing.”

For a passing second, Brivere’s gaze faltered at the thought of Sidon; the deep sympathy he held for
him, the burning shame at having failed to protect him, even just that once. Those thoughts drained
away with haste, however, so that it wasn’t long before his sheer insult and blame regained its spark,
his yellow eyes snapping back up to glare at the hapless Hylian, who was still rendered speechless,
failing to properly catch up in the wake of this clearly startling turn of events.

The Zora spoke anew, his sharp teeth glinting with the harsh snap of his words. “If you knew
anything of my lord’s history, of the things he’s been through in the pa...” he paused in hesitation,
“..of course it isn’t my place to inform you, and I shan’t. But after doing such awful things to this
man, it’s utterly unbelievable that you had the audacity to remain, to leech off of his goodwill and his obligation to you, to uphold this pretense that you could ever be a proper lover to him. Truly, how dare you. You are as wretched as they come.”

Brivere’s body dipped very slightly lower, his glare focused and pointed, his voice deep velvet, yet dangerous and scathing. “Now we’re done,” he said.

“Hey, Brivere,” Link muttered, his empty gaze regaining light, his lips nearly smiling while he craned his neck to look into the Zora’s face. The lonely bridge was dark, save for its inherent glow, the air was still, save for the distant trickle spraying from above, falling an impossible distance to the cavern below, and Link was remarkably calm, his heart having settled somewhere in the eye of his inner storm, his emotions going blank, his mind losing touch, all save for the burning, writhing, angry instincts screaming indistinctly, to the point that it was painful.

“You’re right,” he confessed with a relenting shrug, “I am as wretched as they come.”

The Champion took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh as all of his turmoil washed over him, reflecting itself, at last, in a way that made sense to him. In a nimble flash, his trembling fingers tightly furled, his arm drawing back then slamming without hesitation nor restraint into the hovering Zora’s vulnerable center with enough blinding force to fling him backward, over the rail and down, down with a splash to the watery depths below.

Chapter End Notes

Boss fight: Brivere, Knight Captain of the Royal Order.

Is anybody else as hyped for this fight as I am? The next chapter is gonna be awesome, or at least I'm hoping so haha. Okay, now or never, BOSS FIGHT MUSIC FOR BRIVERE? Seriously, I'm open to any suggestions. I'm gonna need it for inspiration. :)

I'm personally really enjoying the rising tension. How are you feeling, friends?
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

All the mounting hatred and bitterness had led them to this point. They were two dishonored Knights, waging war over the last scrap of value possessed within their hardened hearts.

Chapter Notes

For those of you who don't follow my tumblr pages- I'm so sorry that this is so late. This epic bossfight is probably as long as two whole chapters, so I bumped it to this week in order to not rush it. I hope it is worth the wait. Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Within the deepest chamber of the Basilica, there existed a place hidden by all manner of complex mechanisms and mazes, a dim, misty garden of Fleet Lotus and softly glowing Silent Princess. A vast, unmoving pond formed an endless mirror of deep obsidian, outstretched, encircling a glassy, center platform of pure luminous stone; this was the private chamber of the Head of the Basilica, the hand which guided all, from Knights, to Magistrates, to Scholars: the Divine Oracle.

Three young Apostles were perched about the flowering platform, their short legs folded beneath them, backs straight, faces veiled by their shawls for concentration and secrecy. The youthful trio were still, silent, entranced in the deepest of meditative states, their magical energy outstretched in offering to bolster that of the revered Diviner.

A bleak, harrowing vision had been dancing across of the Oracle’s Goddess-granted sight, fleeting yet dire, bidding them to listen closely to the desperate whispers. It had been there for days, evenings, lightless mornings, unrelenting but faint, growing only clearer as that fateful vision of the future neared until it was almost an inevitable present.

At last, the elder Zora had unlocked the complex, magical puzzle required to gaze upon the tapestry being woven with the constant turn of time, the vivid, endless possibilities for events yet to occur echoing in the hallowed confines of the Diviner’s mind. Despite their hard won success, however, when the Divine Oracle severed their connection to these troubling visions, they let out a helpless sigh.

Normally, the wise Zora could use their great power to make apt decisions, to offer guidance, to prevent tragedies and other unfortunate occurrences. Lately, though, the Diviner had been feeling themself little better than a Zora devoid of magical foresight, for no matter how many options were laid out before them, they no longer held the potential to successfully diverge from certain courses.

The future remained in their eyes, yet was out of their hands.

“I can see the coming dawn of a new era,” they spoke in a tone that was both mourning and hopeful. “It approaches with haste and hunger, snuffing out the light of the previous day, changing the world
as we’ve always known it.”

The Divine Oracle’s head turned ever so slowly, their golden eyes going from one Apostle to the next, severing the magical connection between them, then the elder Zora clambered to their feet, jewels and decorative chains jingling like chimes in the gentlest of breezes. The trio of Apostles bowed low to the ground when the respected Diviner stood, their veiled faces pressed to the stone. Each of them remained in silence, unwilling to interrupt the elder’s concentration while they mused aloud to themselves.

“The Spirits have, at last, chosen new souls to carry out their will. It would be unwise to interfere with that which the Great Ones have decided, and more impossible, still,” the Divine Oracle murmured in the haunting echo of their dim chambers. “However, I have a duty to my people to reveal these coming matters of import. I can only hope the Great Ones understand and forgive.”

Elsewhere, a young Undercity Zora found herself violently awakened from slumber, her eyes shooting open to realize, almost in disbelief, that she was safe in the sleeping pools of Fort Boko. The dreams wracking her body and mind had felt so incredibly real, bursting through every one of her senses so that her muscles still ached, her scales still crawled, her heart still raced in fear and her small frame gave a shiver of apprehension.

The young woman paddled to the surface, clawing her way up the moat ledge so that she was perched at the edge of the pool, water racing over her silvery scales and down to the roughened stone. Her body bent, her knees drawing inward, her head falling into her hands; the calcified cartilage of her skull felt as though it was shattered between the cool touch of her palms, an excruciating ache tracing from beneath her fin spines, to behind her eye sockets, her watery gaze tearful from the sting just beneath her lids.

If it was possible to condense every ounce of light from the sun into a drop of painful, blinding, burning energy, then release it into a person’s eyes, that was what had occurred.

And why did her dreams haunt her with such terror and violence? Her heart was skipping beneath the plate of her chest, dancing to the same tune of dread as her pounding skull.

“Tetra..” another Undercity guardsman muttered sleepily while they bobbed to the top of the pool. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” the young woman answered, taking a deep breath and trying to let the tension slide from her rigid frame. “It’s just a headache.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” the other Zora breathed, almost forgetting that while they could pump water through their gills for air, they also needed air in their lungs to actually vocalize. “Just ask somebody else to take your shifts for a few days.”

“I can’t do that,” Tetra mumbled, her dotted fins puffing in apprehension when the visions from her dreams jumped to the forefront of her mind again without her consent. She couldn’t explain it, but as much as she told herself that these were only dreams, she had the distinct feeling that she needed to be ready, just in case. “I’m gonna.. start my warmups early, I guess.”

“What?” the other guardsman hissed in a sleepy, yet astounded tone, dipping lower in the water while they did; trying to reason with this girl was making them even more exhausted than Sergeant Betaal’s ruthless drills. “It isn’t even first light yet..”

“I know,” the silvery Zora quietly responded, getting to her feet though she stayed bent low to converse. “Don’t worry, I’ll get something for the headache first. Just go back to sleep,” she said,
reaching down into the pool and playfully shoving the other Zora’s head back under the water.

Far from the fort, in Zora’s Domain, another warrior was drifting, consumed by the surrounding blackness. Tucked beneath the surface of nighttime waters, a fallen Knight slipped outside of himself, leaving awareness behind while his mind ventured elsewhere. Within the altered reality of his perception, there was a distant flash of chaos, an invasion, fear and pain echoing through every one of his senses until it was overwhelming, yet he reached further, outstretching himself toward the energy of his Prince. The Knight’s protective instincts still miraculously drove him, giving him focus, even in this thoughtless abyss.

Brivere could feel his heartbeat, jumping from a distant flutter to a merciless pounding that pierced his temples. There was cold water rushing against the sensitive flesh of his gills, which pumped slow and steady. An excruciating sting was boring its way from the backs of his eye sockets and outward, branding his vision with fiery light.

He was both returning to awareness yet clinging to the dull images flashing desperately in the depths of his psyche, grappling them with the utmost certainty that they were of import, no matter how awful it was to pay witness. He clawed his way toward the image of his Prince, finding him seemingly too late; Sidon’s frame was twisted and writhing in torment, blood freely seeping from his gaping gill slits with every terrified heartbeat, until that loving heart finally had nothing more to give and failed to beat any further. Sidon went deathly still, one final breath slipping from him while his scales slowly faded from bold, lush red to a ghastly, translucent blue, every inch of him shining like fragile glass.

The golden Zora’s eyes shot open in fearful resistance, relinquishing any desire he might have had to look upon the images which had flashed through his dulled consciousness in warning.

He’d dipped beneath the deep pool which lined the cavern where he’d fallen. The dark water had swallowed him into its depths, within which there was no apparent promise of return, no rippling light to guide his path, nothing but shadowy void and the thunderous roar produced by the smallest of trickles from the great height above.

But his people had swam into that same void and even called it home for a thousand years. No Zora could ever feel lost underwater, even in the bleakest of circumstances. Brivere could still feel the energy signature of the little beast who had knocked him from the bridge with a single cheap shot. At that knowledge, his bottled emotions rose up to color his thoughts; he was beyond enraged, as to be expected, but he was even more ashamed of himself for not apprehending the Hylian’s thoughtless actions. He supposed one tiny shred of naivety and hope had lingered within him, in thinking perhaps he was wrong about this so-called Champion, in thinking that surely this man wouldn’t opt to behave as despicably as possible.

He certainly wouldn’t be so foolish a second time.

The Knight kicked his feet, paddling into an upright position and aligning his posture in the proper form. One hand reached over his shoulder, drawing the sword he’d been carrying as a replacement to the one he’d destroyed. It felt wrong in his hands, but it would serve its purpose well enough.

The steel sang an underwater song as it was brought forth between the golden Zora’s hands, held at the ready just before he began to paddle his feet with furious force, his body arching into the technique he’d practiced time and time again. He may not have perfected an on-land form of the complicated and difficult whirlpool technique, but in the water? There was nobody better.

From above, the Hylian Champion was shaking his hand, loosening up the bones that he might have damn near fractured with the intensity of the blow he’d thrown. Pain didn’t worry him; it was the
absence of pain which gave him reason for concern. Maybe it was just adrenaline, or instincts, or
burning rage which made him numb to whatever damage was levied onto his body in a moment of
necessary violence. But, he also had another feeling, a distant worry clawing its way up his spine,
scratching at him from the other side of the dark mirror of his mental lapse and whispering the softest
pleas to be set free.

And if a singular worst idea existed among bad ideas, that one was probably it.

At the sound of rushing water growing in speed and intensity, Link’s ears perked upward then he
placed one hand upon the rails of the bridge in order to peer over the side. In slow, steady warning,
the water below began to recede from the rocky shorelines, shriveling as though it had found a safe
cavern to hide itself from some coming danger. Unfortunately, no such luck.

From the very place where the Knight splashed down, a swirling, black whirlpool had opened up; it
was tiny at first, quickly growing wider, stronger, until the gorge itself was lined with but a shallow
pool of water, and a great, vengeful waterspout shot up from below, forming a dancing, twirling
column that reached past the bridge, all the way to the top of the trickling fall.

Link’s sharp, blue gaze traced the violently twisting spiral from bottom to top, fingers tightly
clutching the railing before himself in the sudden suspicion that one tiny shift of the watery cyclone
could tear him from where he stood and swallow him up. Yet for the vicious speed and power of the
waterspout, all it took was the twirling slash of a golden blur shooting up the center to cut it back
down to size. Brivere erupted from the column, his body tucked into fast, aggressive flips, blade
brandished so that his path severed the spiral down the center, causing all motion to cease and
leaving the great mass of water to pour harshly from above, a raining tempest, a force of nature sent
by an enraged deity.

The icy downpour roared across the lonely bridge, a great, loud hiss that grew to such a volume, it
cloaked the sound of Brivere coming to a landing back upon the surface from which he’d been
originally cast, however, it did little to conceal the way his weight caused the structure to tremble
once more.

“It is just as I’ve asserted,” the Zora growled, straightening to a stand and sheathing his blade with a
quick flick of movement. His voice was still tight and breathless, one hand clutching at the ache
where he took the first blow, the pain flaring up in a way it hadn’t until he attempted to use his voice.
He would not allow any show of weakness for long, however, and his hand fell away before he
continued, “You’re a thoughtless, selfish, egotistical beast of a Hylian. You’re not capable of doing
anything but harm. Your every action is merely another mistake in what must surely be the long
series of mistakes you’ve come to know as your existence.”

“But I assure you,” Brivere’s voice dipped dangerously lower, every ounce of bottled fury at last set
free and permeating his being. “...this will be your very last one.”

“Oh good,” the Hylian muttered darkly in reply, his voice feeling as though it had come straight out
of that mirror in the shadows of his mind, a hiss from between the bared, jagged teeth of his alternate
self. “I was almost worried that first hit was all it was gonna take.”

Link didn’t wait. He rushed in because goddamn it if that wasn’t his way, quick and thoughtless,
without consideration, reckless and powerful. Anger felt irrelevant, rage felt the same as tranquility,
because in some sick way, he’d been waiting for this, he’d been wanting an excuse, he’d been
hungry to lay hands on this bastard.

The bridge trembled while Link’s feet pounded the path in his haste, his fists flying at Brivere,
aimless, careless; it didn’t matter where he hit the Zora, as long as he was able to hit him. It wasn’t
terribly convenient because for one, Brivere had apparently been on duty and was still armored to hell and back. On top of that, thanks to Link’s accursed stature, he couldn’t just deck the dude in the face without some clever acrobatics, much as he hungered to pummel that brooding, impassive look into oblivion.

Link’s fists clanked against the silvery steel of Brivere’s arm guards, clank, clank, clank, one strike after another meeting a flawless, impenetrable blockade of skill. The Hylian let out a holler of burning frustration, certain that he could and would land at least one strike. Yet instead the Knight performed a deft parry faster than Link could hope to process, redirecting the Champion’s assault and grappling him. With haste, Brivere bounded into one of those weightless Zora leaps, sailing over Link’s head with his arm in tow, coming to a sharp landing, then dipping low and using the force of his own jump to yank the Hylian off his feet, swinging his much smaller body overhead and slamming Link down to the stone with brutal force.

A sputter was forced from him upon impact, all breath cast out, leaving him to gasp. Yet despite the disorientation and sudden vulnerability, Link did not still. His burning instincts both guided and assailed, painful experience making him quick to remove himself from danger. Without need for thought, Link’s body rolled away, avoiding a harsh stomping kick with less than seconds to spare. The Zora’s clawed foot pounded the ground, the sharp hook of his toeclaw scraping the stone in an audible, cutting threat. Link hurriedly rolled back to his feet, catching breath and bouncing on his toes.

Again, the Hylian rushed the Zora, his anger blinding him to the fact that he was out of his element. He normally fought with the purest intent to kill, a blade in hand to render his fast, flailing movements utterly dangerous. The Champion’s means of conflict typically involved using his small stature and nimble movements to keep out of his opponents range, while delivering merciless, stinging blows, bleeding larger, more sluggish enemies to their last.

Now, here he was, doing the very opposite of what felt natural, waging a clumsy, frontal assault at an enemy who was his equal in terms of deftness and speed, all on the blind, burning desire to kick his ass and the hope that he could successfully do so.

Link’s moves were rapid fire, passionately furious, his bundled fists flying at the Zora’s abdomen again and again, as it was the only truly vulnerable target. Brivere’s style was patient, cautious, and very fast, like this entire tussle was little more than a warm up. He blocked, parried, damning the vulnerable bones of the careless Hylian’s hands by doing little more than allowing them to connect with his armor with every punch Link threw.

Brivere bounded aside, bouncing here and there, his feet shuffling gracefully, his body light and flexible, leaping, flipping, turning, impossible to follow and even harder to hit. He was a blur of shining gold, his existence as flexible as water, reading every one of Link’s movements with ease.

The Hylian’s footwork was nonexistent, his balance something that teetered haphazardly, not even a minuscule effort put into maintaining any defense of his own; it was scarcely difficult for Brivere to find openings. Link’s attempted strikes were numerous failures, whereas the Knight fought with careful consideration, throwing a single, measured punch between the ten or twenty hurled at him in turn. Every blow was decisive, bruising and bouncing the Hylian about, furthering his lack of steadiness while he exhausted himself.

Everything about Brivere pissed Link off all the more, and he had anger in spades to make that perfectly clear. The Hylian’s hands jabbed and swung, blocked and blocked, so that the skin of his knuckles was scraped raw and bleeding, but he did not stop. His feet were spread wide, a kick aiming low for the Zora’s uncovered legs, a shove chasing Brivere’s retreating dodge, as though
Link could really throw his weight around to save his life. The golden Zora moved on his toes, sidestepping, turning, the muscular length of his tail curling and delivering a blow to the Hylian’s head, effectively knocking him aside.

Link might have damned Zoras in his mind, because he’d never fought anything like a trained Zora warrior, and it was that alone which weighed the odds so heavily against him. His resentment could only be pinned directly upon Brivere however; he hated everything about him.

The Hylian righted himself, brushing his palm at the bruise already blooming upon his cheek bone from the tail swipe he took to the face. It painfully blindsided him as effectively as any punch, his neckbones aching and whiplashed. That ache only intensified Link’s wretched, twisting, flailing, screaming hatred. Everything about this man pissed him off: his impassive face, his calm demeanor, his powerful body, his undeniable speed and skill, his sharp tongue and the way that his every movement was so damn precise. Link could feel the turbulent, belligerent, dangerous part of him coming untethered from all of his inner restraints. It was normally something that he only set free when he was fighting for his life, when he was wracked in pain, fear and carnal fury, yet even if none of that was true now, he couldn’t stop himself. He was so used to letting those feelings drive him. He was so used to surviving this way.

Brivere continued hopping about, twisting and flipping away from every strike, dodging and redirecting Link so that he stumbled, so that he was unsatisfied, discontented, so that his anger boiled without release. But even despite this mild, defensive maneuvering, the golden Zora had steadily turned Link into a flailing, fighting terror who was desperate and vulnerable, all with the force of a few words.

And goddamn him for every one of those words, because everything Brivere had said was true. Every accusation had hit its mark, every awful deed the Zora had presented was one which Link was guilty of, and it was bitterly, wretchedly infuriating that he could not deny any of it. He knew it was all the truth, and that both threatened and terrified him.

Link couldn’t hide from the awful man in the darkened mirror, and Brivere had effectively shoved his face right into it, like a bad dog whose nose was being pressed into his own shit.

“Damn it,” Link hissed in utter frustration while his bloodied knuckles continually met empty air, and the Knight bounced backward, landing atop the rail and walking it with catlike balance.

“So you’ve noticed now just how much faster I am than you?” Brivere hummed, shaking his head in bitter disappointment, not even winded enough to make his voice less steady. “I’m used to moving about while also heaving the great weight of a Silver Longsword. Without it, I’m far beyond anything you could ever hope to land your clumsy strikes upon.”

“And you called me egotistical?” Link blurted with a chuckle that was utterly misplaced upon his snarling features. He was all the more enraged because, yeah, he had forgotten all about the last time he’d seen Brivere fight; his blows were savage and fast, even with a two-handed sword, his speed somehow enough to rival an opponent with a comparably lighter spear. What was worse, the golden Zora had fought Sidon at a level of merciless brutality that he hadn’t even breached against Link.

“Just stop talking about how great you are and start fighting me seriously!” Link called out, almost wanting to be hit back, for the love of fuck. He didn’t care any longer, if it took having his body torn apart to wrangle the necessary savagery within himself to break this man in turn, so be it. If this turned into a nonstop, hate-driven beating that neither of them would back down from, so be it.

“Seriously? You want me to fight you seriously?” Brivere said with narrowed, yellow eyes, one hand reaching for his sheathed sword and drawing it out with a flick and a flash of steel. “Is this
serious enough for you?"

Link didn’t have a chance to say anything in reply before the now armed Knight leapt from the rail, his body twisting, spiraling sideways so that his sword shimmered, spinning around with him like a whirling saw blade. The golden Zora came to a graceful landing, his body dipping low, one hand catching the ground while the other angled his sword upward. His toe claws grappled at the smooth stone, his webbed toes splayed wide for grip and balance.

The Hylian unsheathed his dirk in deadly preparation, his shining, glassy eyes flicking down to look upon the rosy goldenscale steel, concern momentarily flashing in his mind. Was this, really, truly, just another grave mistake, as the Knight had said? How would Sidon respond, should he wake up to learn that the man he loved brandished his gift against his friend, possibly spilling his blood, gravely injuring him.. or worse. Would this be another regret, another fuck up for Link to feel guilty over, while doing nothing to prevent another and another and another..?

Brivere was right. He was right and Link hated it. He hated him.

It was odd. For such a long time, the Hylian ‘Champion’ had begrudged people who praised him, people who claimed that he was a hero, while knowing the lengths of violence he stooped to against ‘monsters,’ while it was evident and clear that he was really just an angry, broken, damaged monster himself, subsisting on the merciless slaughter of living things which were ‘acceptable’ to brutalize.

Killing for the sake of killing; it was what monsters did.

It was what Link did.

He didn’t even fight in the Goddess’s name. He fought because he regretted and resented his own existence so fucking much that it turned him into a bloodthirsty mongrel and he fucking knew it.

And Brivere knew it, too. He was apparently the only one who really saw it at all, who acknowledged it. So why did Link suddenly feel so uncomfortable? Maybe it was just because.. If Brivere saw him for what he really was, then Sidon stood a chance to find out, as well.

In the end, Link decided that mistakes like these weren’t meant to be considered, nor reconsidered in the present, and hey, Brivere drew his sword first, so fuck it.

As usual, even with a weapon in hand, Brivere remained poised and still in his defensive position, ready and waiting for Link to play the part of the aggressor. Even that drove the Hylian to further frustration, and maybe Brivere knew that. Maybe he also knew that Link didn’t have the will to contradict his assumptions because Link ceased to hesitate, spinning the dirk in his grip before racing at the Knight with violent intent.

The blade in the Champion’s hand swiped the air with sharp flicks, his body a vortex of furious, aggressive movement, opening up from his core, upending his existence until he was no longer physical but the embodiment of his weapon and his irresistible will to fight.

Even so, the much smaller dirk was hardly meant to be used against a sword, and was less effective within the range Brivere could easily keep between them. Every flick and thrust met the Zora’s sword with hasty clinks, so fast and brutal that it began to feel that their bodies were moving beyond their own comprehension and they were spectators paying witness from behind a thin pane of glass.

Link’s boots slipped with his flighty footsteps, the wet stone not offering much footing, though Brivere was clearly not having the same problem. Still, Link persisted, at last securing an unexpected opening, the hand guards of his tiny blade hooking against Brivere’s sword so that Link was able to
shove it back just enough to step into the Zora’s range, catching him by one of those long, swinging forefins quite unexpectedly.

“Uh oh,” Link cheerfully chimed in mockery, holding Brivere’s weapon hand at bay with his own while tightly clutching the Zora’s forefin between his fingers, yanking downward while driving his knee harshly up, slamming it into the pointed crest of Brivere’s brow.

That was satisfying.

Link made an effort to repeat the movement, but the Zora sharply yanked himself free and leapt back with a flip and an unsteady landing, the blow having clearly effected that flawless grace of his.

A smirk tugged at one corner of Link’s mouth, steadily pushing further across his face as he watched Brivere clutch at the slope of his brow, his fingers trembling while the pain of it surely danced through his sinuses, glassing his yellow eyes with tears and disorienting his senses. Link lingered in still satisfaction for a moment longer, only enough to see a trickle of blood trailing slowly between the Zora’s fingers.

Otherwise, this was a perfect moment to take advantage, and Link continued his ceaseless assault, coming in with speed that Brivere now had a bit more difficulty matching. Again their blades clinked together, and the Hylian continued to use the danger of his weapon to keep the Zora’s focus, while he made fast swings with the hand opposite, zipping here and there, keeping the Knight on his toes, dancing into his range again and again.

With a flighty dodge and a quick roll, Link darted behind the Zora, reaching and grabbing for what seemed like yet another vulnerable target. Link’s fingers tightly clutched at the small of Brivere’s tail, right before the fork of his fins, in the blind assumption that he could pull a similar maneuver to the one which had worked before.

However, though Link gave a yank, Brivere resisted, his head falling back a tiny bit while his feet spread apart and centered him. A quiet growl of annoyance could be heard from him a second before his tail flicked to one side with enough strength to drag Link along in his determination to avoid letting go. His balance teetered to one side, his feet shuffling to right himself while he stumbled, but not before Brivere spun around and slammed the steel of one arm guard hard into the Hylian’s face. Link was cast helplessly backward, his flopsy body rolling from the strength of the blow until it was forcefully halted, crashing into one of the rails of the bridge with a harsh thump.

Link choked, coughing, sputtering, rolling up to his knees and clutching at his own now bleeding nose, or lip, or both, his gaze immediately seeking the sight of his enemy. He found Brivere standing at a slight distance with a rather smug look on his own bruised, blood-smeared face.

“You slimy piece of fuck,” Link growled under his breath, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the blue stone beneath his scuffed hands. He inched forward on his knees, reaching for the dirk that had slid from his grasp in his fall, then he clambered to a stand, the back of his hand brushing at the streak of blood coming from his nose.

“I’m losing my patience.” Brivere’s voice was a rumble of warning to chorus the rapid clicks of the Hylian’s feet as he charged the Zora again, blade swinging wildly, his eyes gleaming a wild, crazed blue. “And my sense of mercy is sure to go with it.”

Link didn’t care. He barely heard one single word. His thoughts were absent, his ears pinned back. His mind was fully submerged in his bitter hatred and the task before him; beating this guy’s ass one way or another. His dirk pushed, slashed, fierce and hard against the edge of Brivere’s sword, the fight to get into his range almost a losing battle, if not for the fact that Link was so utterly determined.
He rushed forward and Brivere’s feet skipped back. He took one shot after another, one deadly swing always following the last in rapid fire. Link wielded the dirk like it was a massive blade with unstoppable force, pushing, pushing more, breaking into the golden Zora’s space, the heel of his boots slamming down onto the edge of the Zora’s webbed toes while the blade caught the Zora’s wrist, slicing without restraint. Link’s head ducked low, his upper body forcefully ramming into the bruised pale of the Knight’s scales where he’d taken the first hit.

Brivere’s sword clattered aside when his wrist was cut, the metallic sound of it echoing up and down the canyon walls while he teetered backward. ‘Now I have him,’ Link was thinking, already focused on putting the Zora on his back, pinning him down, beating him without mercy. Yet as the Knight went back, his body arched, his hands going overhead to break his fall, his feet going up to chase his line of movement, his toeclaws hooking into the fabric of Link’s doublet, cutting into the soft flesh beneath so that Link let out a yelp.

The Zora sprung, his grappling toeclaws casting Link overhead, then back harshly to the ground, the Knight’s musculature tightening as he straightened, one foot on Link’s chest, bundled still in the cloth of his doublet, while the other stamped down the Hylian’s one, armed hand.

“Ahh,” Link choked, trying to gasp against the sheer weight pressed into his chest.

“Concede defeat, Hylian,” Brivere uttered in warning. “This reckless way of life doesn’t just harm those around you, but you, yourself.”

At both ends of the bridge where the two rivals had fought to an apparent standstill, small, loosely bunched groups of Zora bystanders had wandered over, drawn by the commotion. They looked on with a mix of responses, some excited, others concerned, their murmuring voices growing audible enough to be heard over the trickling fall while the golden Zora held the Champion in submission.

Link gave Brivere nothing; he refused. He was little more than a pair of fiery, glaring blue eyes beneath a muss of tousled, blonde locks and a snarling face painted with smears of blood. He could feel the Zora’s foot upon his chest lessening the weight pushed into him, giving him sufficient air to plead for mercy if he so chose, but he’d gladly die first, not that Brivere knew as much.

“No?” the golden Zora questioned, his webbed toes clenching more tightly against the soft Hylian in his grasp, the sharp of his claws hooked into Link’s flesh and digging in. Link kicked and squirmed, his one free hand pushing and striking the legs of the Zora to no avail. Brivere at last let out a disappointed sigh, the kind that might come from him in response to a stubborn child, then he reached down, keeping his legs straight to maintain his hold on the Hylian while he wrenched the dirk from Link’s tight, desperate grasp.

The furrow’s of Link’s face softened for a wary instant, his eyes following the weapon as it was stolen right out of his hand. There must have been something fleetingly pleading in his countenance, something woeful and aching at the loss of the prized gift from Sidon, because the golden Zora appeared to pause in consideration, as if he actually gave a single shit.

Then again, it could have been the simple acknowledgment of the dirk being crafted of royal goldenscale that caused Brivere’s momentary hesitance. When that little shred of guilt passed, the Zora no longer held back, casting the weapon from the bridge with a swift flick of his arm.

A howl tore from the Champion’s throat, his ears pushing upward in order to confirm that which he couldn’t see; the flitting slice of the air when his prized weapon shot into the distance and disappeared.

But Brivere evidently cared nothing for the Hylian’s turmoil, his body rolling forward and across the
ground with Link still in tow, flinging him overhead once more and tossing him with enough force that his body skidded nearly the length of the bridge, leaving the tattered heap of Hylian to rest at the feet of the gathering crowd.

Link wasn’t done, however, oh no, far from it. His anger was newly stoked, his bitter indignance heaping higher, not just from the difficult time he was having, but because that asshole had thrown Sidon’s gift away. Link’s desperate eyes searched for his dirk, helpless and unable to locate it. He tore the Sheikah Slate from his belt, fingers rapidly tapping at the magnesis rune with the hope of being able to use it to find his prized possession, but he didn’t.

Instead, in his rage, Link selected the discarded sword which belong to Brivere, drawing it to his own hand with a silvery flash, returning the slate to his belt and charging after the damnable Zora.

Link didn’t know what he was going to do. The blade swung wildly when he came within range, catching the surprised look on Brivere’s face with a certain merciless pleasure. The disarmed Zora bounded back, bouncing about and flipping into his dodges as he had been the entire time, yet now he was weaponless and Link had a sword, the most deadly possible weapon that he could ever find in his hands. Link gave chase, tireless, unrelenting, determined, hungry for some means to end this, but blind to exactly what that was.

He ignored the question in his anger. He overlooked the knowledge of the only possible answer.

What could he do? Killing was all he knew, all he was made for, all that gave his existence purpose, his body strength, his heart desire, his burning mind fleeting satisfaction.

Brivere moved rapidly from parry to parry, from block to dodge, looking like a man struggling to keep up, fighting himself to plan his next move while he flailed helplessly at the other end of the blade. His scales had a wet, glossy sheen and his pupils were widened to deep, dark pearls in his attempts to read the chaotic and ever-hastening danger. Sparks danced off of the two combatants, when the sword met the Zora’s arm guards over and over. The Knight’s sharp teeth shined, his lips opening in his new rush for breath, then finally the hiss that came from him when a blow connected.

Gasps and clamoring voices rose further, more and more bystanders gathering at the ends of the bridge, as well as the banks below. It seemed that many could feel their own blood suddenly racing at the sight of Brivere’s unexpectedly spilled, and he leapt high, flipping back to put a much larger gap of space between himself and the Hylian.

“Ahh-” the golden Zora let out a little utterance of pain, his hand pressed tight against the warmth of a trickling blood flow. The edge of the blade had caught him near his hip, right above his fins, and he took a breath while he drew his hand away to assess the wound.

It wasn’t shallow by any means, but it also wasn’t enough to be life-threatening. A stream of crimson stained his pale gold surface, trickling down along one muscular thigh. It was painful, but it wouldn’t take long for his scales to interlock in order to cease the loss of blood.

From somewhere at the bent Zora’s back, an onlooker scoffed, their toeclaws clicking against the ground, their ulnar fins folding tight as their forearms crossed over their chest. They leaned nearer to the Zora at their side, their voice a cynical hum while they commented, “Who would have guessed? This guy can’t defeat anybody who still has both of their eyes.”

A soft wave of laughter rushed across the gathering crowd, a certain tightness clutching at the Knight’s chest in response. He wished he hadn’t heard that, but he didn’t know why he was surprised any longer. He didn’t know why the same old anger and shame felt it necessary to flare up, to burn beneath his scales, but nevertheless, it did.
Why was his existence such an affront to these people? What had he done to deserve this never-ending mockery?

The click of the Champion’s boots was slow and steady now, a casual approach, a predator closing in on bested prey, the kill an immanent taste already resting on the tongue of the victor. Link’s blue eyes shined like jewels beneath his dampened locks, like they possessed a burning light of their own, yet at the sight of his foe, bent and bleeding, his fighting instincts finally stilled long enough to let some sense of logic catch up.

He couldn’t do anything more dire than what he’d already done and was resolved to stick to that. The edge of the blade in his hand dragged the ground, a gritty, metallic scraping coming from it before his fingers loosened on the hilt, and it clattered aside.

“So much for being beyond what I can land my clumsy strikes on, right?” the Hylian confidently called out as he approached, a snarl wrinkling his face, promising that despite his discarded weapon, his rage was still a burning inferno. “Get up!”

“You like to assume victory an awful lot,” the Zora growled from one knee, his crisp, yellow stare meeting that of his blood-smeared rival. “Erroneous.”

Brivere’s hand fell away from the bleeding wound, and he got to his feet, straightening and ignoring the pain of his injury in favor of the itching indignance, the fury which had always been his inner tune, a secret hidden by his impassive face.

This time, it was Brivere who rushed his opponent, his bared teeth a gleaming flash as bright as the silver shine of his armor. The Hylian threw up his tightened fists in defense, in surprise at the Zora coming toward him in a blur, yet just as Link was sure he’d feel a hard strike, the Knight leapt, flipping overhead and landing long enough to collect the discarded sword. Link’s ears pressed back at the clink of brandished steel, and he turned on heel, mirroring Brivere himself who had spun around to face the Champion.

Brivere knew what he had to do now, and he’d been preparing for this moment, unbeknownst to himself. He was going to execute the whirlpool technique on land, at last, with success.

The golden Zora no longer had to think through the steps he’d performed dozens upon dozen of times. He knew them, he felt them naturally with every inch of his being. His feet slid apart, his weight balancing between them, lapping from one foot to the other in fluid tandem, then he charged, his toes springing, rotating, gaining speed until his body was a motion blur of silver and gold, encircling his enemy.

Link’s ears twitched forward, then backward, one cocked in an entirely different direction at the swirl of sound surrounding him, his eyes peering about in the same state of puzzled desperation. His blonde hair danced against his face in messy tendrils from the wind created by the Zora’s furious speed. His fists were tight and raised high in defense as he was surrounded by multiple images of the golden Knight in a perfect circle, imprisoning him.

Like the hasty battle-monger that he was, Link let out a war cry and raced at one of the blurry images, thinking he would either strike the Zora and send this entire technique spinning out of control, or he’d pass through and escape the dizzying prison of nonstop motion. Instead, his own strike was deflected, bouncing him backward. Then, as though Brivere had been waiting, expecting Link’s thoughtless action, the spiral of copies began to move, one at a time racing forward to strike the Hylian, tossing him mercilessly between themselves in a way that truly felt like being set upon by a pack of wolves, or a hoard of bokoblins, or any other group of ferocious enemies out for blood.
The Hylian’s body was pummeled by the onslaught, his balance never quite returning while he stumbled between blows, his arms drawn over his face to prevent another strike from landing there. He took fists to his back, to his gut, the butt of the Zora’s sword harshly pounding into him, a thousand consecutive blows battering and bruising him, wearing at his will until it was a fragile thing, covered in a thousand tiny cracks.

At last, Brivere himself wanted little more, and rushed in one final time to land a kick to the back of the ‘Champion’s’ knees, forcing him to crumple to the ground before all who were paying witness. The Zora bounded over the Hylian’s head in a last twisting flip, landing before him with his sword drawn and held out so that the blade hovered just above the Hylian’s shoulder.

The golden Zora’s chest was deeply expanding and contracting, breathless and exhausted from the effort, but his impassive front did not give away anything of it, nor did the sharp precision of his movements waver.

Looking down on his foe, for an instant, Brivere was reminded of his fiery opponent from years ago. He could still see her in his mind’s eye, on her knees in brutal defeat, her face still not fully healed despite Estuu’s efforts, yet everything about her was still proud and unbroken, refusing to back down.

“You’re a man on your knees, a bested foe,” Brivere spoke when at last he’d caught his breath enough to do so. “Nothing in the way you fight speaks of a true warrior, nor a Knight with any kind of real training. You’re graceless, formless, little more than a disorganized brawler. You’re scarcely any different from the Hylians that remain today, the pale shadows of their fallen Kingdom’s former might. You’re no Champion of Hyrule, that much is glaringly clear.”

A bitter laugh came from the subdued Hylian, blood dripping from his lips while his head lowered and he cast his furious glare uselessly at the stone before himself. His callused fingers were clutched into fists, his body rigid from the reminder of the world’s weight on his back, and his wretched self-loathing being set free against his wishes.

“I’ve been waiting so long for someone to realize that.. hoping someone would,” he uttered, his voice rough and pitched low, his head turning to one side so that he could spit out the blood pooling on his tongue. “..but why in Hylia’s name did it have to be you?”

What Brivere didn’t realize, of course, was that for what Link lacked in flawless skill, he made up for in boundless determination, his will to fight a thing that mended itself as soon as it was broken, little different from his life, which couldn’t be ceased.

The Hylian rolled aside, out from beneath the threat of the blade and back to his feet, his pain a boost to his speed, his suffering a boost to his strength. But the Zora was, on equal terms, in utter refusal to be bested. He did not linger long as the Champion escaped his grasp, his sword returning to its sheath just before his webbed toes skipped across the stone of the bridge in his haste to put this damnable beast down for good.

Link danced out of the way of aggressive blows that were thrown now without hesitation, like Brivere had been saving them all along, preparing for the necessity of going all out in order to best his longtime rival. The Zora’s fists struck the Hylian’s parries with shattering strength, and even Link was forced to acknowledge that he wouldn’t withstand such a barrage forever.

The Champion moved with chaotic speed, dodging from side to side, leaping here and there much the same as the Zora, making himself an impossible target, and he could tell by the way Brivere’s sharp, golden eyes chased him that he was having difficulty reading the style he’d only just denounced as predictable and clumsy. Brivere, too, was becoming fatigued from the use of his fancy
technique on land, as well as the quiet trickle of blood leaving little spatters beneath his feet- he must have known that he was bound for exhaustion and had to bring this to a quick close, lest the Hylian would outlast him on stamina alone.

Each combatant blocked and parried, throwing out strikes with overflowing fury, both landing as many as they avoided. Brivere kicked low, his raised arms shifting from blocking to delivering a sequence of jabs and swings that audibly slashed the air around them, yet still Link avoided them. The Hylian’s feet sidestepped, his knees bending to give him power enough to spring backward, landing upon the bridge railing and pushing off of it, his body whirling into a kick aimed for that goddamned Knight’s face.

Brivere had yet to throw his defending hands back up from his last attack, the flaw in his speed costing him as the Hylian’s boot landed a powerful strike and he stumbled back, his body arching, his hands catching his weight while his feet swung overhead, then he landed with a little bounce on his toes.

The Zora blinked, shaking his head to reorient himself in the reeling haze that attempted to overcome him. His jaw ached and the corner of his lip was split from the hit, but the tip of his tongue slithered out to quickly lap away the small bead of crimson.

And with almost no plan in mind other than ceaseless assault, the Hylian charged at the Zora again, perhaps hoping to defeat him in the moment of dulled awareness that came with the blow to the head. Brivere skipped backward, darting away but Link continued his forward charge, only for the Zora to leap and flip over his head. The Knight’s arms crossed against his chest, his body straightening into a spiral rotation, his long forefins flying outward with his motion.

The Zora’s knee bent, his leg drawing back when he sailed through the air, then it sharply shot forward, a kick slamming into the Hylian’s back and tossing him aside once more. Brivere hoped that the foolish, stubborn boy wouldn’t continue this pointless struggle any longer, but he also knew better than to let outcomes ride on hopes. He took a few running steps, throwing his body into another high, flipping leap, his toeclaws clicking against the ground when he came to a landing before the Hylian’s boneless, rolling frame, one foot drawing up and coming harshly down to bring the thoroughly beaten boy to a stop.

“This is over. It was over before it began, you merely couldn’t see it,” Brivere hissed, his split lip beading with new blood as he moved his mouth. “Allow me to show you.”

The Zora bent down, bundling his fingers in the fabric of the other man’s doublet, using it to lift him high, off of his feet. The material tightened around Link’s body, straining with the force of his weight, but that did not stop the Champion from flailing to escape.

Brivere’s arm straightened, his muscles tightening but holding steady while his enemy was placed over the side of the railing and dangled helplessly in air. He was still surprisingly lucid despite his battered state, but then again, that could have been the sight of the massive drop which he was precariously hanging over, with only his enemy’s grasp to keep him from falling.

“You asked me to fight seriously,” the golden Zora stated like it was an astute observation, despite how the words slid sharply off his tongue. “...However, one cannot fight any Zora at their most serious on land.”

The sharp of the Zora’s fingerscales held the Hylian in tight suspension, piercing the cloth of his doublet, yet once he’d spoken, his fingers unfurled, releasing Link to free fall toward the watery canyon below.
No stranger to plummeting great distances, Link barely let out a gasp at the familiar feeling of his stomach leaping into his throat. His body was a great weight against open air, dropping at such a rate that the wind raced past him with razor fury. Link’s hands fumbled about, reaching for the paraglider out of instinct, though he’d grown unfamiliar with the mechanism needed to spread it open. His jaw clenched, his chest tight from how he held his breath, trying to keep himself from spinning out of control while his clumsy fingers grappled with the chord, which was dancing in the wind. He only prayed the item hadn’t gotten damaged from the fight.

Finally, he clutched the elusive cable in his grasp, tugging it so that the paraglider’s wings spread open, catching the air with a violent puff that yanked Link’s body backward, ripping painfully at his shoulders from the force of coming to such a swift halt. A grunt of pain was elicited from him, and he was left to curse himself for being so rusty, for letting himself gain so much speed before he was able to do something that should have been effortless.

Brivere paid witness from above, his golden eyes little different than those of an islander hawk as he clambered up, perching on the rail, his body straightened and awaiting the right moment. When the Hylian at last succeeded in opening that glider, Brivere bounced on his toes, springing from his perch and taking a graceful dive toward his escaping prey. He fell with rapid, aerodynamic speed, his body a golden blade that sliced the air.

With his fast approach, the Knight tucked his legs in against his plated chest, spinning into a forceful rotation, only to straighten at the last moment, his feet kicking out beneath him and hitting the cloth which the Hylian had been using to glide to safety. His toeclaws hooked into the item, grasping it, then Brivere pushed his upper body downward, spinning faster and faster with the hapless Hylian in tow.

Link’s back struck the water under the bridge with the force of stone, knocking the air from him, feeling as though it had shattered his soft, Hylian body, his skull jarred like a fragile sparrow’s egg cast from the nest. Darkness consumed him immediately upon impact and all was lost. His will to fight was wrung from his grasp, all control was forcefully torn away, and he hadn’t even the proper awareness left to offer a reaction.

His mind drifted while the Zora darted about, pale blue fins flared in aggression, his feet paddling enough that he raced in a quick spiral around the floating Champion before grabbing hold of him and forcing him downward, shooting toward the bottom of the icy pool.

It was over.

It was beyond over, yet this foolish man was hardly the sort to recognize that fact. Brivere would play the part of a harsh teacher, driving that lesson home so that it would never, ever be forgotten.

When Link’s body harshly collided at rock bottom, pain ripped through his battered frame, pleaded with his venturing consciousness to return from the darkness which had swallowed him. His vision flashed with dull light; he’d been here before, he’d felt this state of fading in and out, he’d felt this breathless, helpless moment preceding fatality.

He’d healed, but he’d never been the same.

Link tried to open his heavy lids, finding that a blinding light was glaring into his face, a large hand was tight around his neck, a warrior hovered over him with a face that was blurred by shadow, only recognizable by the eye of truth smeared across their countenance like it hid them beneath a merciless sense of duty.

He kicked and flailed, the flashes bringing with them a sudden sense of panic, leaving the hopeless,
broken Champion grappling with his frail hold on reality. This was a lapse, it wasn’t real..

His mind flashed with remembrance, words dancing across an illuminated screen, his eyes gazing at the hands typing them, but they were hazy and difficult to read. He pushed himself deeper into the void, his sight flickering back to the image of Brivere’s golden eyes glaring down, no, no, don’t go back yet. Focus.

What did the words say?

‘..We’re led to believe that the Sword that Seals the Darkness chose him.. never indicated that he could hear the voice from the blade.. lack some of the legendary powers.. failed utterly..’

What?

He averted his gaze from the screen, turning instead to peer upon the single, glowing pod which was tucked within the Shrine of Resurrection, finding himself looking down on his own body, pale and littered with fatal wounds, his tattered flesh a pallid gray marked with deep violet bruising, his glazed eyes wide and blindly staring, no light held within.

This wasn’t real!

‘..Link,’ the voice of the Princess called out in distant desperation, ‘open your eyes.’

The Champion’s eyes at last shot open, his sight returning to reality while his breath ran short in the watery depths. Brivere was upon him, pinning him down once more beneath his feet. One was against Link’s neck, clenching his flesh tight between the dangerous sharp of his toeclaw and the rest of his toes, his grip as powerful as any hand.

It was likely thanks to the Zora’s tight hold on him that he hadn’t inhaled any water during his lapse, though now Link was left to glare helplessly up, kicking and fighting to be set free, even if all struggles were rendered useless against the overwhelming power the Zora was able to exert underwater.

Brivere’s features were difficult to make out in the inky, nighttime waters, save for how the bright of his scales appeared radiant and reflective, cast in some mysterious blue haze. The Hylian’s head fell back, his hair dancing weightlessly around his face, his eyes strained and searching for some kind of salvation, catching sight of a fluttering figure just outside of his reach. Her spectral light shined ever the more softly underwater, dancing and rippling around her, a hazy halo that returned sight to the struggling Hylian.

Mipha- she’d come now without purpose or reason that Link knew, as she’d yet to offer healing, and the Hylian severely doubted that she even could heal him, should he drown. No, coming back from that would fall to his accursed resurrection ability.

There was something unusual about her though, and Link couldn’t help but wonder if he was still lapsing, the mind he’d doubted for so long taking things even further now, as if he really needed another reason to question his own sanity. His view of the fallen Zora Champion was obscured and upside-down, but even so, Link could see that Mipha’s typically subtle expressions had been cast aside in favor of something uncontrolled and intense. Her face was furrowed with fear and sorrow, her gaze bleak and shining with a kind of painful, heartbroken recognition, a helplessness that broke whatever was left of her waning presence. Her hands drew upward, her sharp fingerscales pressing hard against her own draping forefins while her pretty, painted lips opened as though she possessed a body with which to utter a single word, and then..
A sound came from her, but it wasn’t a voice. There was only noise; a strange, deafening, metallic static, like steel scraping steel, like a swirling vortex, like a fast vibration that trembled across their very surroundings, shooting up Link’s spine, setting each of his nerve-endings to some kind of electrical overstimulation.

However, as Link writhed from the painful, unholy sound, his dimming vision drifted to the man still hovering over him. He honestly wished this jealous Knight would just skip to the killing blow already, rather than forcing Link to fade away like this.

It didn’t matter- the Champion could feel his strength waning, his desperate chest trying to heave and gasp, even though he knew there was no air. Brivere’s face was the same calm impassive, painted by Mipha’s light. He was staring down, measuring, analyzing, maybe wondering how much of this a Hylian could take, maybe wishing it was over, too.

Link couldn’t wait for that inevitable end. He was hungry for it, longing for it, much as he feared it, too. There was some solace to be found in the twisted notion that, while he was a monster and that fact could never be changed, if Brivere took his life here and now, then he would always know that he wasn’t the only one..

..and that this self-righteous bastard couldn’t pretend to be any better.

Yet before Link succumbed to that awful and wonderful moment of oblivion, the Zora spread his arms wide, his fins still flared, and he paddled upward with powerful strokes, shooting toward the top with Link tight in his grasp. They broke the surface with explosive force, frothy water bursting skyward, crowning their ascent, then, at the height of their leap, Brivere grabbed at Link’s body and tossed him like a useless item onto the shore.

The hard landing left the Hylian sputtering and gasping, his hair and clothes plastered to his frame like a second skin, his body numb and trembling from the chill. After his fight with Vah Ruta, he’d been careful to never reach that level of frigid wetness ever again. Clearly, not hard enough.

Still, his unfortunate physical condition wasn’t anywhere near as painful as his disappointment. Mercy; it was a disgusting feeling, sickening. Nothing had ever shown him mercy but somehow, it was worse than a hundred deaths.

The Zora crested the water once again, his every move executed with elegance to spare, his golden frame flipping to a landing near where Link was left on his hands and knees.

“You cannot win,” Brivere stated, flicking one forefin back so the water raced off of it and over his shoulder. He’d made his point glaringly clear, and was quite sure that a wiser beast would be begging for mercy, not that he’d ever make the mistake of regarding this Hylian as wise.

“No,” Link spat, still coughing and reeling from the lack of air, from the effort of reclaiming his breath. “You’re the one who can’t win.”

The pattering of a dozen excited feet shrouded out the silence between the two rivals, the dull roar bringing a crowd of spectating Zoras, who possessed enough collective tension between themselves to hold up the weight of their stone-carved city. They’d apparently been watching all this time, long enough to see the two warriors disappear into the water, and they’d been waiting with baited breath to find out what the result of this showdown would be. Some were aghast, others excited, and yet others were neutral but interested. Some whispered awful things about the Knight, and others remarked at how easily the supposed Champion had been bested with concern in their voices. How could this man defeat the Calamity if he couldn’t even defeat a single Zora? Some only wondered where the City Guard was and why they hadn’t arrived yet to put an end to this incredible madness.
The crowd was in a frenzy. Link could almost imagine they were waiting for his immanent demise in the hopes of tearing the soft flesh from his bones, stripping him clean in a few awful moments.

Apparently those odd thoughts about Zoras being looming predators hadn’t diminished.

“I beg your pardon, but I’ve won,” Brivere raised his voice over the crowd to admonish his bested enemy. “Deny it all you want, but it is nevertheless true.”

“You can’t win and you never will!” Link snapped insistently, his shining glare upturned and brimming with hatred, despite how small he must have looked, soaking wet and shivering. “You can never win against me, unless you kill me! And you can’t kill me, so you’ll never win!”

“Kill you?” Brivere repeated in confusion, the furrow of his own anger fading away, leaving him wide-eyed and bewildered, looking on the Hylian like he was mad.

“Go ahead,” the Hylian growled, dragging himself back to a stand, though it was shaky and unbalanced. “Kill me if you’re so determined to be rid of me! Kill me if you’re not a coward! Go ahead and try it!”

Link took a step closer to the hovering Knight, finding with ease, even in the shadows, that his expression was muddled with doubt. He looked as though he couldn’t decide whether to be intimidated or concerned, like he couldn’t understand what fucking gall and madness it must have taken for an opponent to challenge him to take their life.

The Hylian shook his head, flecks of water being flung from his wet locks, then he brushed the strands back from his eyes with a quick gesture, his hands tightly bundling back into fists.

There was no end to this. There would never be an end to this, because that was the very nature of the Hylian Champion; he was a force that could only be temporarily deterred, but never stopped. He could be beaten, broken, bled until he had nothing left to give, and yet.. He could never be stopped.

“Kill him,” a quiet voice from the crowd spoke up in the still of the Knight’s hesitation. A lone Zora inched forward, so that she was standing at the head of the gathering which had surrounded the two rivals. Her voice was smooth and calm, her words spoken like they were little more than a pleasant suggestion worthy of consideration.

The sound of the Zora woman’s tone immediately drew the golden Knight’s attention, his yellow eyes flicking over to regard her, to look on her with confusion that was steadily heightening. From the moment his Hylian enemy had begun to encourage him to strike a killing blow, Brivere hadn’t thought things could get any more bizarre- but civilians, too?

Brivere’s gaze shifted to Link, noticing that his demeanor had rapidly changed, as well. His fists had been placed aside like tired tools and his back was to the Knight, his attention turned, instead, to the woman who’d spoken. His ears were flat in his sudden uncertainty, one of them perking when Brivere’s voice spoke up to question what he’d just heard.

“Excuse me?” the golden Zora uttered, the words falling off his tongue like, for this moment, he only barely understood the language they were speaking.

“Go on, do it,” the woman stated again, a smile on her sweet features. She had a motherly look about her, and appropriately, since everything about her screamed ‘Mom gently encouraging her kid to try something new and scary.’ “..Kill him.”

“Just kill him,” another Zora said, stepping forward. He, too, had a smile on his weathered, kindly features, his voice soft and earnest, continuing, “Go ahead.”
“Is this some kind of joke?” the Knight’s voice raised ever so slightly in volume, indignance pure and easily audible. All he could think was that these people were taunting him, playing along with the Hylian’s little assertion that he must have been a coward if he refused to take a life unnecessarily. But no, that couldn’t have been right, because Link was still looking from face to face, his head turning this way and that in growing trepidation, and in fact, he’d taken a few steps back, in Brivere’s direction.

“Kill him!” a little child cheered aloud, giggling and bouncing on her toes.

“Kill him.” Another Zora from the crowd came forward to insist on this suggestion, with a companion at their side nodding enthusiastically in agreement.

A few more joined in, softly uttering the phrase, ‘kill him,’ then a few more, and even more, until a wall of Zoras of various shapes and sizes were shoulder to shoulder, their formation tightening around the two exhausted rivals. Voices from the crowd raised higher, joining in chorus, chanting in encouragement, “Kill him! Kill him!”

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Chapter End Notes

Friends!
How? Was? That?
I hope you all really enjoyed the fight, and you're all on the edge of your seats! And how about the cliffhanger, huh?
Haha, I put my damn lifeblood into this chapter. I do hope that it was a worthy throw down. :)
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

It wasn't long before the Guard Captain caught word of the disturbance caused by the Prince's Knight and the Hylian Champion. But because Link was his friend, he set off to handle the matter himself, knowing that his own hand would be the most merciful in delivering justice. When he arrived on the scene, however, there was plenty to question, and even more to leave him astounded.

Chapter Notes

Hello, friends. Was it agony waiting for this chapter? I think this one is pretty action-packed, there's some surprises, there's quite a few emotional moments, and overall it was really enjoyable to write, so I hope you all really like it as well. Be sure you let me know whether or not this was what you expected! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Only one of the four grand chambers of the Basilica had yet to be repurposed to occupy Zoras ill with the Waterblight, and it was this lone chamber which still offered privacy while the halls overflowed with Undercity folk awaiting their handouts; that was how the single occupant saw it, anyway.

She was stripped of her armor, her emotional pain and turmoil bared before the Goddess whom she'd served so faithfully. Her aqua scales shined like glass in the soft candlelight of the alter where she was knelt, her head dipped low in front of an effigy of Hylia.

"Praise to Farosh, Great Spirit of Valor, may your courage guide us in our darkest hours, may your valiance accompany us in pursuit of the light, may we face the danger of all that is vile, of all that is evil, of all that is wretched, and in the name of the Goddess Hylia, may we amend all that is wrong, and never falter."

The Knight's voice was unwavering, though her strong shoulders shook with each word, the sound of vows taken so long ago echoing softly throughout the vast, empty chamber. It did not escape her notice when the sound of softly pattering footsteps announced the arrival of another Zora, presumably a lost soul seeking the guidance of Hylia in the dark of the late hours. The Knight paid the newcomer no heed, continuing.

"Praise to the Goddess Hylia, bearer of the light, To uphold your virtue, we shall offer our spears, To uphold your purity, we shall bare our hearts, To uphold your dominion, we shall... Sacrifice."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Most Courageous One," the newcomer spoke up at last, their tone gentle,
with a warm, rich timbre that was unmistakable. The knelt Knight Divine raised her head immediately, turning to glance over her shoulder with surprise written over her tear-stained visage.

“Your Grace?” the Knight uttered, astounded to find the only Zora in all of the Basilica who stood ahead of her in power now waiting in the shadows like an unassuming page or a casual visitor. She knew automatically that this unusual event could only be the result of something much more dire than the diviner let on, standing there exuding calm tranquility as they did.

The Knight Divine got to her feet, turning and descending the pale blue stairs which led up to the altar, then she went down upon one knee again, this time before the holy Zora whose eyes possessed the purity of Hylia’s light.

“How may I serve you?” she asked, determined despite the way loss had begun to wear at her resolve.

“Much as you must feel that you’re at your very weakest, your people need your strength now,” the Divine Oracle explained, the goldenscale chains and ornaments which adorned their body jingling with the slightest movement. “A dark hour has fallen upon us.”

“Have you had a vision, Your Grace?” the bowed Knight asked, her steely voice laced with urgency and purpose. She raised her head enough to peer imploringly upward, the golden scales which dotted her hide glinting in the candlelight.

“You must send your Knights to the surface. An enemy has infiltrated our great kingdom.” The Divine Oracle answered in a way that was both calm, yet quick. “Our young Prince is in grave danger.”

“You mean, I must send those of us who remain,” she uttered bitterly, her fins curling in woe, in disgrace. It had been a hundred years since her Order’s numbers had shrunken so near to extinction, and even then, it was in bloody struggle against all the horrors of the Calamity. Now, one by one, her Knights had faded from this world, their lives stolen by a plague, devoid of honor and valor.

Her beautiful son, with his scales the color of the summer sky and his gleaming silvery armor, had been rendered a pale, empty husk weeping murky black, dying on his back.

The Knight Divine pushed aside the troubling images of her dear, lost Strata, hardening herself to fight another battle in the name of the Goddess she so loved and trusted.

“We shall answer the call, Your Grace.”

It was somewhere on the cusp of late and early, and for the Guard Captain, the hour for rest had arrived at last. The black Zora had paused just before unbuckling the first strap of his armor when a yawn blurred his vision.

He had always been completely dedicated to his job and willfully overworked himself, but he could scarcely recall having ever been so tired. He brushed away the tears which had rendered him glassy-eyed, then bent down to begin the process of removing his armor once more.

“There’s apparently been a physical altercation of some kind,” an on-duty guardsman announced as she entered the barracks, her armor clinking with every movement.

“Proof that Undercity people will get into it over nothing, even without being completely wasted,” Bazz’s Lieutenant commented, strapping his own armor on, preparing to replace the Guard Captain
during his off hours.

“Sir, it’s actually in the northernmost end of the Uppercity, near Prince Sidon’s tower,” the
guardsman explained. “I would have grabbed somebody else on patrol, but I didn’t think it would be
wise to lighten the Prince’s security on account of this.”

Bazz’s hands paused, his claws poised against the smooth leather straps while he listened in interest.
A very large part of him wanted to say ‘fuck this,’ and head back to his quarters where he’d stashed
some of the drinks he’d lifted from Zambezi’s estate, but another part of him, probably the very part
which had led him to becoming the Guard Captain, was urging him not to go through with that plan.

That part of him still clung to the notion of dedicated vigilance, of being the one to stand in the way
of the chaos threatening to tear their world apart. He maybe didn’t really believe that such a thing
was actually possible any longer, given the state of things, but.. perhaps tonight was the night to hang
on to childish ideals.

“The fight is drawing an unusually large crowd of bystanders,” the guardsman continued, mostly
addressing the Lieutenant, knowing that he was normally in charge by this time. “We’re going to
need a few hands for crowd control.”

“It must be one hell of a fight,” the Lieutenant commented with a little chuckle.

Bazz straightened, letting out a sigh of frustration, disappointed with himself for listening to his own
whimsical feelings, rather than making the selfish choice. The Lieutenant blinked in uncertainty,
glancing over at his superior when Bazz refrained from shedding his armor.

“Captain, I can take care of it,” he attempted to reassure the dark-scaled Zora. “It’s not a problem.”

“Hnn,” the sleek, black Zora hummed in a gruff, overly tired way, shaking his head. “I have a bad
feeling about it. Order some of the others to get into their armor and meet us over there.”

“That’s some bad feeling, Sir,” said the Lieutenant, everything in him betraying his dubiousness, but
he obeyed nonetheless, quickly brushing past the other guardsman and out of the armory, heading
down the hall to the shared sleeping quarters.

“You’re with me,” the black Zora spoke in command, addressing the guardsman who’d delivered the
report.

“Yes, Sir,” she answered, falling in line with the Captain when he hurried off.

By the time they arrived, the apparent fight had gone from the lofty height of the Uppercity bridges
to the shores below, at the very borders of Zora’s Domain. Yet still it was just as reported; the area
was heavily populated by gathered bystanders, many more than Bazz ever knew to be out and about
at such an hour, even when Zambezi’s Cantina was open. It immediate struck him as quite odd.

The oddity of the situation only escalated further once the pair of city guardsmen descended the
bridge where they’d expected to break up a couple of hot-blooded, young nobles fighting over
family honor, or some other nonsense, finding instead a massive crowd passionately chanting the
words, “Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!”

“What in Hylia’s name..?” Bazz uttered, his eyes narrowed in a confused glare. Everything about
this served to intensify that feeling of dread that had first ghosted up his spine when the report came
in, but he maintained a sense of discipline, not yet taking his weapon in hand. The guardsman at his
side, however, wasn’t quite so unperturbed. The dark scaled Zora spoke to address her, saying,
“Whatever the hell this is, it’s vital that we get it under control as quickly as possible.”
She gave a nod, raising her voice above the blood-thirsty clamor of the crowd and pounded the butt of her spear against the river stone beneath her feet to give her cries more authority.

“Break it up!” she called out, her voice a sharp, sweet thing which was odd to hear so loud and serious. The armored woman shouldered past the outer perimeter of the tightly bunched crowd of Zoras. “Clear the area!”

Bazz followed directly behind the guardsman, pushing people out of his way a touch less gently. They had no business being out here behaving like a maddened mob and he spared his manners on them. Even still, the crowd closed up behind them, stepping right back into the same place as though they hadn’t been ordered to clear out. It had the Captain glancing over one shoulder, suspicion adding to the tired shadow on his features, whereas the faces surrounding him looked much too calm and collected for the situation.

It was only more difficult to push through once the two lone guardsmen broke the front of the cluster, to the point that the younger Zora began using the shaft of her spear to forcefully clear the way. At last, they successfully breached the apparent fighting pit in the center of the crowd, only to find two individuals that neither of them had expected.

Bazz said nothing immediately in his hesitation, his golden eyes going between the confused and bloodied faces of the two instigators, that gaze alone laying disappointment on both of their shoulders, but one much more than the other.

“Sir,” the guardsman uttered in bewilderment, turning to her superior for orders, the questioning in her tone enough to speak her uncertainty. “It’s the Knight Captain and the Hylian Champion..”

The Guard Captain’s answer didn’t come without a few more moments of hesitation. He wasn’t fond of Brivere in the least, yet looking on the relatively younger Zora, the way his gaze was averted and his shoulders were stooped in shame, it didn’t fail to prod at the sense of guilt which had been growing in the back of the Bazz’s mind after the last thing that had occurred between them. He couldn’t help but wonder if he was partly to blame for this.

And as for the Champion, Link had a wild-eyed look that the black Zora hardly recognized on his face. It made the much smaller Hylian appear as though he had no clue where he was or how he’d gotten here, and though it was clear that Brivere had been the source of his injuries, Link had backed himself almost against the golden Zora’s side, like the crowd itself now posed a much greater threat.

With a defeated sigh and a shake of his head, Bazz at last gave his answer. “They’re still subject to penalties under our laws. Get this damn crowd cleared, and I’ll put these two into restraints.”

Bazz loosened the first pair of locking cuffs from the belt at his hip, beginning toward his bruised up friend first. Despite his words, his plan was to throw these two idiots into the holding pin in the barracks for the night, then set them loose in the morning with some stern words.

But though the crowds’ sadistic chanting had died down to unsettling silence, the Hylian’s body was still rigid, his eyes wide, his ears pinned back in confused panic. That, alone, was worrying enough. Bazz had never seen him like this and could only wonder what put him in such a state.

Matters were only worsened when the Champion’s steely, blue eyes turned to the approaching Zora, glaring up at him like he was totally unfamiliar and far beyond trustworthy. His hands tightened into bloody-knuckled fists and he squared up the moment Bazz came within striking distance, which brought the Guard Captain to a very uncomfortable halt.

He’d seen this before.
He’d seen this same look on his father’s face, of profound confusion, his awareness a thing that roamed from time to time. Bazz had been called all manner of names that he either didn’t recognize or knew to belong to Zoras who were dead and gone. He’d been on the receiving end of blows intended to strike down an encyclopedic collection of monsters, from bokoblins to Guardians. He was only glad that his father’s magical abilities had escaped his grasp in his old age.

“You’re under arrest, Hylian Champion.” The guardsman accompanying Bazz took a few steps closer to the Captain’s side, gripping her weapon warily. “If you resist, the penalties will only be more severe.”

“I’ve got it,” Bazz gently uttered, one hand extending toward the other Zora and gesturing for her not to approach. He then took another tiny step nearer, doing all he could to prevent a look of pity from writing itself so clearly on his visage while he regarded his very shaken friend. “Easy, Master Link.”

“Did you not hear our orders?” the other guardsman turned back to the unabating crowd, her tone further sharpening when the spectators utterly refused to clear out, as commanded. “If you do not clear the area now, you’ll all be placed under arrest.”

The tone of the Zora’s voice drew Link’s attention, and his worried gaze flickered over to the armored woman, then wandered across the surrounding bystanders, who all seemed to be eyeing him with intent hidden beneath their innocent faces.

“I’m going to put these restraints on you, Master Link,” Bazz spoke up again, regaining the Hylian’s attention, though mistrust was still there to be found in the furrow of his brow and the shine of his glossy gaze. “Then we’re going to walk back to the barracks and have a little chat.”

Slowly, and with a great deal of hesitation, a tiny glimmer of recognition and trust returned to the Hylian. His tightly furled fingers loosened as his arms slowly fell at his side, and though he still glanced here and there like he expected to be attacked at any moment, he offered the gentlest nod of his head, taking a step toward Bazz of his own accord now as though all he wanted was to get out of here.

The Guard Captain very carefully placed a hand on Link’s shoulder once he was within reach and turned him around so that his arms could be brought together behind his back then hastily encircled by the restraining cuffs. Bazz moved with quickness and caution, treating the man he’d known since childhood now like a flighty animal who could change his mind at any moment.

In the hopes of keeping the unhinged Champion tethered to reality, Bazz continued to speak, his voice a soft purr. He did his best to keep it light-hearted, though it was nearly impossible to hide the deep concern he was feeling while he tightened up the cuffs and thoroughly fastened the locking mechanism.

“I never would’ve thought that one day I’d be showing up to intervene in trouble caused by you, Master Link,” he joked. “It almost feels like.. like Mipha or Gaddison could show up at any moment to save you from my bullying.”

Brivere, too, was taken aback by the normally feisty Hylian’s timid behavior. He’d been confounded enough by Link’s words and by the careless way he’d dared him to take his life. But then there was the interference of the bystanders which turned the entire matter overwhelmingly bizarre; even now, they refused to obey the orders of the other guardsman, instead completely ignoring her in favor of watching the scene play out, apparently entranced by it.

The Knight slowly turned one small footstep at a time, calculating, measuring the responses offered by the hoard of Zoras surrounding them. He’d had crowds mock him, boo him and verbally drag him
and his family through the mud, but never had he seen people behave like this. It was beyond unsettling now. It had grown to complete eeriness to the point that Brivere damn near shared the sentiment of desiring arrest, if it gave him an excuse to be free from these peoples’ unflinching, hungry stares.

He blinked, his sight going black for a quick second, the images from his underwater lapse leaping back to the front of his mind in painful warning. The flashes danced across his vision, now reinforced by other points of perception; the overwhelming, iron tang of blood newly permeated his senses, his muscles held tension that his psyche told him was not without purpose, and his heart raced as it did the moment before he took the strike which could secure victory or leave him in defeat.

He could see something, something that was not unlike a memory or a dream replaying in his mind, if not for the fact that it held no familiarity. His weapon was drawn, his hands tight on the hilt while his enemies waited for him to surrender. His yellow eyes flashed between them, desperate to find a weakness that he could exploit, and then..

Then his gaze fell upon his Prince and the images of Sidon’s death were replaced, reconfigured. Sidon’s eyes opened, the moment of vulnerability that Brivere needed was upon him, his enemies were incapacitated and he made his move..

“So you’re not gonna do it, then?” came a voice, yanking the golden Zora back to the tense reality before himself. He blinked, his vision unsteady, like he could see exactly what was in front of himself, yet he couldn’t perceive it. Slowly, it returned, color bleeding into the dim images that his eyes were carrying to his brain, yet even so, he doubted what he was seeing.

“You’re not going to do it, are you?” A man who had untangled himself from the spectating crowd stepped forward, coming to stand between the yellow Zora and the Guard Captain. His unblinking, yellow eyes were locked with the Knight’s, lightless yet bearing a kind of weight that was palpable, solid, suffocating.

“I’ve.. seen you before,” Brivere uttered in uncertainty, squinting in recognition while he studied the other Zora who’d come forward to address him. “No.. that can’t be right.”

“You’re not going to kill the Hylian?” the familiar man asked again, this time sharper, more insistent.

“No.. that voice,” the Guard Captain muttered, his head raising, his body going rigid when the sound of the other man speaking met his ears. A kind of undeniable familiarity struck him at first, comfortable and welcoming, yet it faded into chilling dread as his memories provided reason for doubt.

It couldn’t be.

Slowly, Bazz turned around, hardening his heart for what he was prepared to see, only for his defenses to shatter with hardly a struggle when he laid his gaze upon an image, a face, that he mournfully questioned as much as he doubted. There, just outside of his arm’s length, stood a tall, brown Zora with soft but handsome features and a face that formed a sweet smile that was somehow always much too casual, even when he wasn’t trying.

“...Rivan?” the black Zora muttered, the normally strong, gruff sound of his voice suddenly fragile and shaking. He looked into the face of his friend, a face he missed every day and night, when he was awake and when he dreamt, when he was sober and even still when the drink had loosened his restraints and dulled all of the sharp edges of his pain, leaving them still strong enough to break his heart with blunt trauma alone.
“If nobody wants to do it,” Rivan said with a grin and a shrug, “then allow me.”

The brown Zora’s knees bent, his body taking a fighting posture, the only sign he offered before one hand reached to draw a weapon and he ran at the vulnerably bound Hylian Champion while the Guard Captain lingered in a state of paralyzed sorrow.

Rivan let out a sharp war cry, leaping into his assault, his weapon raised high and coming down hard, only for Bazz to hiss the word, “No!” at the last possible moment, his own weapon being smoothly drawn from his back to shelter his friend from the death strike of someone wearing the face of another friend.

This wasn’t Rivan, no, it couldn’t be. Bazz had been there, he’d carried his friend’s lifeless body to his pyre, he’d lit the flame that turned a man he loved to ash and memories.

Rivan was gone.

But this awful nightmare wearing his face persisted, his weapon clashing into Bazz’s with a violent, metallic clang that sent sparks dancing through the air and dying at their feet as they exchanged blows. The brown Zora moved into a fast offensive, every swing of his weapon made with the intent to cut the interfering, black Zora down, but even so, fear and sorrow softened the Guard Captain’s returned strikes, hesitance persisting even as logic dictated that this was not and could not be friend.

Then, in the slightest of openings, the brown Zora took his chance to render this nuisance null and void, his light, quick weapon flicking the Captain’s spear back when he turned with cat-like steps and ducked into striking range, his weapon coming around with the spin of his body and slashing the black Zora across the face.

Bazz’s eyes shut tightly, tearing with pain which flared through his every nerve, and though he automatically stepped back and shifted his weapon to defend, the villain attacking him leapt into a kick that connected with ease, sending the Guard Captain back and to the ground.

The brown Zora flipped and came to a graceful landing, not wasting a second before he rushed the Hylian Champion again. The stray guardsman was running in to offer aid, and Brivere had shaken off his own hesitance in recognition of the new threat, but neither were quick enough to make it to Link, to offer any aid before the attacking Zora knocked the helpless Hylian to the ground and raised his weapon once again.

The hiss of a spear aimed for the brown Zora’s back caught his attention, interrupting his attempted assassination, however. He growled in annoyance, hurriedly bounding over the grounded Hylian and parrying the deftly jabbed spear that had been aimed for his back; had he not, he would have been impaled before he even landed a blow on the Champion.

The assassin found the Guard Captain back on his feet, his blood-stained features newly furrowed by a snarl of deadly seriousness. Despite his injury, he’d refused to stay down.

At the feet of the two warriors, Link bundled in on himself as much as he could, his mouth shut tightly if only to keep down the heart which had leapt into his throat, threatening to escape if he uttered one word. He felt as though this was all a bad dream, and his body was sluggish with panic, almost to reaffirm his horrid suspicions.

But in his wide-eyed paralysis, one detail did not escape the Hylian’s notice. While he peered up through squinting lids at the weapons clashing just above where he laid, he looked on one in fearful recognition, finding it to be the final, awful key to confirming his most dreaded of suspicions; the Zora trying to cut him down was wielding a Demon Carver.
Like that, the spell of fear which had stunned the Hylian was carried away on the wind, and his body shot full of adrenalin in his sudden peak of self-preservation. His silence was not just broken, but utterly destroyed by the way his voice tore from his throat, sounding the alarm.

“They’re not Zoras!” the Champion cried aloud in both terror and fury, the blue flame of his gaze flicking about in time to realize that the entire crowd was armed and waiting. “They’re Yiga clansmen in disguise!”

The grounded Hylian allowed himself to be helpless no longer, his inwardly drawn legs unfurling with a sharp kick to the brown Zora’s knees that sent him toppling with ease. He’d discerned at least one important detail from the events playing out around him; Bazz and the lone guardsman he brought along were actually who they claimed to be. Still, their odds were unfair at best, and downright shitty at worst.

While the first attacker was down, Link rolled back to his own feet with only minor instability thanks to how his hands were trapped behind his back. He let out a sharp curse at the inconvenience of it, knowing that these pricks must have been waiting for somebody to render him easy prey. Even so, while the villain wearing Rivan’s face was on his back, Link drew one leg up to kick his weapon away, knocking the circular blade aside and out from under the brown Zora’s reaching fingertips.

Bazz’s spear came down to impale the enemy who had, perhaps unknowingly, taken advantage of a deep, personal weakness. However, the sharp head of the weapon only met gritty earth and a cloud of violet smoke as the disarmed clansman disappeared with scarce seconds to spare before he met a merciless demise.

But one escaped Yiga clansman was the least of their worries. The four warriors stood against the chaos of the crowd of enemies who now moved in to swallow them up. The small Hylian only did his best to defend himself with kicks and well-placed headbutts, as well as quick, flighty dodges which led lunging clansmen into the weapons of his allies.

Brivere had drawn his sword newly forth, only now fighting will full intent that he’d dared not unleash on the Champion, no matter how he disliked him. The faces of the attacking mob yet gave him reason for pause, making each blow feel utterly wrong. Fast, killing strikes still came one after another, though his sword felt odd in his hands, and the movements of his body turned wary, hesitant. Even knowing without a doubt that these were enemies, it was discontenting, troubling, to see another Zora at the end of his blade when he cut them down, to see agony written on faces he identified as those of his own people.

“Captain!” came a voice from beyond the mob, a holler that announced the arrival of additional Zora warriors, who came leaping over the pit of enemy bodies, their armor-clad frames twisting and flipping through the air, landing in the center where the fighting had become that of a few desperate souls against the blood-thirsty swarm.

“Lieutenant,” Bazz somewhat slurred, his sharp teeth shining from beneath his gouged lip, even covered in blood. “.thought you’d decided to sit this one out.”

“Nah. But remind me never to doubt your bad feelings, Sir.” The other Zora tried to chuckle at his own humor, his voice a sound jostled by the quick movement of his weapon. “That wound looks pretty bad.”

“I’ll have to endure it,” Bazz growled, swinging his spear in a wide arc that knocked multiple enemies aside, at least one of them stumbling helplessly toward the slash of Brivere’s sword, while one was tossed at the Guard Lieutenant’s feet. “I don’t think they’re gonna just excuse me, on account of a big scratch.”
Link continued to shuffle himself out of the reach of one relentless enemy, just to run headlong into another, no matter how he tried to keep himself in the range of his allies. It didn’t help that he was the target, so being unarmed and bound was making him lose his patience.

From behind the Hylian, an arm grappled around his neck, drawing him in, tightly restricting him so that he was left with his legs dangling and kicking at his enemy’s knees to no avail. He might have been virtually helpless, but goddamn if he wasn’t getting incredibly pissed off. He gave one last kick at the solid form behind him, this time for the sake of vaulting his hanging body upward, his legs going rapidly overhead so that his thighs landed atop of the disguised clansman’s shoulders, then Link quickly tightened his legs around the neck of the other.

The stubborn clansman went down soon after, taking Link to the ground with them, and the Champion let out a cough to catch his own breath, dragging himself to his feet despite his dancing vision.

“Can someone please unfasten these damn cuffs?” he hissed, acknowledging that while everyone present was waist-deep in enemies, he really, really didn’t relish the idea of getting captured here.

Before anybody even had the chance to answer his pleas, Link’s ears perked upward at the sound of rushing footsteps overhead, his neck craning to bring his gaze to the bridge where he’d been fighting the golden Zora maybe an hour earlier. The shining blue structure seemed a distant height now, but even so, the Hylian didn’t fail to notice a cluster of enemies darting across, not even bothering with disguises. There were a lot of them, more than Link could’ve counted in the short time it took them to rush past, but he knew better than to assume they were simply lost. His heart was sinking, forming a heavy weight in his gut at what he knew was happening, though he tried to fool himself into believing that it couldn’t be.

But no, their actions were intentional. They were headed for Sidon’s tower and there was nothing he could do to block that out the cruel awareness of that fact.

“.no,” Brivere growled between defensive swings and deft parries, and Link turned in his direction at the sound of his voice, noticing that his gaze, too, was focused on the threat to Prince Sidon that was beyond either of their reaches.

But the golden Knight was not a man to simply ignore threats which were out of his reach, and at just the possibility that Sidon could’ve been in danger, he charged outside of the defensive perimeter established by the handful of Zoras waging battle against the disguised invaders. Yiga clansmen set upon him tenfold, surrounding him from all sides, yet his blade was an unrelenting force, arcing now with the intention to cut down anyone and anything which blocked his path.

The Champion felt no less passionate about removing himself from this losing battle and running to his lover’s defense, even if he was in a much worse place to attempt escape. He ran, trying to follow at Brivere’s heels, taking care to keep just outside of his killing range, because Link felt quite certain that the Knight either hadn’t noticed him following, or didn’t care.

Then, Brivere finally succeeded in pushing back the onslaught, giving himself enough of an opening to take a leap over the wall of warring bodies and inadvertently leaving the Hylian to fend for himself.

Without the threat of the golden Zora’s sword to contend with, the numerous clansmen overwhelmed him, pushing him off his feet with but a minor struggle. Hands without faces grappled and clutched at him from all sides while he kicked and struggled, flailing, biting, spitting, anything he could to escape, though it was all for naught. Fingers tangled into his hair, his clothes, the cuffs which held his arms behind his back, yanking him, dragging him away. It only took a few of them to drag him
deeper into the crowd, away from his friends, away from his allies. There were arms around his neck, hoisting his body over one shoulder like the quarry of a successful hunting trip, and for a moment he couldn’t bear to kick because all of his weight was pulling at the bones of his neck.

His breath was nearly completely choked out of him from the tight hold and the fear ripping its way through him, paralyzing him once more. All it took was one clumsy mistake, and here he was again, his heart pounding so ferociously that his ears had flattened from the sound of it, and all of a sudden he was back on the floor of his cabin in Hateno, his body a trapped, useless thing, like a summerwing butterfly pinned mercilessly to a display and captured beneath a pane of glass.

They were hauling him toward the shadows, escaping with him in tow. They were going to cut him apart again, steal away his immortality, his life, as pitiful and pointless as it was. He damned all considerations of pride at that thought, screaming aloud for his life, for whatever aid could be offered, praying Bazz or one of the guardsmen came to his rescue.

But it was no uncaring deity who answered his pleas. An unexpected attack took the disguised clansmen from behind, a sword slashing their backs, its wielder leaping overhead, his body turning with his bloodied blade brandished, cleaving the skull of the villain who had a hold on the Champion, so that his disguise shattered and fell away with a burst of light.

He’d made it all the way to the water when he heard Link’s screams, his watchful eyes catching sight of the small Hylian being carried away. Indecision held him back for half of a second, his heart pulling him toward his mission to see to his Prince’s safety, but instead he doubled back to rescue a man who he despised.

That same loathing was plain enough on Brivere’s blood-stained face when Link peered upward to see who his rescuer had been. The Hylian could only try his best to scrunch his own features in bitterness and discontentment, though he must have seemed so meek, so helpless.

The Knight spared little gentleness in rolling the worthless Hylian onto his front, his webbed foot pushing into Link’s side in order to leave him with his face pressed into the dirt. Link spat words of complaint at the treatment, but quieted the moment he realized that Brivere had sheathed his sword and bent over him in order to unfasten the locking mechanism which kept the cuffs snapped in place.

“Hurry, hurry,” Link hissed, his head raised enough to see the feet of additional enemies racing in his direction, unwilling to relent even slightly, especially considering they’d infiltrated a heavily armed city to do so.

Soon enough, the metallic cuffs clicked open and were thrown aside, and Link pushed himself up from the ground, his stiff shoulders now aching with the effort.

“Get on your feet!” Brivere hissed in impatience, reaching down to grapple the Hylian by his tunic and lifting him forcefully upward. Link would’ve let out a huff of rebuke at all of the fucking manhandling being done to him tonight, but he settled for running his ass off to keep up with Brivere when he made another bolt for the water.

Link hurried to stay right on Brivere’s tailfins, catching sight of the golden Zora glancing over his shoulder to make certain he was still there before he leapt ahead, sailing over what remained of the ground between themselves and the water, his body straightening into a dive that took him beneath the dark, glassy surface with hardly a splash.

The Champion was all too sure that this dedicated Knight would serve to be the quickest path to the Prince’s side, given that they both had the exact same destination in mind. He wasn’t sure exactly how at this very moment, but he didn’t have it in himself to question it yet, because as long as he
made it to Sidon, that was all that mattered.

Without hesitation, Link followed Brivere into the water, splashing clumsily until it was deep enough for him to swim further out, his head turning this way and that in search of the golden Zora while he treaded water, attempting to be patient though his sense of dread was heightening and in whatever moments of pause he had, his morbid brain was telling him that Sidon was already dead and this was all his fault.

Taking a deep breath, Link ducked himself beneath the surface. It wasn’t just for the sake of finding the Knight, but also because a determined group of Yiga clansmen had gathered at the shore, collecting their bravery in order to enact an aquatic pursuit. Apparently even disguised as Zoras, however, they didn’t possess a Zora’s swimming ability.

The water was a murky navy when Link began to sink, but the pillars which held the bridge overhead offered enough of a glow that Brivere’s form darting about became visible whenever he passed by. The golden Zora was swimming a wide, fast circle which slowly tightened, his pale fins flared and paddling hard to create a current.

Link recognized what Brivere was doing now with ease, and he soon felt the power of the current drawing him toward it as it took the form of a dancing spiral, twisting and sucking air downward until with one final movement, Brivere sent the powerful, watery cyclone jetting overhead, preparing to swim up it in order to access the bridge as he had before.

The Hylian kicked with all of his might to avoid being dragged into the waterspout and his visibility was only further minimized when the water was jostled, turning white water wild and frothy. Before he succumbed to this losing, underwater struggle, however, the golden blur of Brivere darted near enough for Link to grab onto his shoulders. It was reminiscent of being upon Sidon’s back during their battle with Vah Ruta, especially as Link’s cold-numbed fingers clutched at and tightened into the furrows of the Zora’s armor. Maybe Link hadn’t liked Sidon very much at that time, and regardless of how he’d died time and time again in the Prince’s arms, his trust never faltered and Link only ever laid the blame upon himself for his mistakes.

But now Link was underwater and clinging to the back of a Zora who would probably be happier with him dead, all while his breath depended on that very Zora’s judgement.

Brivere angled himself downward while they approached the whirling cyclone, giving a few hard kicks so they shot to the deepest, darkest depths of the pool and the lashing current twirled overhead, yanking and tugging at them with its uncontrolled danger. Then, with an abrupt redirection, the golden Zora kicked off hard from the bottom, swimming directly up, into the center of spiral, his body a fluid, flicking bolt of power and precise control.

Link’s grip tightened all the more, his body drawing nearer to the Zora’s as they shot up the spiral which whipped and tore at them with only greater ferocity while they climbed, the turbulent waters a constant threat to swallow them up, to rip them apart, to cast them aside.

The Knight, however, refused to waver, because if his Prince was in danger, not a damn thing was going to stand in his way, his own shortcomings least of all; it was a sentiment he unknowingly shared with the Champion in equal measure.

They burst from the top of the spiral with an explosive splash, their bodies sailing high above the bridge, chased by twinkling droplets of water and a spray of mist at their backs. With the patter of Brivere’s feet, and the click of Link’s boots, the duo came to a flawless landing, neither of them wasting any time in running for Sidon’s tower, sure that his life could’ve possibly depended on it.
The golden Zora ran ahead at first while the Hylian gasped to reclaim the breath he’d lost, his shoes slipping in the water streaming off of him. It was only a short sprint through the lovely courtyard, still full of greenery despite the sleeping blooms, but all of the beautiful green in the world couldn’t disguise a messy splatter of red.

Already the situation was damning, to the point that Brivere and Link ran in desperate haste and tense silence. The gate to the Prince’s tower was torn open and the guardsmen assigned to keeping watch over the entryway had been dispatched, tossed aside in a messy streak of spilled blood, their weapons still settled in their loosened grasps.

Link pushed himself to speed up, still bounding at the Knight’s flank while Brivere rushed with greater haste than Link had ever seen a Zora have on foot. They proceeded up the spiraling stairway, and Link spared the golden Zora a worried glance, noting the focus on his features, the worried lines which had set themselves there. He didn’t need empathic powers to be sure he could feel the dread rising in the Zora. Or maybe it was that his own was equally matched.

That dread rose up like mountains at quaking fault lines, like the sea in an never-ending monsoon, when they rounded a corner to find the pristine, blue stone painted by a stream of blood, the stairs littered with shining, armored bodies in gruesome, deathly repose.

These were Knights of the Royal Order, these were warriors hand chosen by Brivere, felled like nothing and gone, lost.

Everything in the Knight was upending and that much was palpable even before the word, “No..” fell unconsciously from his lips, the sound of it more terrified and sorrowful than Link had ever known him to be. The Hylian felt it, too, the panic welling up in him, the ache, the desperate hope that Sidon was safe, yet the utter, overwhelming certainty that he wasn’t.

His mind was being rendered a swirling void, a darkness that drew everything in, everything he felt, everything he knew, everything he was. It was taking him cruelly apart, one piece at a time, so that he felt he may wretch, he may lose control; he had no clue what he would do if he walked over that threshold to find Sidon dead.

When the Knight and Champion did, at last, come rushing into the Prince’s chamber, they found precisely what they had both dreaded and expected; a dozen well-armed Yiga clansmen, their concealed frames hovering like violent shadows, the emblazoned eyes of their masks staring with hunger, each and every one of them ready for a fight.

And amidst the lot of foottsoldiers armed with bows, scythes, and blades, there was a hooded Blademaster with a small kunai hovered directly over the throat of the Zora Prince.

“Very good, you arrived as promptly as expected,” spoke the Blademaster, his deep voice light with sadistic amusement.

Link recognized the sound with a certain horror that he wished he could deny. This was the same man who’d been there the night of the Blood Moon, the same man who’d contributed to his utter torment, to breaking him both mentally and physically, and who had nearly succeeded in killing him for good.

The Hylian’s normally belligerent, challenging gaze drifted lower. He wasn’t even able to hold eye contact with their masked faces. He couldn’t bear to look at them, while his body trembled with rage and fear.

He could already see what was going to occur.
He already knew precisely what they were going to do.

They knew exactly what they had to threaten to assure his surrender.

They were going to take him again. They were going to put him through every bit of the torture all over again.

He’d made the mistake of thinking he’d escaped with his life. He thought he’d outwitted them and that he was safe, but no, they upheld their awful promise to render him unable to run, unable to flee, unable to feel safe anywhere he went. Even Zora’s Domain.

And now, here they stood, with a blade at the throat of the man he loved.

They’d won. This was the end.

The end.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everybody! How! Was! It!
Sorry, haha, I'm just so excited about this chapter. I'd like to know what you all thought, as well. :)

I have quite a few thank yous to hand out, and hey, if there is anybody I've forgotten to thank, be sure to let me know. Some of you were anonymous, which is fine, too. Rodinia, I'm uncertain if I thanked you yet, but THANK YOU!

Thank you to Bunnybob who has made SO many awesome memes and pictures for this story, AS WELL AS some of her own fanfics based in the Comaverse. Those are really awesome, and you all should check them out, either on her tumblr or her Ao3.

Thank you to KhoaticVex for the really awesome drawings. I loved every single one of them, especially the one with Crazy Girl. Thank you to Miauzen on tumblr/Deviantart for the really cool animation. I'm super enjoying every slide and the cool, new profile picture that I now have. Thank you to Alouette-Lulu on Tumblr for the really excellent fanart. I'm still crying over how beautiful and angsty the one with Link is, and how adorable the picture of Link and Brivere is! Aaaand thank you SO much to Mistyotltl on tumblr for the beautiful, amazing art of Brivere! It is so pretty, and you are awesome. Thank you, all of you. <3

Alrighty, all of my reader friends~
My Tumblr is BanishedOne/BanishFics
My Twitter and Facebook are both BanishedOne
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Was this the end? The trap had been sprung, and the Yiga Clan had kept their word, making good on their promise to track the fleeing Champion like valuable quarry all the way to Zora’s Domain. Would he falter like helpless prey, or would another of his enemies step up to shelter him?

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. I’m really sorry that this chapter took two weeks. I’m so offended at myself since last week was the anniversary of this story! D: (March 29th) Can you all believe that I’ve been writing this story for a year, now? Anyway, it may be late, but happy first anniversary to the story, please enjoy~

Days of hard riding had finally brought the tired warrior home, if a Hylian could, in fact, call any place home in these troubled times. He thought he’d found such a thing once, in his foolish, younger days, but he’d left that kind of naivety behind with his heart.

He had a new home now, along with a life of real, true purpose.

However, the warrior and his broken band had limped back this time with news of failure, of loss and that was beyond troubling. He’d already survived so much bloodshed, warring against cowardly, masked phantoms in Faron Woods. He’d already lost so many of his people, and it was times like these that he began to doubt the position of relative leadership he’d been granted, knowing that he was a hopeless, broken man, a stray seeking belonging and guidance.

The powerful stone of the towering Colosseum normally filled him with pride, but as he and his battered bunch thundered on horseback across the land bridge to their destination, he found himself swallowing down a thick lump comprised of dread and shame.

How could they have failed to take a target as easy as Hateno Village? Was he losing his edge? Had the angry warrior’s spirit in him finally been broken?

The man let out a sigh, upturning his stare to the familiar guard posts and defenses which had been build by Hylian hands, flawless and sturdy. Upon those stone towers, the night watchmen were already on duty, creatures nobody would have ever expected to see coexisting with Hylian people, let alone cooperating in an organized, civil manner.

A clicking chirp sounded from above, the voice of a black lizalfos crying out to confirm that the newcomers were friends, not enemies. The reptilian beast clambered about on all fours, hanging comfortably upside down from its station, its shining eyes flicking to follow the movement of the warrior’s mounted band, while the rest of its body remained perfectly still.
Up ahead, a blue moblin lumbered to its feet, flicking its ears and gurgling in reply to the lizalfos, then it cranked the gate open, allowing the beaten band access to the Colosseum corral.

The group rode onward, unperturbed by the monster presence, and they dismounted outside of the bustling construction in silence, every one of the survivors feeling the same kind of dispirited loss as the man who had led them into battle. He didn’t bother with unsaddling his mount, as one of the bokoblin stableworkers was sure to take care of it in his stead.

He had more important business to attend to anyway.

The warrior felt unbelievably small every time he returned to the ancient, stone structure, every time he came home to see that the Guardians of Hyrule had grown larger, stronger.. hungrier. He wove through the narrow, familiar alleyways created at ground level by the makeshift shelters and tents, a slum city which housed scores of Hylians who’d turned to the Guardians of Hyrule for safety and protection.

It was a dark, crowded place, which tended to smell foul no matter how people tried to maintain it. It reeked of mud and too many bodies. The tempting scent of foodstuff being prepared wafted by from time to time to mask more unpleasant odors, only to disappear whenever one expected it the least, usually sneaking away and leaving the wretched fragrance of filthy chamberpots in its place.

In the late hours, fire smoke permeated the Colosseum more powerfully than anything else, and even while most people were sleeping, there was always a distant chattering of voices, the bark of a nervous Hylian shepherd, or the shrill cries of a baby, unable to sleep through the night.

The warrior did not linger in the twisting paths of the slum, instead ascending to the upper levels, where he knew he could find the patron saint of this desperate collection of people, the unstoppable soldier who had bled to organize and empower her people, and who had birthed all the beauty and power that was the Guardians of Hyrule; Karmina.

When the loyal soldier indeed located his fearless leader, he dipped his head low in respect, waiting for acknowledgment rather than daring to interrupt her exchange.

Karmina was lurking inside a room built of canvas guard walls, which housed a chaotic maze of tables, all stacked high with books and equipment. The warrior waited patiently on the threshold, slowly raising his head enough to observe the organized chaos all around him; some of the equipment actually appeared experimental, whereas some of it might have well been magical in nature, as far as he knew. There were other areas that appeared as though they belonged to some kind of hellish tailor, then amidst all of it, there was a strange man of short stature who was concealed beneath a violet, patchwork cloak.

The man’s hood was brushed back just enough for him to peer upward from underneath and somehow still see the face of Karmina, who towered at his side.

“If you took an apprentice, you wouldn’t have so much trouble keeping up with the demand for potions,” she grumbled, her voice still so much gentler than it might have been, were she not addressing a long time friend. “...my potion takes priority, so regardless of how busy you are, I expect to have it on time.”

“I made a promise to you and I intend to keep it,” he mumbled, fiddling with some of the objects on the table before himself. “...but if I don’t have the ingredients, what can I really do about it? They aren’t easy to come by, you know that.”

The woman’s leather cuirass produced a soft groan while her strong arms were folded across her
chest, and at last her sharp, blue gaze fell upon the quietly waiting soldier, instead. She let out a sigh, which from her was an attempt to be patient, then she turned on heel, her voice a purr when she spoke the words, “We’ll finish this conversation later.”

“So you’ve returned,” Karmina addressed the man, her trusted general. “What news do you bring?”

“Bad news, I’m afraid,” he muttered, his body and soul utterly tired. “We were unsuccessful in capturing Hateno Village and the losses weren’t exactly negligible.”

“I got word of interference,” the woman spoke, the heels of her boots making soft clicks that belied her impressive height, her shadow in the flickering candlelight a specter which could swallow up even the man before her. Her tone was like that a sly cat, her words sliding clear and thoughtfully off her tongue; it wasn’t difficult to believe her claims that the lynel she called ‘Father’ really had raised her. “It wasn’t just from the Sheikah cowards but from the Zora people and... the Hylian Champion?”

Karmina scoffed, one hand raising to brush aside the mane of brown curls which crowned her head and fell upon her shoulders. Normally, her tolerance for losses was a ferocious, bitter thing, yet something in the unnatural shine of her eyes appeared almost intrigued, and eventually she let out a contemplative, little laugh. “We hadn’t exactly counted on the rise of a mystical Knight from a hundred years ago, had we? Nevertheless, we’ll recover for now, then we’ll have another go at it. After all, I never expected the unification of Hylian lands to be an easy task. We’ll just have to be relentless in our pursuit of it, as we always are.”

“I should like to have a word with this Hylian Champion,” the woman added. “We could possibly come to a... better understanding.”

“That might be difficult,” the older man commented, suddenly regretting one of his only moments of success during the sloppy battle for Hateno Village. At his tone, his leader’s eyes turned to him once more, a vivid, icy blue which barely concealed a burning red light beneath her pupils.

“I put an arrow in his heart,” said the general, shaking his head, his own gaze drifting downward so that his graying, black locks splayed around his face.

“Hmm,” Karmina hummed, a grin tugging at her rosy lips which spoke her doubts almost as well as words, though her voice quickly followed to clarify what was going through her mind. “Call it a feeling, but I doubt that will keep him down for long. I have a very strong suspicion that he and I have that much in common. For now, let’s put it out of our minds. After all, I’ve come upon something that will certainly cheer you up.”

The General’s steely countenance was raised once more, his eyes focused on those of his leader in calm curiosity, hiding well the hopeful flame bursting to life in his heart. He was loyal to Karmina and served her for the sake of gaining nothing beyond the success of her own ends, which he believed in with everything that he was. There was only one other deeply personal matter outside of this which drove him, and he was sure that this was all his fearless leader could’ve possibly been referring to, yet still he paused in doubtful hesitance, awaiting Karmina’s ultimate confirmation.

“We finally managed to ensnare your crafty little desert wench,” the woman uttered with pride, the corners of her scarred lips upturning in a cheshire grin.

“Are you...” the General began hesitantly, not wanting to be overcome by his desire to see an end to the tireless pursuit he’d begun alone more than ten years ago, “...are you sure she’s the right one?”

“I’ll let you confirm that for me,” Karmina purred. She wasn’t the kind of woman to allow prey to
elude her for very long. The loyal soldier fell in step with his leader as she gestured for him to follow, guiding him toward a place he knew well; the holding cells.

Hyrule Castle perhaps sported a labyrinthine dungeon of twisted halls lined with cold, wet cells where monsters and Hylian criminals alike would be thrown away and forgotten, but the Colosseum had its own chamber of cruelty, clearly constructed with the castle’s dismal terror in mind.

Karmina and her General entered a well-guarded stairwell, taking torches in hand and descending into an endless, curving corridor of stone masonry that looped about the underground perimeters of the Colosseum. It was home to inescapable cages crafted of heavy steel and tucked far from the light of day. The Guardians of Hyrule got plenty of use out of the cruel prison, letting their enemies rot underground for however long it took to render them more friendly... or dead, whichever came first.

The General had surveyed each holding cell in his time acting as the warden of this awful dungeon, and had long selected the most uncomfortable of them all for the quarry he’d been so relentlessly seeking. Yet seeing his sadistic fantasies of revenge finally coming to fruition didn’t offer the kind of validated pleasure he so hoped for, but rather... bitter sadness, the same he’d tried to put out of his mind, to no avail.

The footsteps of the two Hylians were a resounding, lonely echo in the quiet, moist chill of the cavernous prison, their bodies casting ominous shadows in the light of their torches when at last they stood before the intended cell.

This particular holding cell had sunken, so that it was almost entirely flooded with filthy water and sewage. Slimy mold clung to the surface of the stone walls, so the air was spoiled and rancid. There was only one area that stood above the pooled water and mud; a stone which came to an uneven peak that was torturous to attempt sitting upon for any length of time.

And yet, when the firelight illuminated the piteous cell, there was the prisoner stooped upon the jagged stone, her body bent at an awkward angle to distribute her weight however possible to make the stone more comfortable. Her body was bundled for warmth, her skin splashed with mud and filth, so that only patches of her long, crimson hair had any sheen left.

One of the warrior man’s hands raised to rest upon the bars of the cell, his palms waiting there in a longing touch he wished could fall upon the woman just out of his reach. She dared not turn and face him, her apparent Gerudo pride snuffed out by her horrid situation, but even so, he knew it was her, he could feel it. She had taken a part of him, long ago, and that piece was carried with her, always resonating and calling him to it.

But for all of the bitterness and resentment he held inside, he nursed pity and affections in equal measure, his love for the errant woman an awful curse which he couldn’t hope to free himself from, so instead he twisted it until it was disfigured and unrecognizable.

“These Gerudo are a pathetic people,” Karmina at last spoke up, her bright eyes narrowed into the coldest of glares, her words sharpened to such a deadly, razor edge that it was all too apparent how personal this vendetta was. “They rely on us for their continued existence but they are little better than parasites. They rob us of the purity of our blood, seducing our people but only producing more of their own. And then after that, what do they do? They away with the children they stole from us, back to their city where the Hylians they mated with are disallowed. Fiends, the lot of them.”

“I was foolish and weak,” the man breathed, his voice the growl of a wounded beast. “I was enchanted by her, a victim of her charms. We settled down, we spent two years together and I thought I was the happiest man alive. Then, no sooner than she discovered that she was with child, she vanished into the night, robbing me of the future she’d deceived me into believing that we had.”
Karmina unfastened the keys to the cell from a belt at her hip, fingering through the collection of heavy, metallic items until she found the one she needed. The door unlocked with a resounding click and a heavy groan as it swung on its hinges.

The two Hylians entered the bog of a prison cell, their boots sloshing in the muck, the torchlight dancing in shining, red ripples upon the black water while they approached the Gerudo prisoner.

The warrior man strode nearer, close enough that he could outstretch his callused hand to caress the woman’s filthy locks, and though he touched her ever so gently, she recoiled, her body bending out of his reach.

“Tell me where our child is,” he implored, his voice a calm rumble, a tremble foretelling a more violent quake to come. “Where is my daughter?”

“You have no daughter, Talius,” replied the Gerudo woman, her tongue a weight in the parched dry of her mouth, her throat weak and rough from the screaming fight she’d put up to resist being thrown away in this wretched hole. The filth smeared over her face could not hide her snarl, however, when she turned a golden glare over her shoulder that flickered with ferocity in the fire light. “And I’ll die before I hand my child over to you!”

“You’re still willing to accept a Gerudo child as your own?” Karmina idly commented, watching the exchange with interest, but not enough to openly interfere.

“My daughter is my child, Gerudo or not,” the General, Talius, responded, a deep sigh coming from him, the lonely whisper of wind through a twisted canyon. “The fact that she is Gerudo was my mistake, not hers, and when I find her, I’ll raise her like any other Hylian. And if she knows anything of this menace of a tribe that she descends from, it will be the truth; enough to hate them as I do.”

“Then don’t despair, my friend,” the leader reassured with a nod, taking a few steps nearer to the man she so trusted in order to place one hand upon his shoulder, offering him her strength. “We’ll find this child of yours. Your pursuits are mine as well.”

“Thank you, Karmina,” breathed the General, slowly turning his back on his former lover and facing the woman who had given him true purpose. “You have the strength and wisdom of a real leader. Without your guidance, I would still be lost.”

The room felt to be both silent yet echoing with a shrill buzz of noise, both still yet tipping sideways, spinning, threatening to drag the Hylian down with it. He was paralyzed, unmoving, but even so, his entire body was quaking in apprehension, the silent mourning for the death he knew was quickly approaching; his own.

His gaze was plastered to the ground before his feet, his innards so twisted in turmoil that he could scarcely draw breath. The only part of him that was capable of movement were his pointed ears, which twitched in nervousness at every little sound that sang through the haze.

Brivere had his sword brandished, his will somehow steeled despite the clear hopelessness of the situation. Link could hear the Knight’s webbed fingers tightening on the haft of his blade, and slowly, the dull blue of the Hylian’s eyes drifted to his side, rising high enough to look on the Zora next to him in doubt, but questioning.

The golden Zora was an over-thinker, an analyzer, Link knew as much to be true, but even so, it was difficult for him to imagine that Brivere had devised a clever way out of this mess. The Hylian had
no doubts that the Knight would do everything in his power to protect Sidon. He was probably just as willing to throw his life away for the Prince as Link was, himself, but even self-sacrifice couldn’t have been enough.

It was the purest form of desperation that the Link was falling prey to, when he found himself praying that Brivere happened to know something that he didn’t.

“As you can see,” the Blademaster began, the muffled timbre of his voice enough to visibly cow the breaking Hylian that much further. “The Zora Prince’s life has been rendered our bargaining chip for your surrender, Hylian Champion.”

The hooded man made a vague gesture with the hand that didn’t have Sidon’s life held in threatening suspension, coldly speaking the words, “Take him,” like this discussion was already finished.

At his command, a trio of footsoldiers tucked their weapons momentarily aside, approaching the duo with confidence but also the very slightest air of caution. They strode nearer, their postures straight, their footsteps measured, their gloved hands ready and reaching for the angry but unresponsive Hylian.

And though the clansmen might have expected Link to be the one to bite their hands in rebuke while simultaneously surrendering, before they were close enough to make any contact, it was the Knight who raised his sword in warning. Brivere’s feet slid apart, his posture taking on a strong, defensive stance, his sharp, yellow gaze going between all three of the masked phantoms while he measured them, ascertaining the easiest way to separate them from the world of the living, should they misstep.

“Step aside, Zora,” the hooded clansman growled, though his threatening tone hardly veiled a chuckle of amusement. “You’ve seen how easily we dispatched the other guards. You’ll be no exception.”

The threats rolled past the Champion and the Knight, and while Link was frozen in his own sense of hesitation, the Zora hovering by his side did not waver. His blade remained raised and ready, the shadows upon his furrowed features deepening at the bitter reminder of his felled team, at how they were spoken of, like they were irrelevant, like they were nothing.

Maybe those people were not his friends and maybe they were not even kind to him beyond professional neutrality, but their lives had been worth something, they had mattered. They had people who loved them. Each of them still had so much potential left, so many days that should have been theirs to live as they pleased, but they’d been senselessly deprived of that precious time.

Outside of the mounting sense of loss, Brivere’s expression gave little away, even as the Hylian looked to him in confusion, trying to discern what logical reason he could possibly have for stubbornly protecting a man he hated, while a man he loved was being threatened in turn.

Link fought himself, trying to push past the trauma of his last encounter with these vicious animals, the fear they had instilled in him, the awful way they set him back in his mind, until he was little more than a helpless idiot, crawling out of the Sheikah Shrine all over again, a sniveling weakling who feared pain and death.

No, he wouldn’t abide that. He wouldn’t allow the Prince’s Knight to stand here looking brave and unperturbed while he choked.

He raised his newly sharpened glare to the standoff before himself, between the golden Zora and those masked bastards. They were either going to kill him, or try their very hardest to do so. He wasn’t going to let them do it without giving them as much fucking attitude as he could muster. He
wasn’t going to take this like a helpless coward.

And if he died for the sake of keeping Sidon safe, he’d gladly suffer and bleed until merciful oblivion took him from this wretched world, and still he’d know he left it a better place, for making sure that his Prince’s beautiful heart still existed within it.

Were he and the Knight outnumbered? Oh yes. Could they still succeed against this number of Yiga clansmen? Perhaps, but definitely not unscathed, and not while Sidon was in such immanent peril.

..Was it maybe possible that the physical damage rendered to the Zora Prince would be nullified by the effects of his own spirit potion? After all, it was already tearing his body apart, then mending it over and over again. Was Sidon not in as much danger as Link was assuming?

“We came quite prepared, young soldier,” the Blademaster attempted to reason when Brivere refused to back down, though his every word had a degrading, patronizing edge, disallowing the Knight any notion that he had a chance. Even if Link wasn’t the one being addressed, his ears flattened at the sound which he remembered with such awful clarity. The clansman’s tone had always been so full of sadistic confidence, and it was now more than ever. He’d seemingly delighted in the pain he’d inflicted on the Champion before and would probably find ways to make him suffer, to be sure that each moment preceding death was pure agony, all because Link had the audacity to escape his grasp once before.

“This blade at your Prince’s neck is poison-dipped,” the Blademaster went on, the triumph in his words like bitter mockery. The kunai danced between his nimble fingers while he spoke, leaving both Link and Brivere holding their breath at the danger presented by one slip of his hand. “It could kill a Zora normally, but a Zora under the effects of Goddess Bloodstone? It will violently alter his body chemistry in a rather gruesome way that I’m certain you wouldn’t like to witness.”

A pained breath escaped the Knight in response to the threats, at the perception of his time growing short, and in acknowledgment that the possibility of holding the Hylian like a bargaining chip of his own was slipping away with every second he continued to hesitate. In Brivere’s mind, he was sure these enemies wouldn’t risk killing the Prince without securing the prize they’d put so much effort into obtaining. If they did, the entire effort to hold Sidon hostage would be nullified, leaving the masked villains to fight it out, to lose more people and still potentially fail to succeed.

He had little guarantee that forfeiting the Champion would assure Sidon’s safety, whereas stalling maintained it for a time. He feared that once all the metaphorical cards were in the hands of these murderous fiends, Sidon would then be in greater danger than he was now.

Brivere’s weapon dipped lower, in deepening hesitation that he hadn’t meant to show. He glanced to the Hylian at his side, regarding him, considering him. It was beyond him why these people would go to such effort to take somebody like this so-called Champion, but he couldn’t even pretend that he possessed the capability of aligning his own thought processes with those of such cruel, terrible people.

But.. maybe it was that.. as long as the Hylian Champion existed, he represented an idea, a possibility, a future that these people would go out of their way to prevent. He was the pathway to that possibility, the vehicle carrying fate upon his shoulders, or so Hylian mythology and legends would have one believing it were so, and apparently extremists as well.

Likewise, Brivere couldn’t shroud the odd and sudden belief that this Hylian was the key to unlocking the result he desired. The golden Knight, in this moment, was feeling, sensing something he never had before, something that lurked outside of his usual processes and considerations, something distant and obscure. There was an important matter that he was reaching for but just
He couldn’t lie to himself and he couldn’t bottle up what he was feeling now; he was terrified. There were unlimited possibilities stretching out before him, complex webs of cause and effect, threatening to ensnare him and assure defeat. He was awash in a state of confusion, living in the present while fending off a sudden, overwhelming deja vu.

As much as he knew that he’d never been here, living this very danger before in his life, he was equally certain that he’d seen this, he’d seen it play out, and there was a pattern of action which promised success, if only he could access it, if only he knew how to navigate to it. There was also the possibility that he was losing his mind, and his wandering sanity threatened to take Sidon’s life with it.

“The clock is ticking, Zora,” the Blademaster called aloud in violent impatience, his armed hand lowering until the razor edge of the knife was pressed to the soft white scales of Sidon’s neck.

“Then just take me, you lot of cowards!” Link hissed at last, relinquishing himself in desperate, enraged fear for his lover’s life, his body trembling in a renewed rush of anxiety, watching the pressure applied to the Prince’s skin grow ever more dangerous, knowing a little cut would be all it would take. His voice was tight and shaking, his hands bundling into fists while his knees bent in growing weakness, threatening to drag him down and have him pleading for mercy. He dared not take a step closer to the tense group of Yiga clansmen, fearing what they could do out of pure jumpiness, though he was ready to throw himself right into their hands, if that was what needed to be done. “He’s just one Zora. What the hell are you all so afraid of? I’m unarmed, I won’t resist, so take me already.”

The hovering trio of footsoldiers exchanged cautious glances between one another, inching with measured footsteps which made nary a patter on the stone, nearing the surrendering Champion, only for the Knight to contradict him once more. Brivere clutched his sword in fearful uncertainty, in anger that was burning in him now that the Hylian had pushed and pushed, setting it free, though all that gave away his warring state of mind was the gentle flick of his tail.

“Just put the sword down, you stupid asshole,” Link spat, his terrified, tearful gaze turning sharply to the Knight, the sound of his voice something bitter and morose. He looked into Brivere’s face like he was seeing him for the first time, reading the subtle changes in the golden Zora’s damnably impassive countenance now like he hadn’t even been trying before.

“This is my choice to make, not yours, so back the fuck off!” the Hylian hissed, one hand reaching out and forcibly pushing Brivere’s hands down so that the point of his sword clicked against the stone beneath his feet. The Zora had this dumb expression all of a sudden like he didn’t understand why Link was doing this, like he couldn’t conceive of giving up, like he didn’t recognize the defeat that was so damn obvious. What the hell was wrong with him?

“You’re Sidon’s protector, remember? It’s your job to shield him from danger, no matter the source, just like you said,” Link uttered, repeating Brivere’s own declarations with the purest bitterness, chuckling if only to fight off the shine of tears glassing his eyes; his fiercest glare wouldn’t look like much if he couldn’t get his weak and rampant emotions under control. The Champion’s shoulders moved in a nonchalant kind of shrug, his gaze finally faltering and drifting downward in pitiful defeat. “Well, I’m still the source of danger, so do your damn job and let them take me. I’m no Knight of Hyrule, anyway, right? It’s no major loss.”

The golden Zora’s expression grew ever more pinched as the Hylian pleaded with him to back down, for him to be complicit in this surrender. If only it were an option for Brivere to communicate that an opportunity for victory was approaching, that soon their enemies would be vulnerable, but
only if they followed the proper course..

..at least, he thought so. He had his doubts as well, but he’d begun to slowly recognize the teasing flashes of imagery playing through his mind. He’d begun to suspect that they could be something more than dreamlike déjà vu or solidified anxieties..

But he’d lived in doubt for so long, he didn’t dare to fully trust himself. He didn’t dare to believe he was anything more than a mediocre Knight with the minimum requirement of physical prowess, not when Sidon’s life was riding on these whimsies. The uncertain Knight stole a glance at the Prince’s quiet, sleeping expression, looking on the helpless, unknowing innocence of his peaceful state, an ache blooming in his chest at the knowledge that his precious existence was such a delicate thing, a tiny flicker that could be extinguished at the end of an enemy knife.

Brivere’s gaze faltered, a sigh of defeat at last coming from him, and with a flick of his wrist, he aligned his sword with the sheath on his back, sliding it away.

“Good, very good,” the Blademaster purred in a vicious, disgusting way, the sound sickly sweet while it rolled off his tongue like poisoned honey. “Now that we’ve established that obedience is key here, I want the both of you to listen carefully and do exactly what I say. Make no mistake, I’ll cut this Zora’s throat before I wait for any reinforcements to arrive, so don’t hold me up any longer, unless you’re willing to gamble with his life. I want the yellow Zora to back off to the wall and I want the Hylian on the ground, arms outstretched, palms on the floor.”

Link did not hesitate at all, regardless of how his entire body had begun to turn numb in panic and everything inside him was wildly twisting. His knees were weak, his legs not sturdy pillars but liquid seeking to spread itself out when he let them crumble beneath his weight. The stone was cold against his palms once they touched the smooth surface and Link’s neck inclined but long enough for him to look on the Prince one, final time.

The Hylian hardly needed to tell himself that he was doing this for Sidon any longer. He wasn’t even a worthy exchange for the Zora Prince’s life; he had no place here, he was unimportant and by Hylia, that was all he’d really wanted. That was all he’d asked for. Sidon had been a temporary salve, soothing the pain of an unwanted existence. Without that existence, Sidon’s compassion and love weren’t necessary any longer, and he could finally be set free, rather than being the component holding together a man whose whole life was an ailment.

This was fine.

No, this was better.

Maybe these demeaning, self-destructive thoughts were actually meant to be a comfort, a shroud to hide away the burning sense of loss, but if it made things easier, what was the harm?

When Link was down as instructed, the three footsoldiers who had been waiting to lunge at him finally achieved their goal, setting upon him and holding him in the position he’d taken of his own accord, their gloved hands clutching so tightly, it was as if he was offering resistance despite that he was perfectly still in complete and total resignation. His forehead was pressed harshly into the floor, yet even so, the most that came from him was a quiet grunt of discomfort.

This was how he would die, he could feel it; on the ground with his face against the floor.

He hoped they at least had the decency to knock him unconscious before they started cutting on him again, but that was probably asking too damn much.
“You're lucky, Zora,” the Blademaster hummed in wry amusement, sending another little duo of underlings to stalk after Brivere while he, too, begrudgingly obeyed. The clansmen held their own weapons at the ready, closing in on the single Zora with every click of his claws, every step that took him closer to the wall where he would be, at last, disarmed.

Even on the ground and with enemy bodies hovering, suffocating him, Link’s pointed ears twitched at the sound of the Knight’s pattering, webbed feet and the slow clink, clink, clink of his armor. He was moving so damn slowly, it was like the threats weren’t filtering into his stupid, fucking head.

“If you’d come charging in alone, we would have just killed you like all the others,” the hooded clansman nonchalantly stated with a laugh of mockery. “But you brought the Champion right to us and since he was the only one we really wanted, now you get to li..”

“You get to li-” the Blademaster repeated, trailing off once again, his wretched voice caught in his throat like there wasn’t room enough in his trachea for the air needed to vocalize. The words had turned solid, they’d roughened and grown until they were lodged there, refusing to pass his lips or let him draw breath.

While the leader of the Yiga group went silent, his numerous underlings all slowly turned their heads to peer in his direction, their hidden faces likely written in confusion. Even Link’s perked ears were listening in apprehension, unable to make much of what was going on, apart from offering a dim awareness that something had, indeed, happened. Still, he dared not raise his head.

“Yes,” the Knight uttered, as though in reply to the Blademaster’s unfinished sentence. By the time the two clansmen who’d backed him to the wall returned their attention to him at the sound of his voice, his hand was already on the hilt of his blade, and the steel sang out as it was drawn, rejoicing at the deft flick which sent the razor edge of the weapon through the narrow columns of the hapless footsoldiers’ necks.

“This is it,” he breathed in chorus to the sweet song of his sword.

Brivere spared no extra steps, his frame nimbly soaring up and over the bodies which still held enough tension to remain on their feet, despite how their heads had rolled and their sliced necks spewed crimson. The Knight landed with a graceful click, his sharp, yellow gaze focused and burning into the mask of the paralyzed Blademaster like enraged flame, with a kind of consuming, passionate fury that could only be unleashed by this brand of vile scum who had the audacity to threaten one of the only things the Knight had ever seen fit to love in all his wretched, lonely life.

The hooded Yiga clansman’s body was rigid, his muscles straining in resistance, fighting against some invisible force that had suddenly overwhelmed him. Brivere couldn’t tell if the eyes behind the mask were turned to acknowledge him, or if the villain possessed enough awareness within his loss of control to feel the approach of his own demise, but nevertheless, the Knight would happily deliver it, with or without due credit.

Slowly, the knife aimed at the Prince’s throat began to draw away and the Blademaster stumbled back by a few clumsy paces, looking as though he were being dragged by a chain that had tightly encircled his neck, strangling him without mercy or care.

At the very same time, the golden Zora drew back, casting his sword across the empty space between himself and the Blademaster, so that it sliced the air with a quick flash, a dart that punctured the pupil of the eye emblazoned upon the mask concealing the Blademaster’s face, ending his struggle.

A muffled curse was audible from beneath one of the masks of the footsoldiers holding the Hylian in
place and they began to scramble as all hell effectively broke loose. They grappled and tugged at the unmov- ing Champion, dragging him to his feet while they shuffled toward the nearest route of escape, their movements suddenly uncoordinated and unsure.

As soon as Link was raised up enough that his gaze could be cast upon the situation and he processed the wild shift in control, his own surrender was rescinded with furious tenacity. The only thing he really needed to confirm was that the blade threatening the life of the Prince had been cast aside and that the one wielding it was now weeping tears of blood from the inverted eye of truth. That single assurance of Sidon’s safety freed the Hylian from the fearful, fretting restraints of his heart and he wrung himself right out of the hands of the trio attempting to steal him away in the chaos.

They really, really should have knocked him unconscious. Now they were going to pay for that mistake, and for the mistake of daring to fucking breathe anywhere near Prince Sidon.

Brivere bent down long enough to tear a weapon from the deathly grip of the nearest clansmen he’d cut down, flinging the sickle toward seemingly empty space, though as the now free Champion rolled across the floor and back to his feet, the weapon clattered before him, sliding right over so that it bumped the toe of his boot.

The trio of footsoldiers who’d had Link in their clutches gave chase like soundless shadows, following right at his heels while he lunged for the weapon. He spun around to catch the nearest of the pursuers off-guard, slashing them across the middle so that their skintight suit was slit open like a package that had no flesh, and scarcely even contained the overflow of blood and viscera that the Champion set free.

The Knight leaped again, his body tucking into a flip that carried him to Sidon’s bedside, where he ripped his sword from its gruesome sheath, the felled Blademaster’s skull. He gave it a flick, slinging a rain of red threateningly at the encroaching enemies who were now desperate to regain control, but they came at the Knight with weapons in hand, answering his threat like it was a diminutive challenge, or as though their lives were fuel to be cast off, feeding the flames of an inevitable victory.

Brivere cared not, for as long as he stood between his Prince and the coming onslaught, he had no fear.

Link’s success in stealing the life of one footsoldier did not deter them and if anything, their mad pursuit of him increased in fervor that he met gladly and matched with his own vengeful bloodlust.

He was a beast unshackled, his face a snarling mask, his eyes like those of a predator in the darkness and his body moved with energy that was renewed, his weapon swinging and twirling from one target to the next. He embodied an enraged deity, rending open the ground beneath his feet, making a home for the new sea he was building with his own two hands, a sea that would be rendered from the blood of mortals who’d been foolish enough to challenge him.

That was, until his reckless swinging brought the Vicious Sickle he was armed with against the surface of another footsoldier’s Demon Carver with a metallic groan, a crack and finally the violent shattering of what must have been very brittle, poorly tempered steel.

“Damn it!” he cursed, barely dodging the blow that followed the loss of his weapon and unintentionally backing himself into the grasp of other waiting clansmen.

If it were possible to condense the Hylian’s problems and various poor circumstances to a numerical list that counted up to exactly ninety-nine, he would approximate that the absolute garbage smiths produced these days could somehow be blamed for nearly every single one.
Link writhed in the grip of the footsoldiers, not wanting to allow the reality of the situation to catch up with him; his body was aching and tired from his previous fight against the golden Zora, so his struggles soon proved to be for naught and he stilled in their clutches, his muscles burning, his chest heaving for breath that was swiftly disallowed. No sooner than his fight diminished, the clansmen bettered their hold on him, one snaking an arm tightly around his neck, aiming to choke him into submission for ease of transport. Another, less patient enemy closed in from the front, raising their weapon to quicken the process with a blow to the Hylian’s head.

When the masked devil’s arm drew back, Link flinched, making another vain attempt to fight those who were holding him at bay, feeling that this was to be his last ditch effort, yet the blow meant to still him never came.

The Hylian’s clenched lids opened and a curious blue glare fell upon the footsoldier, who was now suspended mid-attack, apparently unable to bring their weapon down. The shadows played across the rises and dips between their muscles, their entire body looking as thought it was exerting pressure against an impossible force, yet they remained still, like they were frozen in time.

While Link coughed and kicked, the Yiga clansmen whose arm was restricting his breath and blood flow let out a muffled, desperate plea, a question that was more of a confused demand. “What are you doing?” they hissed, their voice tight and heightened in pitch.

There was little time for the Champion to wonder at the strange occurrence, or for him to feel any gratitude, though it gave another chance to regain his freedom. He drew one leg upward amidst his struggling, then slammed the heel of his boot back hard into the knee of the clansman restraining him, at the same time pulling slightly forward in their clutches, then smashing the back of his head against their masked face.

A wail of pain came from the footsoldier when they teetered, stumbling with Link in tow, but he wriggled free and quickly regained his balance. The other lingering clansman made another grab at him, but while they grappled and tugged at Link’s tunic for a hold, the Hylian nimbly drew a kunai he spotted sheathed at their waist, yanking it free then plunging it into their middle and kicking them aside. He spun on heel, quickly cutting down the last of them- the one who was still paralyzed in place.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the mysterious paralysis melted away from the last Yiga clansman, the muscles loosening as their blood flowed free. Their body fell with that same, weathering crumble, toppling aside at last to leave Link with a newly unobscured view of his Prince’s bed. There laid Sidon, still reclined but heaved enough upright that his head was raised and the golden shimmer of his eyes, just barely held open, fell upon the Hylian Champion.

“Sidon..” Link uttered, the kunai falling from his slackened grip while the entirety of his physical being froze, save for his bitter heart, which betrayed its own nature at the sight of his wakened lover, leaping and skipping about beneath the bone of his breast, a newly warmed, softened, gleeful thing.

The moment he overcame his nervous hesitation, the Hylian rushed toward the Prince’s bedside, bounding over the chaotic mess of felled bodies that laid between them. He was overwhelmed by the excess of emotion overflowing inside of him, so much that it was as though his innermost thoughts had begun to call out in urgency, speaking a language he didn’t understand and his muscles no longer recognized the blood in his veins, making his whole body tremble at the perceived invasion within him.

Link’s body collided with the soft bounce of the water mattress, his hands thoughtlessly reaching for the pale of Sidon’s face, only to pause moments before connection. His shaking hands were battered and bloody, unfit to touch anyone, Sidon most of all, so instead he allowed them to fall at his side
and he carefully leaned in, pressing his forehead to the crest of the Zora’s brow in affection and the deepest relief.

“My dearest one,” the Prince forced his words free, each one aching in his broken chest from the effort, his tongue a funny, forgotten lump of useless flesh. Every subtle movement was laden with pain yet to be fully remedied, but he forced through it, the sting of this ongoing separation much worse to endure.

Sidon’s hands did not hesitate as Link’s had, his palms cradling and enveloping his lover’s small frame, coaxing him nearer regardless of how bloodied and filthy he was.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his typically vibrant tone now a roughened sound. The Prince bumped the Hylian’s soft fringe in return, caressing with cautious care before he lowered his head just enough to be eye to eye with Link, invading the cool, steely blue with his own worried, burning gold.

“I, um..” Link stumbled over his own reply, the fearful resignation in him still lining his chest, taking up the otherwise dusty, empty spaces. The look in the Prince’s gaze was that of knowing, that of concern, the look of a friend and lover who had seen the depths of Link’s troubles from the very beginning and gently implored but never, ever forced the issue.

The Hylian was all too sure that Sidon knew the answer to his own question, that he had felt Link’s spirit dull and concede defeat, that his heart had broken as he sensed the Champion resigned to giving his life away to protect the Prince’s own, yet.. he gave Link space to lie, regardless.

“I’m fine,” Link stated. Sidon was safe and the upperhand had been regained, so his previous defeat didn’t matter any longer. All that mattered was what was right here, right now; the connection between their hearts, each touch, each word, every moment they spent together, alive and doing whatever they could to thrive. Against the ever mounting odds, they were still together, and that was something worthy of cherishing.

Very gently, Link kissed the Zora’s pointed brow, his scarred forefin, his cheek, until at last Sidon upturned his visage enough to press his lips to the Hylian’s and Link graciously welcomed the familiar affection he’d been so lost without.

“Don’t worry,” uttered the Hylian, his lips moving softly against the Prince’s, his voice so quiet that only the two of them would hear his words. “Don’t worry about me.”

“It seems the danger has yet to pass,” came the deep, warning voice of Brivere, who’d sheathed his blade and taken up a watchful perch at the window. His reflective, golden scales were painted with ruby spatters, yet still he shined in the moonlight, his observant gaze meandering the ground below in concern that he kept as calm and quieted as possible. “There’s still a great deal of fighting and commotion down below.”

The Knight let out an apprehensive sigh, turning from the window and quickly striding to the Prince’s bedside where his body dipped into a bow of respectful formality, his apprehension a palpable thing, visible in the way his gaze was unable to meet Sidon’s own. “Thank you for your previous assistance with the masked invaders, my lord, however that was not all of them, I’m afraid..”

A look of questioning furrowed the Hylian’s features and he turned to glance at Brivere’s bent form, mulling over his statement. Sidon had assisted? Wait. Link’s curious gaze roved across the collection of bodies littering the floor, coming to rest upon the hulking frame of the most elaborately adored one of all: the Blademaster. When he’d stopped speaking, had it been because his body was held in place by an invisible force, as with the one other footsoldier Link had slain? His head had been down
when it happened, so it was only now that he’d had a moment to catch up.

Was that Sidon? Did his powers really offer him those kinds of capabilities? To take full control of another person’s body, to actively imprison them within their own flesh? Link had assumed that secretly reaching inside and peacefully observing was the extent of the Prince’s magic. Then again, his skills had apparently been bolstered by the same potion that had stolen his awareness, so maybe that was to blame for both the danger and their success.

“My lord I know your consciousness will not last long, so I’ll speak quickly,” Brivere continued while Link untangled himself from Sidon’s protective embrace. Even though the Knight had verbally resolved to concisely describe the situation, however, the words hung on his tongue like a weight which threatened to tear out everything inside him as soon as they slipped from his mouth. Yet for Sidon’s sake, he swallowed his own pain, hiding his mournful emotions away to prevent them from harming the intuitive Prince in turn. “The entire team of Knights tasked with guarding you, save for myself, were killed in the line of duty. It’s necessary for you to use your powers to communicate the danger that you’re in, to see to the aid of reinforcements.”

“It seems that.. it’s already been done,” Sidon began after a moment of concentration, wincing over the physical pain still twining through his cartilaginous bones, and the bitter loss he shouldered at the news that even more of his people had been slain while he slept. “There are already.. additional Knights on their way.”

“You’re certain, my lord?” Brivere’s tone did not give away his confusion, but it was made clearer in the way he raised his head ever so slightly, his gaze drifting upward, but not high enough to look directly upon the Prince. He was relieved to hear that the reaction time of his fellow Knights was so quick, but he was clueless as to how they could already know that they were needed.

Sidon offered a curt nod of his head and the golden Zora bent lower, bowing deeper in reply to the simple gesture. With the exchange completed, Sidon’s attention returned to his lover, looking first on Link, who was bent over the fallen Blademaster, stripping him of the weapon strap which held his sheathed Windcleaver sword. The Prince’s eyes then wandered, peering across the numerous dead who surrounded him, both appalled and enraged, yet still saddened by such an immense, pointless loss of life. For what? What great purpose made all this death necessary?

“These are the ones,” the Prince commented, his golden eyes shining in woe and recognition. He remembered these people from the night of the Blood Moon, from the memories he’d delved himself into while his lover lay in pitiful tatters. “..These masked warriors.. They’re ones who hurt you before.”

“.yes.” Link breathed like a guilt-ridden confession, both aching and angry. His own blue stare had turned to hateful flame, and the Hylian’s bloody fingers violently tore the mask away from the face of the Blademaster. The urge to look upon his countenance, a thing he kept concealed, felt like an act of rebuke, an invasion, a mutilation, and Link couldn’t help the surge of justified satisfaction when he did just that.

The man, minus the wound which had gouged the flesh between his eyes, was average-looking. His brown skin had turned to deathly gray, and his pale, wavy locks were dyed a murky crimson with the blood that had soaked into the fabric that aided in his concealment. His eyelids were cracked open enough that he looked as though he were waking from sleep, if not for how still he was, if not for how his deep crimson eyes endlessly gazed, unblinking but shining with a strange, faded glow, like a dying ember.

He looked like any given man that might meet Link with welcoming smiles and pride in Kakariko village and somehow, that made the Champion regret looking at what was hidden under the mask.
Straightening, Link fastened the Blademaster’s weapon strap to himself, so that the lightweight Windcleaver clicked inside its sheath, against the Champion’s back. “I’m so sorry,” he hissed, returning his gaze to the comfort of his lover’s face, distinctly feeling as though his own anger and sorrow bled from him and into Sidon when he did. “I didn’t think they were bold enough.. I thought I was safe here, but I just brought them here with me..”

This was his fault. Another mistake. More lives lost, more innocent blood on his hands.

When would he fucking learn?

“I put you and your people in this danger,” he stated, his head falling into the shelter of his palms, carelessly streaking his face with crimson stains.

“Link,” Sidon sharply piped up, the razor edges of his teeth flashing in the tenacity of the way he spoke his lover’s name. One of his hands furled and he pounded it against the soft surface of the mattress beneath him. He hated everything about the wretched guilt that he knew the man he loved was feeling; he hated it and understood it without need for empathic abilities. “This is not your fau-ahh!”

As Sidon’s voice was raised, pain shot through him, shuffling the disjointed pieces that lurked beneath his skin and forcibly bent his frame so that his head dipped low, pressed to the soft blankets beneath him.

“Brivere,” the Prince hissed, not even raising his head, but nevertheless, the Knight heard and answered his call.

“Yes, my lord?”

“This is an order,” the Zora Prince spoke, slowly dragging himself upright once more. The stern sound of his tone was still so utterly unfamiliar as Link listened, despite that he’d now heard it so many times. Sidon kept his voice low, trying his best to maintain some steadiness through the overwhelming pain he was feeling, but he sounded no less powerful while he issued his command. “Do not allow these Yiga clansmen to take the Champion. Protect him... with your life, if necessary.”

Brivere’s skillful neutrality hid away whatever emotion he felt at such an order, yet as his lips parted to reply, his voice got lost for a hesitant instant. Sentimentality, heartbreak, wistful, regretful longings were all irrelevant, because the golden Zora had a duty to perform, and it was one he would do without question, gladly..

Still, there it was again- the choice, so painfully clear, so blatant and goddamn merciless. Between himself and the Hylian, one life was meant to be protected at all costs, whereas the other was.. expendable.

No, this was not the time and place. Once again, the Knight lowered his upper body into a bow of respect, his long forefins falling forward in his movement, then he quietly uttered the words, “..yes, my lord.”

Again, the only answer he received from his Prince was a curt nod, before Sidon’s attention went back to the troubled Hylian.

“Link,” he cooed gently, his pale lips forming a bittersweet smile, “I’m sorry.”

“What?” the Hylian mumbled in confusion, taking the scarce few steps that brought him back to his lover’s bedside.
“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you what this damnable potion does,” the Prince explained, the pink patch below his crested brow furrowing while his lip curled in frustration. He hated this awful process, and now that it had hurt someone else he cared about, he hated it that much more.

“I’m not upset about that, Sidon,” Link stated, his tone calm and steady, as though to prove the words he was speaking.

“But you were,” the Prince uttered knowingly, his voice and ability to speak beginning to slip out of his grasp. But though his neck ached and his body was barely held up, he gave a little nod, his golden gaze faltering in burning guilt. “And that was.. troubling me, I’m afraid.”

Bewildered silence was all that came from the Hylian for an extended instant, then suddenly, a quiet laugh bubbled from him and his own gaze shined with guilty amusement and affection. Despite everything, Link smiled, savoring this precious sight of his loving Prince, awake and as doting as ever, regardless of how he was suffering. All he could think of was how he feared that this could be the very last time he’d ever see his lover’s beautiful face or hear his soothing voice and feel the mysterious, wonderful sensation that being loved by him induced.

He hadn’t realized, but he’d been afraid of that very thing for so long. He’d been afraid to lose his one, true friend, to never see him again, and maybe it should have been obvious since that damned hinox swallowed him and Link stabbed the beast in utter desperation, but he’d never been very observant.

He was glad he knew now, anyway.

“Hey,” the Hylian said, patiently waiting until the shining gold of the Zora’s eyes bravely returned to meet his own. “Don’t let it trouble you any more. You don’t owe me any explanations for your actions. You don’t need my permission to make your own choices. I’m not angry. I’m just ready for you to get out of this damn bed, because I miss you.”

“Then I’m sorry for that, my friend,” the Prince quietly laughed, though it was more of a breathy exhalation that shook his body as it came from him. There was relief even in the smallest of smiles and Link was relieved in turn, just seeing it. “I miss you as well, dear one, but I’m afraid it will be a bit longer.. if you can stand to be patient until then.”

“I’ll wait,” Link confirmed, nodding his head. “I’ll wait for as long as it takes.”

“Hnn,” the Zora Prince fought off a cringe at the pain wracking him, taking a breath and replacing that expression with one of comfort and gladness. He nodded, his forefins bobbing with the subtle movement, then he slowly, gently laid himself back again, almost fearful that even the soft surface of the mattress could hurt him if he didn’t take the greatest of care.

One hand tightly grappled at the sheets, while the Prince’s other hand extended toward his lover, his fingers unfurled and welcoming the Hylian’s touch, regardless of how every inch of him was blood-stained.

Still, Link hesitated to place his dirty hands anywhere upon the pristine Prince and especially within the soft white of his palm. However, as Sidon’s features furrowed in growing discomfort, the Hylian could not will himself to reject the Prince, and he shoved his hand into Sidon’s own, his comparably smaller fingers twining between the Zora’s first three.

He held on tightly enough to allow Sidon to know that he was here, that he wasn’t going anywhere, and he did not let go until the Prince’s awareness dimmed away, venturing elsewhere all over again.
It was looking as though this was going to turn into another all-nighter for the Guard Captain, not that such things were surprising any longer. He had an unbelievable headache to go with the wound across his face, which had streaked not just his mouth and chin with blood, but his neck had carried the crimson stain downward, so that the silvery front of his breastplate was a mess of branching streams.

Even so, much as these terrible events might have proven themselves inconvenient for him, it was the kind of occurrence he also couldn’t find it in himself to ignore. However, that certainly wouldn’t stop him from taking his irritation out on the invaders who had come to senselessly endanger his people and his home.

Bazz moved into each attack, hard and fast on the offensive, yet no matter how quickly he attempted to seal the fates of the surrounding enemies, they evaded with frustrating diligence.

“Coward!” he growled while another of the masked attackers dipped low to dodge the jabbing danger of his spearhead, their gloved hand nimbly drawing some kind of smoke grenade that was no larger than a marble, then in an obscuring puff, they vanished without a trace, reappearing just out of reach all over again, lingering like an opportunistic scavenger.

The small unit of guardsmen kept their formation tight, following their Captain’s lead while he pushed toward the city square, where he would issue commands to his warriors and receive a constant stream of reports from his sentry guards. Bazz’s Lieutenant had been sent back to the barracks to take charge of every guardsman who wasn’t on duty, because Hylia be damned if this wasn’t the purest of emergencies.

Their enemies had quickly dispersed once the Hylian Champion made his escape and the Captain did not fail to notice that. It offered Bazz and his unit better odds against the swarm, as they were suddenly no longer the focus of the attack, however, now the Yiga clansmen had split up to wage all-out war against Zora’s Domain, some in disguise, others not.

What was their goal? Had they lost track of Link and were now searching for him in the most violent manner possible? No, that couldn’t have been right. The entire way they were going about this attack was too obvious, too head-on, especially for soldiers who clearly were more specialized in stealth and infiltration.

Even the way they attacked reeked of suspicion, of some other underlying purpose. They would engage, offer a momentary struggle, get a few strikes in if possible, then they would set to evading before fleeing the fight altogether.

“This way,” the Captain called over the sound of steel clashing at all sides while the small band of clansmen who were following his unit, wearing at them, continued their slippery onslaught. He ushered one guardsman after another into the waters beneath the Uppercity, covering their retreat until at last he dove in to follow.

Thankfully, though these shadowy warriors were proficient at disguising themselves as Zoras, they could not imitate their amphibious abilities.

The rushing waters rinsed Bazz clean and harshly stung at his wound, but he ignored the pain, paddling hard to the front of the group, leading them toward one of the numerous falls which would offer them quicker passage to the Uppercity.

One at a time, the guardsmen ascended, with the Captain leading the bunch. He landed upon the
luminous and ornate plateau that was the Uppercity square, beads of water chasing his armored frame from the power of his climb, then he fell back into the fray all over again.

The Uppercity was swarming with invaders, most of which had set upon a smaller cluster of guardsmen who were desperately attempting to hold the important point surrounding the statue of the Zora Champion. The black Zora rushed in without hesitation, his unexpected approach aiding to break up the Yiga group, especially as one at last fell beneath his feet, impaled upon the razor edge of his weapon.

The masked soldier let out a choked cry when the spear was yanked free, their voice so painfully youthful that even Bazz neglected to deliver the strike which would take their life, instead swiping the butt of his spear hard across the front of their head, soundly stilling them. It was just as likely that their weeping wound would kill them slowly, but the Zora hadn’t time for grief or guilt, especially not for enemies who weren’t sparing that much in turn.

He needed to kill off the compassion of his heart, at least while it served to hinder him.

Once the full unit which had been tailing the Captain landed, they rushed in like a cavalry, assuring the retreat of the encroaching clansmen and securing their claim of the city square. It took only a few more moments of exchange for the archers of the city guard to chase off the last of the bow-wielding footsoldiers, and when the final one retreated, a few of the Zora warriors let out triumphant ‘Zo-ra-ra-ras!’ but the fight was still far from over.

Bazz’s wound had stained his pale features all over again with crimson stripes that seemed almost like warpaint, but once one of the guardsmen who had been on duty at the square got a look at his severely gouged flesh, they couldn’t help but wince, speaking up in concern between quick pants, “Captain, that injury looks serious.”

“I won’t back down over a little cut. I can still fight.” The black Zora slurred his words from behind a slashed lip and the numb sensation expanding outward from the wound.

“Spread out!” the Captain commanded the group, gesturing to send some of his warriors off to shore up numbers at the city entry points, while keeping security in the city square as strong as possible.

It only took a glance for him to acknowledge that the palace and all pathways leading to the King’s tower were swarming with Knights of the Royal Order. The staircases and railings were being thoroughly scouted, while there where armored Knights stationed in every archway. However, they held those positions without intention to deviate, the entirety of their forces clearly dedicated to guarding the King and little else. Bazz only hoped that Prince Sidon was under equally heavy guard and probably the Hylian Champion by extension.

..though if he knew his Master Link, that wild Hylian was sure to be in the thick of things. He was strong, sure, but Bazz still hoped that he was okay.

Soon enough, Bazz’s Lieutenant arrived with reinforcements for the second time in the entire, awful evening. It was a thankful sight no matter what, but as the Captain’s ember-colored eyes drew across the armored ranks, he shook his head in dismay.

“This really wasn’t the best time for our numbers to be stretched so thin,” he uttered under his breath, unsure if he wanted his people to hear him so dispirited, even if all they needed to do was look around for themselves to see and feel the exact same troublesome dread that was creeping up on the black Zora in command. He’d lost people to the Water Blight and having to divvy up those who remained between the fort downstream and Hateno Village was certainly taking a toll. Yet all he’d heard from those above him was that they didn’t have the budget for additional forces.
“The way these assholes keep appearing and disappearing,” the Lieutenant grumbled as he approached the Captain, having had his own fair share of frustration, “it’s like they have no intention to really fight.. just to distract.”

“I’ve been thinking the exact same thing,” Bazz spoke in agreement, doing everything in his power to figure out how best to use the forces available to him, all while a bold handful of footsoldiers reappeared once more, offering further frustration.

The black Zora dipped low, narrowly avoiding a hail of arrow fire from one of the twisting pathways above, then he ducked behind the statue of the Zora Champion, dragging his Lieutenant with him to safety and muttering words of gratitude to Mipha, for her protection from beyond the grave.

“There’s gonna be hell to pay if they damage this statue,” the Lieutenant wryly joked, peeking out from behind the base of the statue enough to spot the enemy archer, then he gestured their location to one of his own. Bazz could only let out a sigh of exasperation, cautiously tipping his head upward as a guardsman wielding a Silver Bow lunged out from her cover, taking aim at the attacking clansmen and snuffing them out with one well-aimed shot.

“Someone should have told them how good we were, then maybe they wouldn’t have attempted this attack,” said the Lieutenant with a quiet scoff, only for Bazz to grumble and reply, “I have a great idea. Taking our job seriously.”

“You’re no fun, sir,” the Lieutenant spoke, his tone completely serious, despite what the Captain had implied.

“Sir!” came the voice of a newly approaching sentry, who had apparently been scouting the residential tunnels of the Uppercity. She was hollering down from one of the intricate, floating walkways, her voice attracting the attention of a footsoldier who appeared behind her, rushing at her with a Vicious Sickle in hand. They rapidly fell prey to her much wider range when the shaft of her spear spun in hand and the sharp end pointed backward, tucking up under her elbow and catching the footsoldier off guard.

The clansman was apparently only nicked, however, and they retreated with great haste, probably to lick their wounds or consume a healing potion.

“What is it, guardsman?” the Lieutenant called aloud in reply, getting a thankful nod from Bazz, who didn’t much like the idea of having to scream and worsen his already severe wound.

The armored woman from above bent close to the rail to speak, “Sir, these masked villains all over the Uppercity, even in and around the residential areas. Civilians are starting to come out in response to the danger and they are indistinguishable from enemies in disguise.”

“I’d hate for the off-duty Goddess Knights to get into their armor any fucking slower,” Bazz growled, shaking his head, then he turned to the cluster of soldiers available for command, gesturing to those he intended to send off. “I want you lot to proceed to the Uppercity residential areas. You’re under the command of whoever was already on duty up there. Evacuate all civilians to the Basilica and do not allow any hold ups. Get them out, under the threat of arrest if need be. Anybody who cannot or will not obey; they aren’t a Zora.”

The hurried click, click, click of a guardsman rushing in the direction of the square from the checkpoint just after the Great Zora Bridge and the entryway to the city served to cut the exchange short. They came panting for breath and in hysterics, the look on their face the only thing that gave away their panic, as their rush to return air to their lungs did not allow them to spill the news which they had brought in such a hurry.
“S-Sir!” they forced the words out of their parched throat.

“What now?” Bazz uttered, his voice sounding very much like gruff aggravation, though it failed to conceal ever mounting concern.

“I’m reporting from the front checkpoint, sir,” they weakly stammered, swallowing and wiping at a scrape from some kind of struggle. “A large number of people from the Undercity just began swimming en masse down the Zora river.”

“What?” the Lieutenant hissed in surprise and confusion, his voice the first in several to begin murmuring in speculation. It was the Guard Captain who did not immediately pipe up, instead quietly simmering the report inside the pit of his stomach, seasoning the awful brew with growing dread.

“This and the attack can’t be unrelated,” he stated, his voice both regretful and certain. If the Undercity Zoras were really fleeing in such great numbers, then it not only meant that this move had been planned and coordinated, but that they knew the attack was coming.

“Lieutenant,” Bazz addressed his second-in-command, his tone hardening in preparation for the awful things he could feel were coming. “Take as many of the others that can be spared and put this exodus to an end. Detain any who refuse to obey and don’t spare any force short of deadly force. We need answers. I’ll handle getting this invasion under control, then I’ll swim out to join you.”

“Yes, sir!”

Chapter End Notes

How was it, friends? There was pain and suffering, woe, emotional fluff and suspense, so I hope you all really enjoyed it. :)

I need to say thank you again to BunnyBob (tumblr) because she produced so much awesome art for the anniversary of this story! Seriously, for those of you who haven't checked out my tumblr, you really have to go see! Also, Miauzen, who made some reeeally adorable art of Estuu, Brivere and Betaal. Thank you so much!

My Tumblrs are BanishedOne and Banishfics
My Twitter is @BanishedOne and it's fairly new so I don't know anybody, please feel free to add me.
Ask me about the Coma Baby Discord~
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Brivere's orders had been to escort the Champion to the safety of the Basilica, to protect Link with his life. He was not one to question the orders, but that didn't mean that Link was quite so willing to obey.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I'm sorry that this chapter is late, but I'm still in the process of moving/unpacking. Also, I think at some point I lost track of time, because I honestly thought today was Sunday. My head needs help, haha. Anyway, please enjoy.

With Sidon back in the depths of his artificial slumber, Link drifted to the tower windows for a peek at what the watchful Knight had observed before. It was just as well for the Hylian to play lookout now, as Brivere had neared the Prince’s bedside, fussing over Sidon’s positioning and making certain that he hadn’t laid himself down in a way that could cause further harm.

Down below, the movement of numerous shadows darkened the softly glowing city streets, though from the lofty height of the tower, it was likened to watching a war for dominance between something as diminutive and irrelevant as ants. It was impossible to tell what side was winning or what was truly going on, only that the chaos had pulled everyone into it, a swirling void consuming the light.

But despite being literally distanced from it all, Link couldn’t distance himself from it, emotionally. Inside his ever-turbulent heart, his feelings and complexes fought a war all their own, something the Hylian couldn’t quell, no matter what his dear Prince claimed.

‘This is not my fault,’ he could tell himself, trying to believe in Sidon’s words, wanting to trust the man he treasured so dearly.

Not so long ago, Link might not have needed Sidon’s reassurances. He could have easily shrugged his shoulders and asked himself, ‘Why should I be bothered to care?’ The problem he faced now was that he did, in fact, care.

Saving the world wasn’t his responsibility. It shouldn’t have been his problem, because he wasn’t the only one who existed in the world, and therefore, he shouldn’t have been the only one invested in saving it. But still, having that burden placed upon his shoulders against his own consent had filled him with irrational guilt that he now couldn’t escape.

“The Yiga Clan are waging an all-out assault on Zora’s Domain,” Link lamented, the weight of that awful responsibility clear in his doleful tone. He didn’t know why he’d opted to let his feelings take the form of words, because not only was that not typically his way, but the one who was about to hear those very words was.. not exactly somebody Link cared to hear from in turn.
The Champion’s fists bundled tightly in determined fury. Inside, the same slighted deity who had taken the lives of those who threatened the Prince was still unappeased and hungry, desiring vengeance for the innocent people who were being harmed as well.

One fist pounded the solid surface of the chilly windowsill and the Champion hissed a declaration of war from behind bared teeth. “I can’t just stand here doing nothing! I’m responsible for this.”

“They’re here to capture you and were willing to threaten the life of Prince Sidon to see to that goal,” Brivere droned in a voice that was uncomfortably calm, while he tucked the Prince’s arms carefully at his sides. “If you leave safety to face them, you risk giving them exactly what they want. You’d be rewarding this unprovoked violence, affirming their actions by granting them success.”

“If it ends this madness, then why not?” the Hylian snapped, turning away from the cold air at the window to face the heat of his burning rage, and the source; Sidon’s pompous Knight. “Maybe you’re willing to continue risking Sidon’s life and the lives of your people, but I’m not.”

Brivere, too, quickly turned to face the Hylian, meeting his wild, reckless glare with a sharp stare of his own. He wished the cold of his eyes possessed the means to refute such ridiculous accusations. Brivere absolutely didn’t wish to place his Prince into any kind of danger, and in fact, he more often advised against Sidon’s brash courses of action. He didn’t find it wise at all, the notion of his Prince willingly disarming himself of the guard chosen to protect him and offering that service to shelter this sham of a Champion… but he obeyed out of pure loyalty, and even in keeping Link safe, he knew that indirectly… he’d be protecting the heart of his Prince.

That was the only thing he’d grasped on to, to steel his will.

“Did you not hear what my lord said?” Brivere chided, placing his aggravation aside in the hopes of reasoning with this pig-headed child of a Hylian. Honestly, he couldn’t be surprised any longer that Prince Sidon liked him. They were kindred spirits when it came to being completely thoughtless and throwing themselves in front of danger on some dim, guilt-ridden notion that it was their job to do so.

The golden Zora brought his hands together, taking a deep breath and slowly released it before he continued. “Prince Sidon ordered me to protect you. He wouldn’t want you putting yourself at risk. And in the condition you’re in, what could you really do?”

“Yeah, well, whose fault is that?” Link accused, his pointed ears pressing back in his indignation at being talked down to.

“If I recall correctly, it was you who threw the first punch,” the Knight snapped, losing his sense of restraint far too easily. He put one hand up, quieting any comment the Hylian might have been ready to utter in retort, then he shook his head, backpedaling with haste. “This matter is irrelevant now. Our people don’t need your protection and we won’t roll over under the threat of aggression. We certainly won’t allow these unknown enemies to steal you right out of our grasp.”

When the Knight quieted, he strode over to the window and the Hylian’s side, peering out at the chaos below once more, then he pushed his new charge back from view, as it likely wasn’t best for him to be broadcasting his position to the world.

“Hey,” Link hissed when he was moved, then he swatted Brivere’s hand away, eliciting a grumble of dwindling patience from the Zora in turn.

“We only have so long before they regroup,” Brivere explained, gesturing to the battle being fought beneath them. He didn’t know how these unfamiliar enemies communicated or coordinated, but he was guessing that the ones besieging the city hadn’t realized that the attack party sent to the tower
had been dispatched. Most likely, they were awaiting a signal of some kind, and when it didn’t come, there was the possibility of a secondary plan, or merely another wave of assault. “Once the backup arrives to protect the Prince, I’ll escort you to the Basilica where you’ll be quite beyond their reach.”

“Just..” the Champion grumbled, gesturing in wild frustration, while his other hand laced in the soft hair of his fringe, tangling there and tugging at it. “..running away? I can’t-”

“Link,” hissed the Knight, unable to comprehend why it was that this Hylian was so determined to throw his life away, especially a life that others clearly cherished and wanted to preserve. Living to fight another day wasn’t selfish, it wasn’t cowardice, if only he could get that through his thick head.

Peering up, Link let his hands fall back at his sides while his blue gaze focused on that damnable serious expression that always occupied Brivere’s face. He was quite sure that the golden Zora had never uttered his name before, unless such a thing had slipped his mind, so it was unusual to hear.

“For the love of all that is holy,” Brivere began in earnest now that he had the Champion’s attention, doing everything in his power to maintain his typical steadiness. “..climb down from the lofty height of that guilt-striken messiah complex you’ve enshrined inside yourself, put your ego away, and have faith in someone other than yourself.”

When the Zora finished, little came from the Hylian in reply, and not just because of his natural tendency to remain silent. No, he was quiet out of a sudden inability to produce a bitter, snarky reply.

Messiah complex? Was this man kidding? Link actually was the fucking messiah, unwilling though he might have been. He didn’t want to take responsibility for the state of the world, he didn’t feel a driving need to do it. The only problem was that, until he answered the call of his Goddess, the people he loved would be punished. The body count was on his hands and there was no way to deny that.

“If you can’t do this for your own sake, then do it for the Prince’s,” Brivere spoke up to ease the tension of the silence, his own tone softened. “He wants to protect you as much as you want to protect him, so allow him to. He has already lost so much in his life, don’t force him to bear another loss.”

“Fine,” Link sharply spat, begrudgingly agreeing to hide the fact that he agreed sincerely. His gaze faltered, then quickly made its way over to the bed where Sidon lay, looking deceptively peaceful though surely he was anything but. He probably felt the same awful responsibility now that Link did; the urge to protect his people, to fight for them, to lead them. Yet he was isolated inside of himself, while his world fell apart around his helpless, sleeping form.

When Link returned his regard to the Zora before himself, Brivere had his face tucked into the shelter on his palm, his eyes clenched tightly shut. He was probably nursing quite a headache from the blow Link had delivered there, but it wasn’t as though the Hylian didn’t have lingering aches of his own. His nose wasn’t bleeding any longer, but it felt very swollen.

“They’ve arrived,” the Knight muttered, dropping his hand from his face and orienting himself toward the doorway before he dipped his head down in a bow to.. apparently nobody?

“I don’t-” Link began, only for his pointed ears to perk forward in closer listening, indeed catching the softest sound of approaching footsteps. One hand went instinctively to the sword he’d lifted off the Blademaster, his fingers tightening around the hilt for comfort. Okay, so somebody was coming, but as far as he was concerned, it could have been a second wave of Yiga clansmen.
They waited, one tense at the prospect of danger, the other tense for seemingly other reasons. As the footsteps climbed the spiral tower, they began to take on the clicking patter that was characteristic of webbed Zora feet and sharp toeclaws. Link was unconvinced, wishing that there had come a time when he noticed whether or not disguised clansmen could make their footfalls match their appearances.

His instinct was telling him that their approach would be silent, regardless of disguises. When the apparent Zoras neared the doorway, the clink of their heavy armor was added to the acoustic mix, but Link didn’t take his hand away from his sword, not even when a large group of Knights crossed the threshold.

They wore a different style of armor than what Brivere was often adorned in, vivid red shawls and some kind of crest that Link only knew to be associated with the Basilica, as he’d seen Apostles and even Sidon wear something similar.

“Knight Divine,” Brivere greeted the older woman at the head of the group, who seemed to be eyeing the mess of bodies with distaste, while buckling a very large sword back into her weapon strap.

“Save the niceties for when the danger has passed,” she chastised, giving her hand a flick. “You can’t afford to have your head down right now.”

“Most Courageous One.” Straightening, the golden Zora addressed his superior, still keeping his head somewhat bent despite her insistence that he remain alert. Link watched a bit awkwardly, feeling suddenly more intimidated by the no-nonsense woman than he was by the Yiga Clan. She seriously had a resting bitchy face that was tenfold Brivere’s intensity. She made the golden Zora seem easy-going by comparison. She looked like she not only had no sense of humor, but possessed within her a humorless void that could feasibly drain all laughter and smiles from people within her vicinity.

“My orders as of right now are to protect the Hylian Champion. He is the apparent target of this attack and his abduction appears to be the goal of these invaders,” Brivere continued, gesturing to the Hylian at his side as he explained. When he did, the frighteningly serious woman’s gaze fell upon Link, and he swallowed under her sudden scrutiny. The way she regarded him, it was as though she wanted to question his identity, the validity of his title, but she refrained from doing so as the disappointment of the answer threatened to be worse than not knowing for sure. “...With the assurance that my lord Prince Sidon is safe in your care, I will away to the Basilica, where the Champion will be safe.”

“You need my assurance that the Prince will be safe in our care?” she uttered, her enunciations even sharper than the pale gold of her gaze. “Don’t insult me, boy.”

Link couldn’t help himself; he let out a snort of restrained laughter at the way she addressed Brivere. Hylia’s merciful grace, this woman was fucking ruthless and suddenly Link liked her more.

“Follow your orders and do it quickly,” she commanded, her words strict and painted in warning. “By the holy powers bestowed upon me, I shall erect a barrier that no foe will be capable of bypassing. You’d do well to make certain that you aren’t caught in it.”

“Understood, Most Courageous,” the golden Zora replied, his tone obviously taking on the urgency he’d understood to be necessary. He resisted the urge to excuse himself with another bow, instead hurrying toward the archway which led to the spiral stairs, casting a glance over one shoulder as he went. “Champion, come with me.”
Link gave chase, skipping over the numerous obstacles scattered across the floor in his hurry to follow on Brivere’s tailfins. He was just thankful that he didn’t do anything too clumsy while that ‘Knight Divine’ was watching.

The duo descended in silence, not making it even halfway down the tower before they ran headlong into enemies all over again. They rounded a bend, stumbling upon a waiting cluster of footsoldiers who had apparently been biding their time, arrows nocked and ready to fly.

And fly they did, aimed squarely for their Hylian target. The arrows sharply hissed across the short distance, their speed only barely matched by Brivere’s own instincts. The Zora sidestepped to cover the Hylian, his own arms raised to shield his face while the arrows clinked uselessly against the armor over his chest.

“Shit!” Link called out in the sudden surprise, but even greater offense, smacking one hand against the shine of the Knight’s armor in rebuke. “Knock it off. I can fight for myself, I don’t need your protection!”

“Sure,” Brivere replied, reaching for his sword, his yellow eyes flicking between the numerous enemies while he stood firmly blocking the Hylian Champion. They definitely didn’t have time for this.

“Wait,” the Hylian muttered, a wild idea suddenly coming to him. He wished like anything that he understood what it took to summon magic with ease. If he survived the night, perhaps he could ask Sidon to give him some pointers, but for now... he would just have to wing it.

With a leap from his slightly higher standing, Link grappled onto the furrows of Brivere’s armor, clambering his way up the Zora’s back in order to perch atop his shoulders, bent like some reckless gargoyle. The Knight let out a perplexed breath, either that or Link stepped on one of his fins. There wasn’t time for him to question what his charge was trying to do, however, because before he could speak, Link had sprung from his shoulders, leaping into the tight-knit group of clansmen with either a foolhardy plan or an utter death wish.

For some reason, whenever the Hylian found himself sailing through the air and very likely to his death, he felt that mysterious slowing of time freeze the space around him to a crawl where he could perceive everything, he could feel everything. And he didn’t know what it was about the danger but he could think so much more easily when his life was certain to be on the line in no less than three seconds.

The clansmen’s fingers were very slowly twitching upon their weapons, bowstrings drawing taut, swords hissing, half drawn from their sheaths, but Link’s mind had ventured back to that wonderful afternoon he spent with Sidon - it felt like it was so long ago. He was desperately trying to remember what it was that endowed him with magic that day. Was it really his obscure attempts to ‘think like a Goron,’ or was it the possibility of impressing the Prince? The fascinated light in his eyes when he looked upon the Hylian, that sincere smile of true admiration...

Yes, that was it, that was it!

“Daruk’s Protection!” Link cried aloud in triumph as he landed amongst the hapless group of enemies, the magical gem of light forming around him, guarding him with its vibrantly shining plates and edges.

The clansmen had no idea what they were in for. They attacked Link the very instant he touched down; an automatic response. They’d hardly registered the shield before a barrage of surprised blows struck it, violently shattering the cloak of magic so that it exploded like a bomb barrel, blasting
foolsoldiers here and there.

Most of the enemies were slammed into the walls with such brutal force that their bodies were left broken on impact, but those who limped back to their feet quickly met their ends to either Link’s newly drawn blade, or Brivere’s, the two warriors moving with merciless speed, deftly slashing and cutting down anything that dared to move.

“Who’s your Champion now?” Link said with a smirk, sliding his sword back into its sheath before he bent down to fumble with the grotesquely sliced remains of a footsoldier. Thankfully, the Duplex Bow they’d been armed with was still intact, and the Hylian wrung it free from the flopsy corpse, putting it over one shoulder before he set to unbuckling their quiver.

Brivere only let out a deep sigh, continuing his trek down the stairs with even more haste than before. “We have to hurry,” he insisted, giving Link an impatient glance before leaving him behind in his rush.

“Oh nice,” Link hissed, stumbling over his feet while he yanked the quiver free, trying to follow while he clumsily strapped the item to himself. “Some bodyguard.”

It was no great loss. The Hylian knew a better and faster way to get down, anyway. He took another moment to shore up his arrow supply, lifting whatever he could off of the bodies of his slain enemies, then he ran at the tower wall, scaling it in order to access the window, which he leapt from without a second thought.

This time, Link actually managed to get his paraglider pulled open before his stomach turned inside out and landed in his mouth. Not only that, but while he drifted downward, he brandished his newly stolen bow, taking aim at lurking clansman down below and knocking them off, one at a time.

Before the drifting Hylian made it to the ground, however, a great burst of light came from his back, so vividly golden and bright that it was momentarily blinding, even if he wasn’t actually facing it. He blinked away the discomfort, waiting for the surprising glow that had shot across Zora’s Domain to dim before he dared to reorient himself with the intention of peering back in the direction of Sidon’s tower.

The bow was hurriedly tucked back over his shoulder, his hand instead moving to shield his eyes from the intense glare, and Link squinted for a peek at the odd event taking place.

From the top of the Prince’s tower, a golden barrier had drifted delicately downward, veiling the entirety of the spiral like a fine, transparent cloth which burned with uncontrolled firelight. It crackled and billowed in the air, looking both weightless and magnificently powerful all at once.

The shield cast the courtyard that spanned out from the entry to Sidon’s tower in a light that was as harsh as midday, yet as low-hanging as twilight. Greenery now burned in tones of washed out gold and hedges cast long-reaching shadows that were absolutely black against the stark glare. Link would’ve thought that the aid of such a spotlight could be helpful against the Yiga invaders, but if anything it only left his eyes ill-adjusted while creating plenty of dark spots for his enemies to hide themselves.

The Hylian aimed himself for a spot that he felt looked relatively safe while he neared the ground, though when he dipped beneath the canopy of decorative shrubs, he soon found that there were a slew of blind spots that he’d been unable to see from above. In one of those very blind spots, Brivere was already standing patiently in wait.

“How did you know I-” Link began, genuinely confused.
“It was a lucky guess,” the golden Zora answered, brushing over the entire matter with seeming indifference. The metallic shine of his golden scales was intensified by the light from the magical shield now protecting Sidon’s tower, and they glinted with even the slightest movement, so he backed himself into one of the hedge shadows to avoid attracting any further attention. “We need to-”

“Hurry. Yeah, yeah,” the Hylian groaned, folding the paraglider back into place. “You’re even more boringly predictable than I could ever be.”

“I cleared a path for us,” Brivere stated, his tone hardening, his facade hardening even further while he refused to acknowledge any of the Champion’s remarks. “Follow me.”

Once again, the newly reunited duo ventured onward in silence, weaving their way through the courtyard hedges. Brivere walked ahead, cautiously checking around every corner and curve before he allowed his Hylian charge to follow. Link might’ve huffed and puffed over how seriously the stuffy Knight took his job and himself, if not for an embarrassing fact that he still hadn’t come to terms with; the Yiga Clan genuinely frightened him.

He didn’t like Brivere at all, and having the golden Zora assigned to his protection had come as a serious blow to his pride, but.. he had to confess, not having to face down the dangers of this world alone was something of a relief, especially now.

It made him wonder if the idea of having to do everything on his own had been the real factor keeping him from continuing his mission to save the world. That would be the kind of conclusion that his ego would disallow him from figuring out. The fear of failure, the wretched feeling of suffering, dying alone again and again because fate had insisted that one person somehow was enough to save the world.

The wind rustled through the hedges, dancing in tones of olive and white gold, while effectively hiding the clink of the Knight’s armor and the click of Link’s boots on the stone. But it hid, too, the much softer sounds that came from a footsoldier’s jika-tabi boots. The Zora began around one of the twisting garden corners, only to catch sight of a lone Yiga clansman patrolling that particular garden row. He swiftly shuffled back, putting his hand up to signal for the Hylian to remain out of sight.

But Link was poor at taking commands, and he decidedly sidestepped the golden Zora, coming to stand near his side in order to peek around the wall of shrubbery. The typical apathy of Brivere’s features hardened into clear displeasure when Link poked his head out in a way that was incredibly obvious, but he said nothing, as he couldn’t risk speaking up.

The Knight already had his hand on his sword and appeared to be considering whether or not he could approach on foot quickly enough to cut the footsoldier down without causing any alert or ruckus. The Hylian, meanwhile, was shaking his head and hoping the Zora understood it to mean that Link was condemning the idea which was so clearly going through his head. There was no way Brivere could clear the space between himself and the stalking footsoldier without his armor and clicking toeclaws catching their attention.

Zoras really weren’t built for stealth. Not on foot, anyway.

Before the patrolling footsoldier turned around to spot the lurking Zora and Hylian, they both ducked back into cover. Link carefully drew the Duplex Bow from over his shoulder, pulling an arrow and smoothly knocking it to the string in preparation. Brivere watched at the Hylian’s side and as a silent glance was shared between them, he offered a nod of encouragement to his charge, apparently agreeing with the course of action being suggested.
Patiently, the duo hid in wait for the footsoldier to turn and continue back in the opposite direction. When at last they did, Link took a few quiet paces out of the cover, then pulled the bowstring back, ending the threat with one well-placed shot.

He really was skilled with a bow, but damn if he wasn’t usually too impatient to be bothered.

With his target successfully downed, Link began to strut over, while Brivere hurried after him like an overly protective watchdog. He actually struck Link as being like a very tense Hylian Shepherd, the kind that started barking in alert whenever the wind fluttered some leaves. Not nearly as cuddly, though. Still, the idea of turning to Brivere and mockingly saying, ‘Whose a good boy, huh? Whose a good boy?’ was fairly amusing.

Link pried yet another Duplex Bow off of the slain footsoldier, handing it off to Brivere, who was glued to his damn side. The golden Zora said nothing, but turned a questioning stare toward the weapon being held out to him like he didn’t know why.

“Don’t act dumb, you know how to use one of these,” Link whispered, though his words were quick and impatient. “You saved my ass that one time when you plugged a moblin that was about to attack me.”

“You remember that?” Brivere quietly questioned, accepting the bow at last, though it was apparently a hesitant move on his part. Link was assuming that he was probably partial to Silver Bows, as any given Zora might be.

“I remember that smug look on your face,” the Hylian uttered with a quiet scoff while he bent down to collect the fallen footsoldier’s quiver, as well as the arrow which had taken the enemy’s life. “Here, take these.”

The Knight fastened the quiver of arrows to himself, quietly walking to the end of the row as he did, checking the path ahead in advance, not wanting to allow any of the Yiga clansmen to surprise them as they had their last victim. It didn’t take long before he turned and came back, gesturing at Link to speed up this odd process of pilfering that appeared to be an absolute necessity.

“Hurry, the bridge is just around this corner,” Brivere muttered in insistence.

“Yeah, but we’ll be out in the open if we attempt to cross it,” the Hylian answered. Normally, the blaze of glory approach suited him just fine, but again, not against the Yiga Clan. “They’re probably waiting to ambush us there. I have a crazy idea, though.”

“I’m uncertain if ‘crazy’ means ‘good,’” the Zora grumbled, his low tone an utterly unimpressed sound. Link, however, paid him as little heed as ever, taking a deep breath before he began to fling off his accessories and unbuckle his straps in a rushed manner.

“Cold, cold, cold,” Link idly complained under his breath while he tossed his tunic aside, revealing his scarred hide to the cool, night air. Already, Brivere was shaking his head, though at the very same time, he was gathering up Link’s laundry like a mother fussing over a messy teenager.

“I’m no longer uncertain,” the golden Zora quipped, “this is definitely not a good idea.”

“Why not?” the Champion hissed with as much maniacal glee as he could manage while keeping his voice down. “They came here disguised as Zoras, so it just seems fitting to use their own trick against them. Plus, their clothes are much better for sneaking about.”

When Link at last set to work tearing the garments away from the felled footsoldier, he impatiently swatted one hand at the apprehensive Zora, saying, “Don’t just stand there, stuff my clothes into my
rucksack. You’ll have to carry it for me.”

“I’m not your pack mule,” the Zora stated, offended at how quickly this Hylian had gotten comfortable with their partnership and abusing it. Nevertheless, he did stuff the discarded clothes into Link’s bag as instructed.

“You have to,” Link insisted. “If there’s anything that sets me apart from the other footsoldiers, it’ll give me away.”

“And what if this reckless scheme causes the people of Zora’s Domain to attack you, assuming that you’re an enemy?” the Knight proposed, still utterly unconvinced that this was a good idea, though he was suddenly conscious of how vulnerable they would be if they continued to argue over what trousers the Hylian put on himself. He certainly wasn’t about to get caught attempting to tear the Hylian Champion out of his clothes.

That would be a difficult matter to explain, when the Prince awakened.

“You’re supposed to be protecting me,” Link answered with a snide chuckle. “So do your job. That seems obvious.”

“Just hurry up,” the Knight hissed, resigning himself to carrying the Hylian’s luggage, though the straps strained against the comparably wider build of his shoulders.

“It’s not exactly easy getting all of this into place,” the Hylian uttered in complaint, though he had successfully wriggled himself into the tight jumpsuit and the jika-tabi boots. He finished getting the gloves pulled up, then moved onto the hood which would conceal his head, and finally the mask.

The item was damaged from the arrow which penetrated it and Link gave it a quick glance, hoping that nobody would notice the hole in the low light. He wiped at the backside, trying to rub away the blood when it occurred to him- how did they see out of these things? Link held the mask closer to his face, sure that there were no eye holes, save for the one he’d made himself.

Actually, upon closer inspection, the inside of the mask appeared as though it might have possessed a screen of some sort, though of course now it was blackened and cracked.

It was far too late to go back on his plan, though, so with a shrug of his shoulders, he strapped the mask to his face.

“This really reduces my visibility,” he spoke, unsure how bad his voice was muffled by the mask and he craned his neck in a funny way in order to point the single arrow hole in Brivere’s direction.

The golden Zora looked as though he wanted to drop his face into his hands and give up on life, but somehow he maintained some sense of patience. “Just keep the mask pulled down until after we’ve crossed the bridge, then,” he suggested. “I’ll run across first. You follow with your bow drawn as though you’re in pursuit. Hopefully that will make you appear more legitimate.”

“You’re the last one I would’ve expected to add his own twist to a crazy plan,” Link commented with something of a titter. “But it’s a fair contribution.”

Brivere withheld any comment of his own, instead proceeded and checking if it was safe to turn the corners once more. He offered Link one last glance, a glance of hesitation and worry, before he went running for the bridge, clanking all the way. Link readied his bow as was suggested, though while he allowed a few moments for the golden Zora to pull ahead of him, he found himself taking several nervous breaths.
If clansmen saw through his disguise, then he would turn the bow on them. There was nothing to worry about. He’d done crazier things than this, all alone.

With fingers tightened on both the bow and the string, he hurried around the corner in pursuit of his Knightly escort. He immediately felt much more lightweight and silent while he sped about in the Yiga jumpsuit, and the soles of his jika-tabi shoes gripped the stone beneath him incredibly well, though he had his head cocked to one side in order to focus on the path before himself.

Link rushed toward the bridge, spotting the golden shine of the Knight’s scales already more than halfway across. Aiming the bow at Brivere’s back, Link gave desperate chase, unsure if his ‘fellow footsoldiers’ would put so much effort into killing a single, unimportant Zora. Given that he had already killed plenty of their own, maybe so.

Had Link been trying to hit the fleeing Zora, he would have had a free shot ten times over, but he just kept chasing, sure that Brivere was making a mad dash toward the first cover available at the other end of the lonely bridge. It was beginning to look as though they had overblown the danger involved in crossing the very bridge they’d been fighting one another on hours earlier. Then, as Brivere was seconds from escape, several grappling hooks shot up from beneath the structure, and with a puff of smoke, a group of footsoldiers swung and flipped into the air, landing nimbly beneath the obscuring cloud.

Link screeched to a halt, scrambling backward while the violet mist billowed toward him, threatening to swallow him within its haze. He couldn’t see a damn thing and he hadn’t a clue how these footsoldiers feasibly could either, yet at the very same time he could already hear the sound of steel clashing into steel, making it more than obvious that the Yiga clansmen had already begun to attack the armored Zora, without any need of visibility.

How were they doing it?

The Hylian’s hands were beginning to shake on his weapon as his uncertainty grew. He couldn’t just fire madly into the cloud and he was given little choice but to back off and anxiously wait until the mist began to disperse. The arrow poised between his fingers was still knocked and ready, if only he could see to aim.

He wasn’t worried about Brivere. That guy could obviously take care of himself, as he’d already proven to his Hylian rival in spades. Plus, Link was aware that Zoras could still locate targets regardless of visibility, using their inherent electoreceptive senses. No, the Hylian was selfishly concerned about his own well-being, and how long it would take these footsoldiers to figure out who he really was. He wasn’t the type to overthink things, or to think things through at all, actually, but at this very moment he was beginning to consider that his plan might’ve had a fatal flaw.

If these Yiga clansmen weren’t using their eyes to see, or to identify their enemies, what were they using? Come to think of it, just as Brivere had mentioned before, how was it that they could tell their own people disguised as Zoras apart from the actual Zoras?

And then, the answer was whispered, like a disembodied voice, right into the Champion’s ear.

Exactly that, actually.

A buzz of static hissed in Link’s ears, followed by distant words breaking through the electric distortion, so that he was just able to make out a voice saying, “Getting readings.. saying that the Hylian Champion is right on top of us..”

What?
“I’m getting the same readings.. thought the sensor in my slate was damaged.. keeps beeping..”

These assholes had some kind of communication devices in their hoods? Furthermore, were they implying that they possessed some kind of parallel to his Sheikah Slate?

Wait, yes, that was it! That was what the broken screen in the mask had been all along, that was how they were tracking him, that was how they were honing in on his location. It all made sense now, great and terrible sense.

Holy shit.

At last, a gust of wind carried down from the mountains blew away the smokey haze, spraying the bridge with a fine mist that beaded upon the surface of the Champion’s disguise. Brivere was deftly blocking, dodging, parrying blow after blow, but not fighting with the kind of fast severity that he’d possessed, even against Link. Surely he was growing weary, and his eyes were going between the numerous identical footsoliders, his actions measured yet unsure.

He must have lost track of Link in the smoke and was now attempting to make certain that he didn’t slay his own charge by mistake. Before the golden Zora could discern which masked phantom was his Hylian companion, however, a lone footsoldier turned to face his apparent ‘fellow’ at the tail of the group, then their voice buzzed in the earpiece, “The Champion is wearing one of our uniforms! He’s there!”

On blind, driving instinct, Link bolted for the bridge railing, knowing full well that he couldn’t escape because he’d shed his paraglider with his rucksack. With a bound, he leapt onto the railing, then sprung aloft, his body turning in the air, his feet flying overhead. His brandished bow was aimed as he soared and once again he found himself in that perfect moment of focus where everything slowed, or else his perception heightened to a blinding, unimaginable precipice.

The knocked arrow sailed downward, striking his target at damn near point-blank range, then in rapid succession, Link knocked and fired another arrow, then another, then one more before he turned all the way around, coming to a landing behind where the Knight stood defending.

Now Brivere had a very clear idea of which footsoldier was actually an ally, and he shot forward while the last of the clansmen’s attention was still captured by the apparent heist which had just occurred. His blade cut down the final two with clean precision, so that they fell in pieces, screaming in bloody horror in the final seconds that preceded gruesome demise.

Despite the narrow victory, Link was standing still in complete shock and horror at the realization which had dawned on him, all thanks to a crazy idea. The golden Zora sheathed his sword and hurried toward the disguised Hylian, muttering words of nervous haste, but they didn’t filter through at all.

Instead, when the Champion regained control of his body, he pushed past the golden Zora, throwing himself down on his knees right next to the nearest dead footsoldier in order to rip the mask from their face.

But when Link checked the backside of the mask, the screen was black and blank, the same as his own. Had he been wrong? Or was there something he was missing?

“No do you hear me?” Brivere was still saying, his words urgent, while his tone still possessed remarkable clarity and calm. “We’re right out in the open, the Uppercity is crawling with enemies, we have to go, now.”
“Right,” Link muttered in reply, sure that his voice was little more than a hollow resonance in his throat, the same kind of soulless sound he used to produce before Sidon awakened the heart in his hollow chest. He dragged himself to his feet, pushing the mask back from his own face, then he pinned his gaze upon Brivere, sure that his perception of the world had turned hazy, and the golden Zora was all he had to focus on.

He had that feeling all of a sudden, that sensation that he was an unknown lifeform wearing the meaty shell of a Hylian all around himself, that reality was fractured, that his mind was splitting, splitting, split..

‘No, come on, Link,’ he was desperately telling himself. ‘Get it together, you don’t have time for lapses right now.’

He focused on the rhythmic clinking of Brivere running in front of him, using that predictable sound to bind himself within his current reality. He took another deep breath, slowly in and out, then he returned to himself.

By the time Link was back in what felt like full control, they had run along one of those typical looping pathways which would pass through a hovering gazebo that offered a perfect ledge for diving directly into the depths beneath the city. The Knight paused upon that very ledge, turning his gaze first to Link, before it quickly drifted elsewhere.

The Champion approached the lip, which would’ve had a trickling fall coming from it, if not for the fact that Prince Sidon had long made sure that his personal walkways would be dry, to accommodate his Hylian companion. Instead of immediately jumping, however, he looked to the golden Zora, noticing the furrow of concern visible beneath his crested brow, then Link traced his line of sight in the direction of the rest of the Uppercity.

The sounds of combat and the frightened, screaming cries of various Zoras, civilians and guardsmen, were noisily meshed in the distance, echoing up from the place where the rest of the upperclass made their home.

Link wasn’t exactly an observant man, nor was he possessed of anything more than the average deductive ability, but.. it seemed clear to him what must have been on the golden Zora’s mind.

“Where is Estuu?” Link asked, the words almost hesitant as he spoke them. Even more hesitant was Brivere’s response, that of silence and a slight deepening of the worried shadows on his features. “Is he over there?” the Hylian persisted in the Zora’s lack of response.

“Most likely, yes,” Brivere breathed, his words a painful ache. “But the more quickly I deliver you to safety, the sooner I can away to assist him. So if you could cease in this needless dawdling-”

“No,” Link blurted, his tone hard and forceful. “We have to find him first.”

“We can’t,” came the Knight’s quick response, his own tone rushed and as pinched as his face. “The Prince ordered me to-”

“He ordered you to protect me, that’s all! As long as you make sure to do that, you’re not disobeying any orders,” the Hylian piped up, interrupting the insistent Zora and raising his voice above the low rumble of Brivere’s. “Come on, guarding one, single person is your everyday occupation. You ought to be capable of doing it for a bit longer, right?”

“We don’t have time to argue about this!” Brivere snapped, his facade like a sheet of winter ice, slowly cracking as it was exposed to the warmth of spring. His expressions were tranquil but forced,
his tone steady though his sharp teeth flashed with how he spoke each word.

“You’re right,” Link said with a joyless expression, though this was a phrase Brivere had already learned not to trust, and he shook his head to deny whatever plan Link had in mind before he even finished what he had to say. “We don’t have time to argue about this.”

Link fled like he was suddenly hell-bent on escaping his guard and Brivere hissed words of restrained frustration after him as he gave chase. It wasn’t long before he was resigned to quietly pursuing, because he risked drawing enemy attention with every word. The Hylian was sure that if the Zora caught him, though, he’d probably attempt to drag him down to the depths, kicking and screaming like the prisoner Link remembered his Zora friends flushing away to Basilica confinement like a load of very enraged garbage.

But, while Brivere was a fast fighter, when it came to outright sprinting, Link easily outclassed him, not to mention that the Zora was weighed down with heavy armor, while the nimble Hylian had donned the most lightweight garb imaginable.

It was no competition, and in fact, Link was forced to actually slow his pace in order to avoid completely escaping the Knight trailing behind him. Also, it was lucky happenstance that Link had been to Brivere and Estuu’s home once before, so he had a good idea of where to go.

Soon enough, though, the Hylian began to feel that outrunning Brivere had become too easy and he glanced over his shoulder, slowing his pace further and hoping that the golden Zora wasn’t clever enough to be doing this all for show. He was still tailing along behind Link by a short distance, but his gait had become awkward, to the point that he was nearly limping. His hand was pressed to one hip and a thin trickle of blood had begun to seep from the wound again, tracing the curve of his thigh.

Right, he’d been wounded in their fight. Link had almost forgotten about that, considering how well Brivere hid, well, everything. Now, though, in the Knight’s determination to keep up with the one he was meant to be guarding, he’d sacrificed being able to appear completely fighting fit.

Looking over his shoulder in apprehension, the Champion at last slowed to a pace that Brivere could easily match, though he was unsure what made them more vulnerable, trekking right across the Uppercity where everyone could see them, or having a guard that was visibly injured and easy to pick off.

“Are you gonna make it?” Link blurted, his tone full of exaggerated disappointment, all for the sake of avoiding giving anyone the mistaken notion that he gave a shit. Apparently, some good old-fashioned mockery was all the golden Zora needed, as it was immediately clear to him exactly what the Hylian was admonishing him for, and with an intensified glare, he dropped his hand aside and began to jog along a bit more naturally.

“You needn’t get your hopes up,” the Zora growled, to which Link let out a breathy snort of laughter that he really couldn’t afford while he was running.

Honestly, what a snide fucking bastard this Zora was.

When the tunnels of the Uppercity residential area at last came into view, Link felt quite sure that safety was just within their reach. He had, apparently, begun his innermost celebrations much too early, because before the slowing duo made it to cover, a cluster of Yiga footsoldiers descended from the twisting walkways above.

His disguise bought them at least a moment of hesitation from their enemies, as they looked on him
with uncertainty, questioning whatever readings they were getting, which informed them of Link’s identity. Like the others that the Champion had encountered before, they must have thought that their equipment was on the fritz, but if they did, they said nothing of it. He heard nothing buzz across the communication device, anyway.

But while the footsoldiers were hesitating, Link drew his bow without question, firing one arrow quickly enough that he successfully struck one of them, though it was only enough to injure them.

In a golden flash that belied his previous, limping pace, Brivere drew his sword and rushed in to attack, engaging the group despite how poorly outnumbered he was. His fast, flicking blade was met with equally sharp parries, and the footsoldiers darted about on their nimble toes, diving in to take cheap shots, then bolting back out of their opponent’s range.

The way the clansmen utilized the same smoke bombs from before while they disappeared and reappeared made them unfair targets, even for Link to attempt to strike. He had gotten caught up with trying to render the single archer of the Yiga group null and void, and the two of them exchanged hurried shots, their arrows clicking against the stone in a series of failed strikes.

The frustrating archer would fire a volley of arrows that Link had to be flighty as hell to avoid, then the Yiga footsoldier would duck into cover before the Hylian had an opening to return fire, disappearing out of sight, only to reappear elsewhere.

But Link recognized the sound that came with their strange ability to vanish; it was the same fuzzy, electronic buzz that engulfed him whenever he warped. They must have been using Sheikah technology to do smaller, minor warps of their own. That certainly explained not just their fighting technique, but also how quickly they were able to travel.

They had all of the same tools that he did.

But at the very least, it meant he understood how to fight back.

Listening carefully, Link waited for the buzz, minute and subtle as it was. It revealed to him his enemy’s intended position, and once he heard it again, he drew his bowstring taut, aiming for that sound and firing his arrow into it, so that just as the enemy archer materialized, the Hylian’s arrow knocked them back, piercing them squarely in the chest.

With their archer down, the Champion turned his assault on the footsoldiers still attempting to overpower the golden Zora with sheer numbers. He’d been keeping them at bay with his greater range of attack, though the effort was sure to be something he couldn’t maintain for long before exhaustion set in. Link easily took down one that had been lurking, waiting for a chance to strike the Zora, so their attention had drifted away from the Hylian.

Those who remained regrouped with haste, warping elsewhere to avoid the Hylian’s ranged assault. When they did, he shuffled in closer to the golden Zora, who was probably fighting the restriction of his armor just to catch his breath. Together, they backed into the shelter of the tunnels to avoid the standoff out in the open, and surprisingly the last two enemies didn’t dare to follow them in.

Apparently the Yiga Clan couldn’t handle a fight when the odds were even.

“They’ll wait for backup, then they’ll hone right in on us again,” Link muttered, his ears squished underneath the Yiga hood, though they still tried to flatten backwards in his aggressive distaste. He quickly put his bow back over one shoulder, gesturing for Brivere to follow him again. “But if we hurry, maybe they’ll lose track of us in these tunnels.”
“Hnn.” Brivere nodded, obviously agreeing with hurrying as a suggestion, since it was all he’d been saying from the very beginning. Something else was holding him in silence, however, while he fell in step with the Hylian and they continued jogging in the direction of his home, where hopefully Estuu was hidden and safe.

The Zora’s crisp, yellow gaze regarded the disguised Hylian at his side and the odd determination written all over a person he’d previously known to be purely selfish and self-serving. He’d always assumed that it was by the grace of his Prince’s stubbornness and charm that such a radically apathetic creature had been convinced to assist the Zora people with Vah Ruta.

So what was driving him now? This seemed to be a contradiction to his very nature, and Brivere couldn’t help but wonder, why?

“I don’t understand. Just what are you trying to prove?” the Knight gave his confounded feelings voice at last. “There’s nothing but animosity between you and I. Why put yourself at risk to aid me?”

“You’re giving yourself way too much credit,” Link bitterly remarked, almost laughing over the entire thing, if not for the fact that, again, he needed to save his breath. Goddamn this Zora for wringing so many chuckles out of him while they were running, though. “Your brother is my friend and I don’t want to see him get hurt or killed because of something I caused. Then again, maybe that’s just my ‘Messiah Complex’ showing.”

Snarky as the answer might’ve been, Brivere opted to quietly accept it, because it was as good as any, he supposed. It was heartening that someone other than himself actually cared about his younger sibling’s well-being, though he certainly hadn’t believed it to be true of the Hylian Champion, considering he allowed Estuu to be swallowed by a monster, once.

“It’s just that, everything I apparently used to know is either gone, or I’ve forgotten about it,” Link continued after a momentary pause, unprompted. He had this sheepish look, like he didn’t really want to say anything at all, but the words had rebelled against him. “When you have nothing of value in your life, it gets hard not to cling to things a bit too desperately. Things like friendships, I mean.”

Maybe they had been referring to Estuu originally, but as the golden Zora listened, he got the very distinct notion that the Hylian was actually referring to Prince Sidon, or at least it had been his apparent friendship with the Prince that had allowed him to come to such a conclusion.

The implication stung at the Knight, like hundreds of needles being thrust into the pincushion of his chest. The possibility of having been wrong about the Hylian wasn’t what hurt, oh no. Brivere’s pride was an unguarded thing that had been beaten so soundly, shame scarcely possessed the ability to make him defensive any longer. It was just that, maybe he had been surviving on his own selfish hopes, on his certainty that the Hylian was absolutely abhorrent, because in that assumption, there was the possibility that Prince Sidon could eventually come to his senses.

It was a terrible way to be and think, he knew. But at the same time, he’d been surviving in that way, because he understood perfectly what it meant to have little of worth and to cling to that single, precious thing far too desperately.

“It’s a sensible explanation,” Brivere relented, accepting the aid which had come his way, or Estuu’s way, as it was.

Link nodded in reply, hardly able to believe that such a self-righteous asshole was capable of cutting him any slack. He wasn’t going to think too much of it, though, because he doubted that mutual concern for a kid’s safety was enough to mend their tense relationship. If that were true, people with
children would stand a better chance of getting along with one another.

Glancing over his shoulder, the Champion uttered the words, “Well they haven’t followed us, yet.”

He had this awful image in mind of them arriving at Brivere and Estuu’s residence, just to find the Yiga clansmen waiting, intent on regaining control through yet another hostage situation.

“The halls are quiet,” the Knight stated in observation, obviously mulling over the details of his surroundings, unsure whether or not it was a good sign. “Hopefully, it means that the residents were safely evacuated.”

And then, as though to contradict the Knight’s words, a shrill, penetrating shriek tore resoundingly up and down the narrow corridors, so pitchy and high in volume that Link winced and hurriedly put his hands over his ears to block it out.

“Estuu,” Brivere uttered in heightened concern, his pace jumping in speed so that he shot rapidly ahead of the Hylian, leaving Link to hurry at his heels.

The Champion, however, felt a sudden wave of hesitation overcoming him. If this was going to be another hostage situation, then his presence was the very thing which gave others any worth as bartering tools. If not for him, then the Yiga Clan wouldn’t have bothered to attack Zora’s Domain, or Prince Sidon, or apparently Estuu as well.

For a single instant, Link actually considered turning around and running in the opposite direction. That desire slowed his gait only momentarily, until he shoved aside such a cowardly idea and rushed ahead to catch up with Brivere.

When they turned down the entryway to the golden Zora’s home, what they found greatly challenged all former expectations. The apprehensive gazes of both the Knight and the Champion fell upon the sight of Estuu, pushed against the ground and struggling to be set free, screeching and crying out in the clutches of his merciless captors.

However, instead of cunning Yiga clansmen, it was a small unit of city guardsmen who were holding the boy at bay.

“Enemies!” cried the one at the head of the group, his spear brandished and held at the ready, his fierce golden eyes glaring down the newly arrived duo with deadly intent.

“We’re not enemies!” Link hissed in immediate reply, his tone offended and disappointed, though he very quickly regretted his decision to outfit himself in Yiga gear before coming here. He pulled the mask away from his head completely, followed by the hood, then he put his hands up for the jumpy guardsmen to see, not taking another step closer, not in fear of being attacked himself, but in fear of what they could do to Estuu. “I’m only disguised as one of them, the same as they disguised themselves as Zoras. We’re just here to help the kid.”

“If you’re not enemies, then clear out,” another sharply commanded, pounding the butt of their spear against the stone floor. “Once we’ve finished with business here, we’ll escort you to the Basilica.”

Link wanted badly to have patience, because in his mind, these Zoras were right to be suspicious. Thanks to the skillful deception of his enemies, this was the kind of chaos that had ensued and these jumpy guardsmen had probably already fallen prey to Yiga trickery more than once this awful night, as not a one among them was unscathed.

But at the very same time, the one bent over Estuu had his damn knee shoved into the kid’s back, and he was busily trying to find a way to put restraining cuffs on him, despite that from what Link
could tell, one of his arms was badly wounded and bandaged. Estuu was screeching aloud like he was crying for his life and it wasn’t doing Link’s sensitive ears any favors.

“I’m the Hylian Champion!” Link called out, trying to scream over the noise that Estuu was making. “I’m the Hylian Champion and this Knight is my damn escort, now stand the hell down and let go of the kid.”

“This ‘boy’ is being arrested under the suspicion of being one of the disguised invaders,” the guardsman sternly explained, still mostly unmoved and uncaring about Link’s claims. “When we came to evacuate civilians, the boy attempted to flee.”

“Well no shit, you fucking tools,” the Hylian hissed, his frustration mounting with the ridiculousness of this situation, and the growing danger of actual enemies showing up at any time. “He probably assumed that you all were enemies, too. How does he have any guarantee that he can trust you?”

When Link’s impatient nature began to strike that point in which he typically started wailing on his enemies, Brivere cleared his throat and took a careful pace forward, quieting the impulsive Champion with a gesture.

“Estuu has no clue what’s going on and he’s unable to speak,” the golden Zora attempted to explain in the calmest way possible, as it was obviously vital to de-escalating this situation. His voice, however, was tight in his throat and his gaze was plastered to the sight of his sibling being brutally manhandled by his own people.

“This excessive force is unnecessary,” he added, sincerely imploring for an end to this nonsense.

“This is an emergency situation!” hissed the guardsman who still had his spear held in a threatening position. “Unless you wish to be placed under arrest as well—”

“What part of ‘I’m the Hylian Champion’ are you not understanding?” Link growled. He couldn’t even conceive of how these overly suspicious guardsmen could think that Yiga clansmen had this kind of patience. In his desperation, he started grasping, gesturing to Brivere and saying, “And aren’t city guardsmen subordinates to these Royal Knights?”

At this point, Link was just praying that they didn’t force him to start waving his friendship with the Guard Captain around, though realistically, he probably could use that to get every one of these assholes reprimanded. This entire situation was a fucking embarrassment.

Thankfully, his words did seem to have some effect this time, as every one of the nervous guardsmen looked between the Hylian and Brivere in new consideration. At last, the more ‘reasonable’ of the two at the head of the group spoke up to say, “Can either of you prove your identities?”

“Can you?” Link spat in rebuttal, though once again the Knight gestured to quiet him, trying very hard to make some kind of progress that the Hylian’s mouthy ways probably weren’t helping. Honestly, though, what did these idiots want from them? Did he need to strip naked and claim that his numerous scars were his best identifying factor?

“Just calm down,” Brivere stated, leading by example, as he was ever masked by his own masterful calm. “We came to retrieve Estuu with the very intention of evacuating to the Basilica. You can escort all three of us there and that will remove any suspicion.”

Each of the hovering guardsmen was silent, though it was impossible to discern if it was because they had run out of reasons to argue, or if it was because they had grown impatient with this exchange and were about to arrest all three ‘suspicious individuals.’
Clearly, they still found something untrustworthy about the plan presented by the Knight, as none of them readily agreed. They were all so utterly hesitant, one would’ve thought it was out of fear for their lives, and none wanted to take credit for agreeing to the trap which would get them all killed.

But then, at last, one of them piped up with, “Very well.” At that word, the one who had his spear drawn relaxed his stance, and the Zora kneeling atop Estuu finally set the boy free.

Brivere let out a deep sigh of relief, dipping his head in formal gratitude that Link thought was utterly undue. The Hylian strode over to the young Zora, his own arms crossed over his chest while the Knight bent down to his shaken brother’s level.

Once he was unhanded, Estuu’s demeanor easily stilled back into something utterly calm, even more so than his elder sibling, or so Link was reading it that way. He’d known the kid to have a great deal of grit from the very beginning, and maybe more reckless bravery than he did, himself.

But it felt like it had been a long time since Link had seen the boy and he looked on in surprise and concern, noticing that the young Zora’s bandaged injury was much worse than he’d previously assumed. His arm was not just wounded, but had apparently been amputated near the elbow.

What had happened to him?

“I’m sorry that I didn’t arrive sooner, Estuu,” Brivere addressed his sibling very quietly, the deep, remorseful rumble of his voice barely above a whisper. “Are you alright?”

Young Estuu swiped the end of his tail across his back, stretching to chase away all the sensations left behind by the overreactions of the guardsmen. His golden eyes peered over one shoulder, taking stock of all who were present, though without any effort at all, his discontentment was clear, as he seemingly found the lingering presence of the ones’ who’d assaulted him to be an affront. Still, he hesitantly offered a nod in reply to his brother’s inquiry.

“Our city is under attack and we have to evacuate to the Basilica where we’ll be safe,” Brivere explained.

Estuu cautiously climbed to his feet, his balance a bit askew from his missing limb, his jeweled adornments making little dingles with his movements. It was suddenly quite clear to Link why Brivere had been so worried. Well, it was normal to be concerned about the safety and well-being of those you cared about, obviously, but given that the boy had been rendered unable to take up a weapon in his own defense, it did leave him in quite a helpless position.

It was a damn shame, truly, because Estuu had been one of the most skilled archers Link had ever met. His skills with a bow had saved the Hylian’s ass once, too.

Once the boy had come to a stand, he strode away from the group without any further thought or indication of his intent. Link’s ears perked in alert, because no sooner than the young Zora turned his back, the jittery guardsmen had their hands on their weapons again in suspicion.

“He’s walking away again,” one of them growled, only for Brivere to put one hand up to still them, offering far more patience than they deserved.

“Just a moment,” the golden Zora calmly stated.

With a few patters of his tiny, webbed feet, Estuu closed the short distance between where he’d been pinned and where his own rucksack was set aside, waiting. He gathered it up, pulling back the flap in order to check that his books were all there, then he fastened it to his back, nodding to indicate his readiness to depart.
“He just wanted his bag,” Link stated in utter disappointment, his tone deadpan, his head shaking. His sharp, blue eyes turned to the group of guardsmen and he uttered the words, “You’re a lot of complete imbeciles,” then he pulled the Yiga hood and mask back into place.

“So long as no real harm was done, their presence is helpful, I suppose,” Brivere said, though his growing exhaustion spoke much greater volumes. “Our return to the Basilica should be much more easily fought. Let’s move out.”

“Err,” one of the guardsmen mumbled awkwardly while the entire unit straightened under the Knight’s stern command. “Yes, Ser.”
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Bazz had always done his best to escape the shadow of his father, the famous war hero. He'd always tried to be recognized for his own strength and leadership, for being more than the son of the Demon Sergeant. However, with all of the tragedy that had befallen not just Zora's Domain, but the Guard Captain himself, this assault was sure to leave that horrid shadow outstretched to define him, and to consume all else.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I apologize as usual for my lateness with the update and also for its relative shortness. This chapter essentially JUST follows Bazz, though I had meant for it to include other scenes. Things always tend to go longer than expected, but also, I've been having some trouble with my computer, unfortunately. Hopefully this will be exciting enough to sate you all until the next chapter, which should hopefully include more Sidon/Link interaction. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even through grit and bloodshed, when the magical shield produced by the Knight Divine cascaded from the top of Sidon’s tower and drifted downward to veil the entire structure in brilliant, golden light, all of Zora’s Domain stood still.

Those of Bazz’s guardsmen that stayed behind to protect the city had been giving their all, their bodies repositories where endless strength and skill were stored. Yet even so, they ached and bled and sweat while their enemies wore them down, doing everything in their power not to let the hopelessness of their utter confusion set in. The barrage was endless, the point of this entire struggle was yet unknown and even the immutable spirits of the Zora people were withering.

But then the shining light of divine, Zora magic painted their glorious city in white gold and pale, pale blue, and it served to remind all who stood fighting who they were, and the principles that they had long stood for. They had come from the muck, from the darkness. They had not just survived an event that should’ve meant their extinction some hundred thousand years ago, but under threat of peril, they had ascended.

And they weren’t going to die tonight, either.

And just like that, the warriors facing off against the Yiga invasion regained their heart, their spirit, their will to fight.

One of the guardsmen who stood near where Bazz had planted himself chuckled audibly enough to capture the black Zora’s attention, saying, “These nobles and their magic. Makes me wish more of them would train to be warriors.”

The Guard Captain refrained from uttering anything in reply, instead focusing all he had on the
cluster of footsoldiers which had backed him and his unit up against the statue of the Zora Champion. Frankly, there was no way he was going to die while Lady Mipha looked down on him. That would be far too much of a humiliation.

The sleek, black Zora charged into the fray, using the sharp end of his weapon to clear the way. The masked phantoms encircled him, but his spear twirled and flicked, keeping each of them at a distance, until one was foolish enough to infiltrate his range. Their Vicious Sickle made a horrid, scraping sound against the shaft of Bazz’s spear, but the Zora drew his leg up in a sharp kick that sent his enemy down, his toeclaw hooking mercilessly into their flesh and holding them in place beneath his foot while he stilled their struggle with a deep slash across their back.

Bazz’s charge alone gave his subordinates the inch they needed to begin the push back against these opportunistic Yiga footsoldiers, though it felt a bit like their last stand, as much as they hated to admit it. Then, finally, the long awaited backup came charging in to bolster their strength.

The Goddess Knights were beautiful, elegant fighters clad in goldenscale armor and flowing, blood-red shawls. They erupted from the waterfalls that poured down, into the underwater cavern beneath the city, their weapons brandished, water streaming from their frames in shining droplets.

Whereas Bazz’s warriors fought with plain but effective technique, the Goddess Knights moved through battle as though it were little more than a fancy dancing party, as flexible as water and as light as air, all to the sound of music that nobody else could hear.

Then again, maybe it was because Bazz and his people were worn down and these newly arrived Knights were fresh to the fight.

“About time they arrived,” Bazz grumbled, though his words came out beneath his breath, quickly lost to the renewed sounds of weapons harshly colliding and the dying shrieks of their enemies.

The shrieks of their enemies were not the only cries to be heard, however. At almost the exact same time, the Yiga onslaught that had set upon the Zoras defending the square of the Uppercity backed off, and a nearby voice hollered aloud a desperate battle cry.

“They’ve turned to attacking civilians now!” one of the city guardsmen hissed, their forefins swinging from how rapidly they turned about, attempting to locate the source of the cries.

“We won’t allow them to steal control of the area through such cowardly means,” Bazz spoke over the growing chaos which was threatening to overwhelm them. “Hold your positions. I’ll take two with me to scout the surrounding areas. Let’s move quickly.”

“Accompany the Guard Captain,” came the command of the Goddess Knight in control of their unit, and with a gesture, one of their underlings joined the black Zora’s small team.

“Thank you, Ser,” Bazz dryly intoned, doubtful that being offered a single Knight to aid him would really make much of a difference, but there wasn’t time to dwell on it. He took his trio of soldiers, and hurried off in the direction of the screams, searching abandoned shops and inns that which had been left behind in such haste that the bedsheets were strewn and laid where they fell when the civilians ran for shelter.

“Empty,” Bazz grumbled, his watchful gaze roving across the scene and finding little to indicate any kind of struggle. He wanted to believe that such was a good sign, but he wasn’t exactly the most positive of Zoras.

He moved on with speed and purpose, though he personally was unsure whether to expect that the
screams came from higher levels or lower. Hesitation held him in place while he deliberated, weighing the odds, fearful that he could arrive too late.

At last he concluded that the number of guards he’d already sent into the upper levels of the great, looping city would have to be enough. Not only that, but as his small band began descending one of the ladders to water level, they heard the same fading war cries as before and quickened their pace to rush to the aid of whomever was in peril.

One might’ve thought that these flighty devils wouldn’t have been so bold as to try their luck against any Zora while near a vast body of water, such as in the under levels, yet before Bazz and his trio of warriors even fully cleared the ladder, they caught sight of a small group of civilians, surrounded upon the rocky outcropping of the central pillar beneath the city.

There were perhaps five or six unarmed Zoras who were blocked from reaching the sanctuary of the Undercity trench by a group of shadowy warriors, who’d set upon the helpless bunch, taking advantage of their weakness. The civilians had no hope of escape, and only one among them was armed, just barely holding the enemies off, while the footsoldiers methodically badgered, waiting for the lone Zora to tire so that they could overwhelm her.

“Kodah!” Bazz called aloud at the sight of his friend, bravely facing the encroaching footsoldiers, while the rest of her fellows huddled at her back. With a spear in hand, she made threatening jabs at any of the masked warriors who stepped too near.

Half way down the ladder, Bazz leaped, his flexible frame arching backward into a graceful dive that shot him to the darkened depths where he disappeared, a black shadow in the night time water. The slicing sound of his splash down caught the attention of the clansmen, momentarily halting their attack and giving the Zora woman enough pause to catch her breath.

A metallic gleam was the only warning of Bazz’s coming presence before he erupted from the depths, landing upon the rocky shore with a click of his grasping toeclaws. Smartly, the slippery, masked warriors shuffled out of range, avoiding his reach as they’d done since this entire citywide attack began, leaving only one among their group who was bold enough to face the incensed Guard Captain.

The Yiga group parted to reveal a warrior who bore the tall, lithe silhouette of a Zora, brown scales the shade of a calm river flow, and duell Demon Carvers that he idly twirled while he sized up the black Zora, a proud smirk furrowing his features in his admiration of the awful mark he’d already made upon Bazz’s own.

“What?” Kodah uttered from where she stood, separated from the safety of the Guard Captain’s defense by the disguised clansmen and his own unit of masked soldiers. At the sight of the footsoldier who’d donned a Zora’s face, her own weapon lowered and her golden eyes widened in perplexed astonishment, in tearful confusion.

“Rivan,” she muttered in woe, her voice weak and breaking. “...it can’t be.”

Clearly, the disguised clansman now recognized the name assigned to the face he wore, and he turned ever so slightly, his sinister gaze passing over one shoulder to regard the distraught Zora woman at his back, to take in the opportunity that her weakness presented.

“It can’t be and it isn’t!” Bazz growled, all the more enraged that this monster had the audacity to show himself again, still proudly adorned in the skin of a dead man. He charged in to engage the pretender, his spear raised high and coming down hard, only to be swiped aside by one of the disguised clansmen’s weapons. The second Demon Carver that the footsoldier brandished aimed a
strike for the black Zora in the opening, but Bazz angled the butt of his spear upward to deflect it.

And just like the coward that he was, when he couldn’t land a cheap, easy blow, he skipped back from Bazz’s range, throwing down a smoke bomb to conceal the bright flash he disappeared into.

When he materialized once again, he did so with a static haze and burst of blue illumination. His form knitted back together swiftly enough for a successful ambush, his weapons lunging immediately for the target who now stood conveniently before him; Kodah.

She’d proven herself to be vulnerable in the quickest of exchanges, so now the clansmen wearing Rivan’s face would take further advantage. One arm wrapped around her neck, capturing the delicate column between the razor spines of his weapon, while his second Demon Carver came around to be poised against the pink Zora’s gill slits. What was worse, the entirety of his unit mirrored his example now that the single armed civilian had been so easily nullified. In terrifying synchronization, the lot of the masked soldiers lept and lunged, grabbing up the unarmed Zoras in order to use their lives as leverage.

And though the trio of Zora warriors who’d accompanied Bazz at last joined him at the rocky edge of the small isle beneath the city, it felt that they offered little real advantage in this turn of events.

“Fiends!” hissed the Goddess Knight. “Demons!”

“. . . demons,” the Guard Captain repeated under his breath, that single word an ember lighting the kindling of a desperate idea that turned to hasty flame in his burning mind. “Do you have any magical skills, Ser?”

“None that could be used in defense of these helpless civilians, I’m afraid,” answered the Knight, the confession colored by helplessness and shame.

“Pity,” Bazz slurred, his fangs shining beneath the gash to his lip, his yellow eyes fiery and furious while his gaze moved between each and every one of his people and their fearful faces while they were being held at the mercy of enemies who’d proven themselves to be, truly, without mercy.

“We only want the Hylian Champion,” the brown Zora spoke up to address the four Zora warriors who’d been disarmed by the threats to their vulnerable fellows. The disguised clansman’s voice was painfully familiar, so much so that Kodah cringed in his grasp, suffering more from the echo of a dead friend’s tone; it was far too reasonable, far too gentle, even as he uttered demands and threats.

“. . . Linny?” mumbled the Zora woman, her dark lids narrowing while her lips formed a snarl. “What the hell do you want with him?”

“So you’re familiar with the one I speak of,” the disguised clansman purred, tightening his hold on Kodah and leaning in over her shoulder so that she could feel the heat of his breath with every awful word he spoke. “Surrender the Champion and the attack will end. Surrender the Champion or every Zora will die tonight.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong,” Bazz growled with confidence that was sharpened to a cutting edge. He glared from behind the war paint of his blood-streaked face, the air around him turning cold and ominous, his fervor increasing as he went on. “We will never surrender our friend to you and even if it meant fighting to our last, you still wouldn’t have him. But I assure you, scum like you will never reduce us to that.”

The Guard Captain breathed a sigh of resignation and irritability, letting the butt of his spear clank against the stone at his feet, loose in his grasp. “Kodah,” he calmly called out to his friend, a strange
still coming over him despite the immediate peril his people were facing. “..if I attack now, all I can assure is the demise of our enemies. Your safety, on the other hand, I’m afraid I couldn’t guarantee. What would you have me do?”

“I don’t care what happens to me, Bazzy,” the Zora woman breathed, her own voice hollow, her life something that she saw no reason not to cast to the wind. “Protect Linny. Fight them.”

“Very well,” the black Zora answered, his eyes slowly shutting in concentration. Even so, he continued to speak, feeling that it would be a horrid waste to have been pushed to this awful point, to the necessity of wielding the most glorious and horrible weapons of his blood, without making sure that these cowardly phantoms understood what it was and what they were truly up against.

“A hundred years ago, our people stood against the full, terrifying force of the Calamity, until at last it was ensnared and held at bay once more. We fought in defense of our home and people, and even against such fathomless odds, we prevailed,” Bazz spoke with a snarl, softly chuckling from behind his bare fangs. “So it’s very funny to me now that you actually believed we’d falter or fall to your threats, that you believed we could be erased by hands such as yours.”

As Bazz spoke, the sleek dark of his scales drained away from bottom to top, seeping slowly down and off of him, like all along it had been a thin coat of soot that was now being washed away by the rain. The darkness bundled and gathered, puddling beneath his feet and swirled, restless and hungry. The spiraling shadow grew ever more immense, until the Zora possessed not a fleck of his former obsidian, and stood, now, a ghastly pale.

“A hundred years ago, when our people fought, my father led one of the charges that was to be our final stand. He earned the rightful nickname, ‘The Demon Sergeant,’ for the magic he commanded.” Bazz paused, his eyes snapping open in a blazing flash, revealing them to be the pale tone of pinkish rubies, rather than his warm, vibrant gold. “Magic that I inherited.”

With his final word, the writhing darkness at Bazz’s feet burst forth into a swarm of a hundred tiny shadows that shot along the rocky ground, squirming and creeping up and over the central pillar of the city, gathering at the shore, and rendering every inch of earth an inky black that could swallow up all who dared to tread upon it.

Figuratively and literally.

“Have you ever seen what happens in Hyrule when the restless crickets swarm? I’ve heard that they form fluttering clouds that blot out the sun with their immensity, that their hunger is a force of terrifying destruction. There’s no way to stop them or even slow them down; they consume everything in their path without mercy or consideration. In any case, now would be a great time to surrender,” the pale specter of the Guard Captain growled in warning, watching in hopeful expectation as the masked warriors nervously flinched while his magical shadow swelled and crawled about beneath them. “..yes? ...no?”

“Final warning,” the pallid Zora hissed so that the tiny shadows buzzed in excitement, as though they were waiting to be given permission to take all they wanted, to perform their work like the vicious army they were so promised to be.

Then, one by one, the overwhelmed clansmen freed their captives, retreating in hazy bursts of blue light, unwilling to risk what awful fate the creeping shadows and their pale commander had in store. Left behind, however, was the single footsoldier who was disguised as Rivan, still clutching at Kodah from behind, his weapons tightened in his trembling grasp.

“What?” he sputtered in confusion. “What the hell is going on?”
The hungry swarm of shadows had already begun to slither up his legs, squirming about upon the surface of his flesh so that they couldn’t be swatted or shaken away. He dared not release his hold on the Zora woman, likely hopeful that he could still use her for leverage, though as he watched the magic blanket him, turning every inch of him to shadow black, his body fidgeted for escape that was nowhere in sight.

“These things are.. interfering with my warp capabilities,” he uttered, his head swinging from side to side, his gaze flicking wildly here and there in desperation. “How? How!”

“You can’t run for it, can you?” Bazz questioned, his tone deep and mocking, as drained of compassion as his scales were drained of their color. “That’s too bad.”

The lone clansman yanked his weapon tighter to Kohdah’s pale neck, clutching at her while he deliberated on whether to attempt to renegotiate his poor position with hardened threats or actual surrender. Bazz could see the words resting on his tongue while he tried to make the choice between uttering, ‘Back off, I’ll kill her!’ or ‘I give up, please have mercy!’

At last, he shoved Kodah into the arms of the waiting guardsmen, shuffling back as though to escape the shadows that he could feel crawling all over him. He flailed and swatted, but no matter what he tried, the magic wasn’t likened enough to swarming, nipping insects that it could be shaken off.

“Please!” the clansman cried out, sounding frightened enough that Bazz couldn’t help but wonder if he’d lost control somewhere along the way, allowing one or two of his tiny shadows to sneak in a few unpermitted bites. “I surrender, I gave the woman back, call these things off!”

“Hmm,” Bazz uttered while he considered the pleas, letting his enemy writhe in suspense while he held out on answering for just a few, torturous moments. “On one hand, I feel that I understand perhaps where you must be coming from. We came from a place of darkness and cruelty, too, and we have little things like this terrible magic to remind us of the horrid, underlying savagery that still sleeps in all of us, waiting to be unleashed.”

“But on the other hand,” the Guard Captain slowly stated, playing up this game of weighing the odds with every ounce of brutality within himself. “Not only did your people attack us without provocation, but you came here wearing the face of my dead best friend. You took another of my friends hostage in an attempt to abduct yet another one of my friends. On top of all of that, you slashed me across the face, as if I didn’t already have enough trouble with wooing my lover, so, honestly, this is kind of personal, and yes, I do hold grudges.”

“No, no, no, please!” the clansman cried out, but Bazz paid them as little heed as they might have, were this situation still tipped in their favor. With his decision made, the Guard Captain set his magical beasts loose upon his pleading victim, his gaze unflinchingly plastered to the sight of the lone footsoldier while the tiny shadows raced across them in renewed vigor, gnawing at their body so their disguise began to flicker and fail, offering only the smallest glimpses of the truth beneath the convenient shroud.

“I’m almost glad that I’m the one who gets to kill you,” Bazz called out, “because a kinder, gentler death wouldn’t befit scum like you.”

Their body suit was swiftly reduced to tatters, every inch of exposed flesh marred with tiny furrows until it was left devoid of any outer layer, and the writhing, screaming enemy was, within seconds, less than a person, but rather a fleshy, person-shaped creature, streaked in fresh blood.

“Stop!” they were still saying, their voice hoarse and choked in agony. Kodah had her face pressed into her palms, her head turned aside, too squeamish or otherwise too gentle to pay witness to such
an awful sight. The other civilians reacted much the same, though there were the scarce few who couldn’t force their eyes away, out of fear that they might make themselves vulnerable if they did.

Would these bastards stop if pleaded with? Would they call off their pointless assault if asked nicely? Would they have set their hostages free, if not in fear of a painful death?

The disguise finally snapped entirely, cracking and vanishing with a fizzle when the clansman went still and their screams abated. The hungry shadows had penetrated the hull of the enemy’s body, consuming them from the inside, out, no care for how awful the process, no heed for whether or not the threat had been destroyed. The magical swarm could not be reasoned with, nor ceased until their target was stripped clean, leaving little more than blood, bones, and bad memories.

When that gruesome goal was finally complete, the shadows left the carcass alone in favor of returning to their home, slumbering beneath Bazz’s scales. Obediently, they clambered up his pale frame, darkening him slowly back to his sleek, original hue. Before the process completed, however, he turned to the guardsmen still watching in stunned silence at his back.

“Guardsmen,” Bazz spoke sharply, sending the other armored Zoras damn near aloft with the frightening regard of his vivid, ruby eyes.

“Y-yes sir?” one of them piped up, while the others straightened.

“Make sure these civilians make it the rest of the way to the Basilica safely,” he commanded, his eyes brightening back to gold as he spoke. “Help anybody who is injured get to the infirmary as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, sir!” they chimed in quick obedience, taking command of the lingering civilians, and saying, “This way!” The lot filed toward the safety of the watery depths, with the armored Zoras waving the frightened Uppercity folk along.

They had all disappeared with soft ripples and quiet splashes beneath the dark of the nighttime water by the time Bazz let out an exhausted huff, using his spear for support as he slid slowly to his knees, his head reeling, his skin burning from the effort the magic required.

It was difficult to imagine, actually, what it must have been like to wield such heavy magic in the war against the Calamity. His father had told him over and over again, sparing few details, about how he spent so much time painted in alabaster pale, people barely recognized him any longer when his own vicious shadows returned. His swarming beasts swallowed up enemy, after enemy, after enemy, but unlike so very many, he returned alive.

“Bazz,” came a soft, hesitant voice. A sweet but quiet, nervous sound. The Guard Captain perked at the sound, finding enough strength tucked away inside himself to raise his head.

Standing outside of arm’s reach, Kodah had lingered behind, her normally bright, pinkish complexion taking on the appearance of cherry wine in the pale light of their city, looming high overhead. Her arms were folded tightly to her chest and her eyes didn’t look in Bazz’s direction when she spoke, staring, instead, at the waiting safety of the still water.

“It’s been a while since I practiced the magic,” the black Zora uttered, “..but I didn’t think it would take so much out of me.”

“That wound,” the Zora woman stated, not sounding as concerned as her lingering presence suggested, but rather, distant. “It’s bleeding badly, Bazz. You need to get to the infirmary yourself.

“I can’t,” he hissed, shaking his head so that his forefins swayed with his movement. “Until this fight
is over, I have to stay on my feet..”

“Don’t be foolish,” Kodah chastised, probably using the same, familiar tone that she did whenever she scolded her child. “You can’t even stand, you’re already off your feet!”

With a sigh of exasperation, the woman closed the distance that remained between herself and the Guard Captain, her feet making soft, careful patters as she went. “Come, let me help you,” she said, reaching a trembling hand out to help the black Zora to his feet just long enough to guide him to the water.

Giving in, turning his back, running away; none of it seemed like the impenetrable wall he’d wanted to make of himself, for the time when chaos came to claim his people. Bazz was quite sure that this wasn’t that time, yet even so, he couldn’t weather it.

And somewhere in the deep, insecure pit of himself, he could feel his perception of his father’s shadow growing larger, larger, ever larger.

Yet taking Kodah’s hand was easy and painless, and without a word of protest, he allowed her to help him away.

By the time they reached the water and began their deep dive to the Basilica, however, Kodah took back her hand, opting to swim ahead of Bazz without a backward glance.

Chapter End Notes

How was it, friends? Did you all enjoy Bazz's scene? It was really fun to write, because I, personally, love my Bazzy boy, haha. Let me know how you all feel about him and if you'd like to continue seeing him as part of the story.

Also, I'm not sure ALL of you know, though I've made hints now and again. This story will actually have a sequel and HOPEFULLY, we are nearing the actual conclusion of Coma Baby. I think what I might do is go ahead and create the sequel story without actually posting a full chapter. Instead, it'll be maybe a little teaser? And it will give those of you who follow this story a chance to bookmark/subscribe to the follow up in advance. I haven't posted it yet, but I WILL let you all know when I do.

My Twitter and Tumblr are: BanishedOne
My Art and Fiction Tumblr is: BanishFics
Links are in my profile. <3

Thank you all, for everything you do. Comments, art, sweet messages, and support. I appreciate every bit of it!
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

With all that was going wrong, with all the terror which had cornered the hapless Champion and come to threaten all he cherished, an evening of dancing and delight seemed to be the furthest thing from reality. As he'd learned, however, Prince Sidon would always be his port in the storm. His Zora lover would always offer solace and safety when Link felt that he couldn't hold himself together any longer.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. As promised, I have written the Sid/Linkiest chapter of all. This entire thing is interaction between Sidon and Link. It is incredibly fluffy, incredibly sappy, and if you have been missing these two dorks, I hopes this will sate that craving. Please enjoy, friends!

Reaching the Basilica made everything feel as though it were over, like an unpleasant chapter one could just turn the page from. Link vaguely found himself wondering how the veiled Apostles could live in such a way, always isolated from the world above, existing in an alternate universe of endless study where nothing ever happened.

He hated it. Not seeing the terror and chaos he knew had to be continually raging at the surface was even more deeply unsettling and stressful than having it all play out right before his face. How was he to tell himself that the world was real, that he was a person who existed within it, if life and death situations like enemy invasion and the ensuing battle to eject them was just so easy to swim away from.

Even worse, he wasn’t even granted a proper distraction. The unlikely alliance he’d been forced into with the golden Zora was stripped immediately from him, as Brivere was resolved to returning to the fray once his mission was complete and Link was tucked safely away. Estuu was oddly insistent about having his sibling’s attention, and therefor couldn’t be bothered to remain with the Champion.

The Apostles treated Link like he was a guest in their home and that his presence was little more than a random social calling. They showed him to a small room, calm but hurried, and oddly alert for it to be into the early morning hours. Then again, time probably didn’t exist inside the Basilica, and Link couldn’t discern if that was freeing or maddening.

It would have been maddening for him, chasing him to the ledge of doubt where he began to frantically question, ‘Am I a real person?’ For the Apostles, it likely gave them the ability to make their own schedules and live by them just as easily. The night owls, err, fish, burned the midnight oil to their hearts desire.

He, however, was beyond exhausted, and for all of his guilt, the moment he laid eyes on a bed, his body betrayed him in pursuit of sweet, soft comfort. The Champion shed his newly acquired
weapons and the rucksack which Brivere had given back at the first opportunity. He peeled away the
counfounded Yiga Clan bodysuit, one piece at a time, and he replaced it with the more familiar feeling
of his own trousers and tunic. They were slightly damp still, but the scarf Kodah had given to him
enveloped his body in warmth that easily combated it.

With a huff, he threw himself down upon the bed, feeling it beneath his palms, against the skin of his
face, which was aching and bruised. It wasn’t the same cool, springy surface as the water mattress
owned by the Prince or the ones offered at the Seabed Inn, but rather like the woolen bedding that
Link could recall sleeping upon the night he shared a tent with Sidon. This particular cot smelled
vaguely of swift violet and fleet lotus, just as the Basilica halls tended to as well, and the Hylian
bundled the blankets beneath his face, burying his head in them like the flowery fragrance could
chase away his inner demons.

He wanted to remember that night at the Zora Prince’s side, he wanted to tell himself that the
memories he possessed were his own, that they really happened, that this wasn’t all a fucking terrible
nightmare that his sick head had dreamt up while his body rotted in the damn Shrine of Resurrection.

Maybe if it was, though, it would mean that the Zora people were safe and that he’d never had the
chance to drag all the dangers pursuing him to their doorstep, leaving them to defend him.

When would this end? Was he destined to live forever with these unfounded fears always chasing
him, always lingering in his shadow? Would he always be trapped in this neverending cycle of
wishing he could just fucking stop existing, all while secretly nursing the terror that he really, truly
didn’t? Would he always be a mad fucking dog, obsessively chasing his tail, blind to any purpose
other than witless drive?

When would the shadowed reflection in the dark mirror of his mind scratch and pound his way
through the glass, escaping, overcoming whatever was left of the Champion’s sanity?

No, no, no, no, please, no..

“..My dear one?” The soft, familiar warmth of concern cut through Link’s idle-minded chaos. It met
Link’s pointed ears like a merciful memory, drifting to the forefront of his mind, to still his building
panic, to soothe his suffering, yet even so his ears perked and his head followed, snapping up to
allow his searching gaze to be set upon the image of Prince Sidon.

“Sidon? Wha-” The Prince was there, standing a few paces inside the doorway, his gaze turned
sheepishly aside, his wrist clutched nervously in the hand opposite. His jingling adornments had
apparently been cast off, so that he was in his pure, uninterrupted state of flowing red and white.

The hazy blue of the Hylian’s stare looked on the Zora Prince with tearful fondness, his hands
clutching at the woolen bedding beneath his aching frame in longing, in need. He’d tried before to
put Sidon out of his life, recognizing the budding addiction and not wanting to be reliant upon such a
bothersome Zora to hold him together.

But now? Link was a helpless sailor upon the sea of his own turmoil and Sidon alone held the power
to calm the turbulent waters. The Hylian recognized it and was offered no choice but to accept.

The only thing holding him back now was the question of his own sanity. He wasn’t foolish enough
to believe that loving concern had overcome the Prince’s artificial slumber and brought him here.
The first thought that came to mind, for Link, was that this wasn’t real, that he’d slipped into a
delusional lapse, that his desperate heart had hijacked his breaking mind.

“I’m terribly sorry, my friend. Truly, I am,” Sidon babbled in mournful sincerity, breaking the
uncertain silence between himself and the Hylian, and breaking, too, the uncontrollable static of noise that had grown to fever pitch on the inside of Link’s head. “I normally wouldn’t dare to be so bold and invasive, to touch a mind unpermitted without very good reason.”

“This is your magic?” Link’s voice came out on his breath, soft and uncertain. Could he have made this up? The last hallucination he’d suffered came on without warning and for as uncontrollable as it was, every frightening moment had been unbelievably real. Having to process the possibility that his own imagination could be so cruel, to tease him like this, was difficult at best, sickening at worst.

But what was even more impossible to digest was the fact that, if Sidon really was here, in Link’s head, he’d finally see how damaged Link really, truly was.

“You’re in my mind?” the Hylian muttered bitterly, his brow furrowing in confusion, his emotions so unsure of what they were, he processed them as anger. “And you can see, what, everything? My memories, my feelings?”

“I could,” the Prince confessed, his head bowed like he was recoiling from his own guilty admission, his tongue hastily moving to produce further explanations. “..but I promise you that I’m not. I distinctly recall you objecting to having your emotions perceived through the use of magic. And I realize that you’re also rather sensitive about being coddled in times of weakness. But with you so near as to fall easily within my reach and with me being able to feel the turmoil radiating from you, I simply couldn’t turn my back, not knowing that I had the means to be at your side... well, so to speak.”

He sounded so contrite, so fearful that he might have grossly overstepped a well-laid boundary, and even if he was a hallucination, Link couldn’t help the guilt that prodded at him underneath the fondness which was making him weak, so very weak.

Had he been so damned quick to anger that the Zora Prince both feared and loved him in equal measure? Was he so monstrous?

He didn’t even need to answer his own question.

“If you wish for me to sever this connection, I will do so,” Sidon reassured, only for the Hylian to finally sit himself completely upright, as though in actual alarm.

“No,” Link said, trying his hardest not to allow his voice to sound demanding, but calm. He doubted his own success in that endeavor, because when the Zora lingering just out of reach peered across the softly lit room, he did so like he expected to be chastised for his bold gaze.

“I mean, it’s alright, Sidon, don’t apologize, don’t go. I just thought for a second that..” Link began anew, trailing off when it occurred to him that it wouldn’t do him any good to come right out and say, ‘I thought I was seeing shit again.’ “..that this was a dream. I didn’t know that you could do this. Well, I hadn’t imagined it like this, anyway.”

“And you’re absolutely certain that this is alright?” the Prince asked again, his posture very slowly relaxing as he began his cautious stride closer to where Link sat, watching. One thing was for sure, if anybody walked in to check on Link, they would certainly think he was hallucinating when they found him watching and talking to somebody who, either way, wasn’t there.

“Yes,” the Hylian confirmed, calm at last. He still wasn’t one hundred percent on whether or not he was unconsciously making this up, but suddenly, he didn’t even care. If comforting delusions were a thing, he could accept insanity as a little indulgence. “I can’t find it in myself to reject you, not with how I miss you. Is this what they meant when they said that absence makes the heart grow fonder?”
“Pardon?” Sidon questioned, bidding further elaboration in regards to his dear Champion’s musings. When he seated himself at Link’s side, the bedding squished beneath his weight, and without even questioning it, the Hylian allowed himself to flop against the Zora’s side.

Link didn’t speak immediately, unsure of his own meandering meanings. He didn’t think he was more fond of the Prince than he had been, but having his precious presence stolen away had certainly tamed some of the Hylian’s fury. His impatient cravings had actually trained him to have further patience.

In quiet wonder, one hand was brought to rest upon Sidon’s forearm, sliding slowly downward until Link’s much smaller hand was tucked within the smothering confines of the Prince’s larger one. He could feel the solidity of the Zora’s presence, the cool, course texture of his red scales, the warm pliant muscle underneath, then at last the smooth softness of his pale palm.

He felt so real. He felt just like Link remembered him.

“Sidon,” the Hylian uttered, his voice tired and empty, hesitant to let itself be heard. “Does it seem like when we finally agreed to courting, some kind of force aligned against us, to keep us apart? To destroy any chance we had at happiness?”

These feelings had occurred to Link, sure, but he dismissed it as being another branch of his typical refusal to align his own existence with the hazy reality around him. He’d blamed Hylia, the Calamity, cruel fate and obscure, sadistic storytellers from other worlds who levied pain upon him for the entertainment of equally depraved readers. So, of course, he needed the opinion of another to put his own perceptions on a more realistic track.

“I know I keep saying this and perhaps it’s a sign that I should stop,” Sidon spoke in reply, his voice warm and soothing, yet very subtly beginning to take on a tired, jaded, hopeless sound. “But things have certainly been better than they are presently.”

Link remembered the last time Sidon had uttered that same phrase- he’d still possessed a heart overflowing with hopeful light. He’d been miraculously nurturing his vibrant optimism, and disallowing what he must have believed was temporary suffering from stealing those inherent, vital components of his spirit.

His ability to resist was fading, and the Hylian ached at the sight and sound of it. He hated to think that his beautiful Prince could wilt, like a lovely bouquet quietly dying on a rainy windowsill. He wished he could provide the same kind of comfort and reassurance to Sidon that the Prince always, always radiated for him.

“I thought being with you would mean attending pretentious dancing parties that I would ultimately hate, but now?” Link mumbled with a quiet scoff, laying his face against the Zora’s arm so that tufts of his blonde hair caught against the ridges of Sidon’s scales. “...I never thought I’d find myself wishing I had the chance to go to a dancing party.”

“A dancing party?” Sidon repeated, bittersweet but amused, his golden eyes still clear enough that they gleamed with inspiration as he turned a small, somber smile to the Hylian bundled against his side.

“Yeah, sorry.” The Hylian’s shoulders moved in a tired, half-hearted shrug. “I guess that’s just the cliche I had in mind for your evenings.”

“I suppose it’s not terribly inaccurate. I’ve attended a few fancy parties in my day. Only the most pretentious ones meet my lofty, royal standards, however,” the Zora quipped, his own sense of sass
alive and well, and Link laughed in quiet gratitude. Yes, he wanted so terribly to return to a point in time when he and his companion could be together with one another, when things were so free and easy, and they could speak so naturally, so unworried.

“If I may?” Sidon began, his words slow and purposeful, yet a tiny hint unsure. He shifted a bit at the Hylian’s side, so that Link raised his head, craning his neck to look up with a questioning expression on his face.

“Perhaps I could fulfill this whimsy?” the Prince asserted, his head giving a single, hard nod, his dark lids lowering in focused determination. “Try not to be terribly startled by it, my friend. Alright?”

Link’s response came a bit slowly in the wake of hesitation, as he had no clue what Sidon was speaking of. Just as he’d opened his mouth to brightly ask, ‘Startled by what?,’ the small, Basilica bedroom where he’d been granted privacy melted away all around him, so that for a sickening instant, his consciousness was drifting in the vast chaos of space which was reconfiguring.

It felt very much like when Link used his Sheikah Slate to warp, and he held his breath, his hands instinctively grappling at his own gut like he expected it to rise threateningly into his throat. The entire process was much more rapid than even his closest comparison, actual teleportation, however, and it came without any bizarre physical discomfort, outside of the unexpected disorientation.

In the time it took him to blink once, then twice, his surroundings had been drastically altered. Normally, he would distrust such a thing as much as he had Sidon’s unusual appearance in his room, and in his head. Two things kept him from succumbing to another bout of panic, though. The first was that Sidon had warned him, albeit vaguely. The second was that, if this was a hallucination, it wasn’t at all threatening, but relevant to Link’s previously expressed desire.

He stood outside the Zora throne room, his head slowly turning from one side to the other while he took everything in, and there was so much to take in. Groups of Zora nobles stood chattering and laughing without a care, with Hylians scattered amidst them in fancy dress that Link hadn’t seen in all of his wanderings since waking from his hundred year slumber.

The night above was clear and cool, but not unpleasantly so, dotted with tranquil starlight, while a soft, blue illumination so typical of the dream-like nighttime lights in Zora’s Domain shined between the castle pillars, gently beckoning Link inside.

The Champion proceeded, his ears flicking here and there at the numerous voices all around him, decidedly focusing on the gathering of musicians playing near one of the entryways to the throne room, a song that was bubbly and bright, but paced just right for a waltz. A Hylian man stood at the head of the band, his voice a warm, velvet tone purring sweet, nonsensical lyrics as mysterious as his sharp, mismatched eyes.

Link stood far back from the crowded dance floor, beholding the spectacle in curiosity, his eyes ever distracted by the flickering lights, dancing across the ornate, jeweled surfaces of the Zora palace, and over the flowing, silky veils and shawls worn by the numerous, joyfully dancing Zoras.

A familiar-looking man with deep, obsidian scales offered a smile to his dance partner, his hands setting her body free when he strode from the dance floor just before the song came to an end. He chose, instead, to grab two crystalline drink glasses, then he pattered off to one of the quiet corners, holding one of the glasses out to another Zora dignitary whose scales were as blue as his sulky appearance. At the darker-scaled Zora’s approach, however, the bright, blue Zora allowed a smile to grace his features, and he brushed his Basilica shawl back so that it fell over his shoulders just so.

King Dorephan was difficult to miss amongst the gathering, as his impressive frame looked to be
only minutely smaller than Link already knew him to be, and he well avoided the dance floor, like he was fearful of taking up too much space, even at presumably his own grand ball.

He was, however, surrounded in vibrant company; Link easily recognized Muzu, as his appearance was hardly any different than it was in the present. The old bastard must have been truly ancient. Near the King’s side was a tall, elegant woman who matched him in size, but far surpassed him in striking features. She had ruby red scales, lacy fin membranes and the same arrow-shaped headfins as Sidon, and given that she bore the crown, it was easy enough for the Hylian to make the assumption that this was the Queen, Sidon’s mother.

In the great shadow of the Royals, a Knight with golden scales lingered, his arms crossed over his chest and an idle smile pressed to his lips as he watched the festivities. He wasn’t dressed as though he was on duty, but his demeanor gave the impression that he never fully relaxed. Still, as golden Zoras went, this one actually appeared content, maybe even happy, though as Link took a few more careful paces over, the Knight’s gaze drifted to meet his own, following him despite that nobody else appeared to notice the Hylian’s presence at all.

This was all in Link’s head, right? So that guy couldn’t have possibly been looking at him.

“It may be a bit over-embellished, I’m afraid.” The soft purr of Sidon’s voice at last met the Hylian’s ears, interrupting his previous state of overwhelmed observation, where his eyes and ears weren’t even enough to absorb all the details.

Link’s head snapped to one side to find the Zora Prince tucked behind one of the great pillars, his back pressed against the shining, blue stone, his ‘naked’ appearance a bit mismatched up next to so many finely adorned Zoras and gentile Hylians. Like Link, Sidon was allowing his golden eyes to slowly take everything in, a bittersweet smile forming a soft curve on the pale of his lips.

“I recreated this from my own memories,” the Prince explained. “I was but a tiny child when we held this party, so the details are likely overblown by how my young mind perceived it all.”

“This is amazing,” the Hylian commented, standing still in his awestruck state. His typical discomfort in crowds had mysteriously vanished and he couldn’t be sure if it was because Sidon was manipulating him mentally, or if the simple knowledge that he wasn’t really here had offered an unexpected barrier. His gaze continued to wander, straying back in the direction of the dance floor while he paused in contentment, settled at the Prince’s side.

The song was nearing its conclusion and many of the guests had vacated the floor, leaving only the most persistent of dancers. The crowd of tall, fully-grown Zoras had parted, creating a window that made the presence of a more petite person readily visible, and even Link lost his breath for a surprised instant.

“.Mipha is here,” the Hylian uttered, pushing off from where he’d nestled himself, in order to saunter right to the edge of the floor. The slow patter of Sidon’s feet followed in his wake.

It was beyond strange to see the young Zora woman solid and gleaming in her natural carmine hue, expressive and animated rather than endlessly gazing in deathly sorrow. Her scales bore an elaborate, gold design which had been painstakingly painted across the round of her forehead and down her arms. She was adorned in even more jingling bangles than usual and they sang like silvery little bells with her every movement. Her graceful frame was draped in sheer, gold material that glittered and billowed around her in a vibrant, ethereal way.

All around the young Zora Champion were friends who were laughing and dancing with her. The majority of them appeared to be Hylian girls, though there were Zoras who all appeared to be
younger or older than Mipha, as they either towered over her, or stood at half her height. The shortest
and youngest of Mipha’s Hylian friends lingered close to her side, a rather straight-figured adolescent
girl with messily plaited, blonde hair who didn’t really dance but happily followed, keeping her
fingers twined with Mipha’s, all for the sake of maintaining the courage to remain on the dance floor.

“She looks very happy,” Link commented, crossing his own arms over his chest, pressing them
against the strange pain which was fluttering about underneath.

“My friend, is it troubling for you to see her here, then?” Sidon asked with concern, immediately
noticing the prickle of sadness in the depths of his Hylian lover’s heart. He bent his neck, turning his
head and dipping lower to get a better look at Link’s somber expression.

“No, Sidon,” Link shook his head, his tone dull in a way that clearly reflected his lingering regret,
yet he reached for the Prince’s hand, tucking his own into Sidon’s and squeezing his fingers in a
grateful way. “This is a beautiful memory.”

“Hm,” the Zora man purred in satisfaction as he nodded, happily accepting Link’s answer and gently
squeezing his hand in turn. Then, in the least pressing of tones, Sidon offered a suggestion. “Did you
want to dance, then?”

“Oh,” the Hylian balked in hesitation, having to remind himself again that nobody at this party could
actually acknowledge his presence. He upturned his stare to gaze upon Sidon’s own soft, confident
smile, feeling that his face was likely tinged with the hue of nervous fluster. His fleeting
embarrassment died off with relative ease, however, leaving behind the bitter sense of insufficiency.

“Look at me, not thinking things through as usual,” Link muttered with a disappointed sigh, letting
his eyes move up and down along the Zora Prince’s frame, measuring him in a hopeless way. “I
doubt you could properly dance with someone so much smaller than yourself.”

“Ah, well, you may be right, dear one,” the Prince laughed, the sound of it painted with both the
awkward joy of this moment, and the lingering sorrow of reality outside of this vision, refusing to let
him be. When he quieted, he shook his head, his forefins swaying, then he took his hand back from
his Hylian companion, furling it into a determined fist and pounding it against his opposite palm. “I
suppose it’s all the more appropriate that this is only happening in our minds. These problems can be
fixed with little more than a thought.”

For a quick instant, the form of the Prince disappeared altogether, only to be hastily replaced with
something quite different and unexpected. Link turned to face Sidon when he reappeared and he
gawked in amazement and amusement when his towering lover returned to him at less than half of
his previous height. The Hylian blinked while his blue stare took in the renewed image of Sidon,
looking as though he was around the same age as Mipha in this memory, like he was more of a twin
brother, rather than a younger one.

And that was not the only surprising change for Link to feast his eyes upon. Whereas the Prince had
been previously unadorned, he was now appropriately embellished, bearing the same jingling
bangles and draped shawl as Mipha, herself.

“How is this?” he asked quite quickly when Link said nothing, his voice much the same, lacking
only a hint of his previous strength and resonance. His prior confidence had apparently shriveled
ever so slightly, as his golden eyes were averted, and his pale cheeks were flushed in soft violet.

“You’re so small,” Link observed with a titter, though his appreciation for the Prince’s efforts was
clear enough.
“Of course. I wasn’t always so imposing. However,” Sidon momentarily trailed off, flicking his tail like it was an alien thing, “I did forget how awkward I was at this age. My tail was still too big for my body and my teeth were too big for my face. Is it not to your taste, then?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” the Hylian commented. He might have rolled his eyes if not for the fact that this entire thing was incredibly endearing. That and, if he was bound to embarrass himself, it was only appropriate that the Prince should suffer with him. With a tiny smile upturning the corners of his mouth, Link bent his body into a bow very similar to that which he often saw Brivere do, and he extended one hand to his Zora companion. “Shall we away to the dance floor then, your Highness?”

“Aha,” the Prince laughed, his sharp teeth gleaming as he did. Link drew his head upward in order to catch sight of the Zora’s pleased expression, and just as Sidon had insisted, his teeth did seem incredibly large, yet still his smile was utterly charming. Luckily, he paid no heed to the Hylian’s sly grin, opting instead to take his hand, saying, “We shall.”

As the two strode onto the dance floor, other newly arrived attendees conveniently shifted out of their path, giving them appropriate space to do whatever they pleased. Link’s eyes flicked here and there, watching finely dressed nobles step aside when he passed, his entire being burning with satisfaction at that bizarre effect. He only wished that he could maintain that ability in the waking world outside of magically produced delusions.

They took their place in the center of the finely polished floor, as though they were the guests of honor, when in fact, Sidon himself had entirely forgotten whatever it was his people had been celebrating. He’d been too young to know or understand, or to properly acknowledge such things.

Link placed one hand upon the Prince’s waist, stealing a glance at his youthful features before averting his eyes again in embarrassment. He was so unused to being at eye-level with his lover, so suddenly holding his gaze was a difficult matter, even though it never had been before.

“This is so strange,” the Hylian muttered, trying to get his clumsy feet to move properly with the relaxed beat of the music, which lapped and flowed like gentle waves, light and rolling. He and the Prince swayed and turned in tandem, chasing the flickers of light which skirted beneath their feet and shined upon the surface of Sidon’s glassy scales.

“But good?” the Prince asked, the shadow of his same warm, doting smile upon his lips.

“It’s nice, yes,” Link reassured, receiving a thankful nod from the Prince in turn, his every step creating another musical dingle from how he was adorned. At last, his gaze grew bold enough to meet Sidon’s own, and one curious hand broke form to touch the Prince’s cheek, to trace one forefin, to admire how oddly average he was in size, and how truly beautiful he was, now that he was more available to gaze upon.

“If only I’d had the forethought to know in advance that a tiny Hylian would ensnare my affections, then I might have never taken the spirit potions at all, and at the very least it would have lessened some of the size difference between us,” the Prince lamented, though it was light-hearted enough and more of a passing acknowledgment of what might have been. “I’d need to see the future for that, however, and I’m afraid it isn’t my gift.”

While Sidon chuckled over his own observation, Link returned his hand to the appropriate place, shrugging idly as he did. Just because he could appreciate being at the same height as his companion, it didn’t mean that he regretted the fact that they were vastly different in reality. If that were so, he wouldn’t have bothered romantically chasing anyone outside of other Hylians.

“You can use your gift to console people in the present,” Link commented, hoping that ‘people like
me’ wasn’t too strongly implied with what he said. “It’s good enough.”

“You’re right, of course—” Sidon said, though their discussion fell suddenly to the wayside when their dance form was unexpectedly parted. Both of them stepped backward, at least one of them incorrectly, so that their clasped hands were torn apart and the Prince’s tail gave a flick, his eyes narrowing to momentarily regard his dance partner with an uncertain glance.

Quickly enough, Sidon shook his head in forgiveness and strode back into the Hylian’s reach, tucking one hand into Link’s now evenly sized palm while his other hand was placed upon his partner’s shoulder.

“Would you like to lead, then?” the Prince offered, thinking it would make for a fair compromise. His dearest one’s timing was all off, and he moved the wrong foot more than half of the time, but Sidon was certain he could follow along much more gracefully.

“Uhh,” Link mumbled, his brows knitting together in frustrated embarrassment, his eyes suddenly very interested in actually watching his own feet. “Yeah, that would be good.”

“Very well,” the Zora agreed with a nod, though as soon as they began again, they got automatically off beat. With a sigh, Sidon did little more than shrug it off, reminding himself that perfection wasn’t a necessity in this moment so much as enjoyment. They were here for the sake of raising their spirits, not creating further dilemmas.

The Hylian’s expression became that much more pinched while they danced on in quiet concentration and the Zora couldn’t help but sense the worry returning to the forefront of his dear friend’s mind.

“There’s no need to take it so seriously,” Sidon purred in a soft, reassuring way, leaning his head near enough that the point of his brow bumped the soft of his Hylian companion’s fringe.

“It’s not that,” Link breathed, his hand tightening against the Prince’s, clutching onto it like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to this tender fantasy, though he didn’t at all deserve to be granted such a peaceful, beautiful thing. “Can you tell if the attack is still going on right now? Have the Yiga Clan retreated yet?”

“Oh..” A dismal sadness swiftly stole the light from Sidon’s youthful countenance, his previous contented smile fading away and leaving a plain line upon his features. “Not yet, but.. try not to be so troubled.”

Link’s gaze took in the sight of his companion’s returned sorrow, wondering distantly if the Prince was really insisting that he not to be troubled, or rather, himself. Maybe this convenient distraction was something Sidon needed just as much, to maintain his own spirit, his own hope, his own belief in a better future. If that were so, then Link would commit to it like he’d never committed to anything else before. He personally thought that hoping for things to improve was a naive dream, as fantastical as this one, but he’d be damned if he stole that chance from his dear Prince.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head, “You put so much effort into this and I’m not even able to focus on it properly.”

“No, my friend. You needn’t apologize for your concern. In fact, I appreciate it, truly,” the Prince said, trying to smile when Link, too, leaned his forehead against the Zora’s in an affectionate nuzzle. “But I assure you, there hasn’t been a single day in the last hundred years and in innumerable years prior to that, that my people weren’t at peak readiness to face disaster. We may not come out of it unscathed, but we will prevail. Have faith.”
“I do, Sidon. That’s not the problem,” Link spoke seriously, somehow following the dance moderately better when he didn’t concentrate so hard on it. “I know that your people are strong. With all they’ve been through recently, I can see it. They’ve shown me time and time again.”

A soft, proud expression lit the Prince’s features at the Champion’s words of belief, and for a second, Link’s shining, blue gaze met his own, pausing there, enjoying the warmth of fondness between them before drifting aside again as his face turned solemn. “But even the strongest things can only endure so much, so I can’t keep depending on that,” Link lamented, not angry, not bitter, just disappointed and deeply saddened. “The Yiga Clan is here because of me. For me.”

“I said that it wasn’t your fault,” Sidon uttered, pulling his partner ever closer, so that Link’s hand slithered slowly from his waist to his back, and his own shifted from where it was meant to be, on the Hylian’s shoulder, instead climbing up to offer a tender caress to the Champion’s cheek.

“Yeah,” Link muttered, his voice hardly audible over the music, if not for how close Sidon was, listening. “You love to excuse me. You love to absolve my guilt.”

“I do because I understand,” the Prince snapped, his apparently ‘too big’ teeth brightly flashing with the sudden intensity of his expression. Link couldn’t help but look up, if only because he was surprised by the sudden rake of Sidon’s fingerscales, sharp against his shoulder when his returned grip tightened.

But as Link’s eyes focused upon the Prince’s, Sidon own gaze drifted dolefully away, glancing, instead, back in Mipha’s direction. She’d shown herself from the floor at last, in favor of socializing with her friends from Castle Town.

“Being asked to take responsibility for the protection of something as immense as your home, the existence of your people.. it’s a burden near impossible to carry, because, as I’ve learned for myself, there is no feasible way to be perfect. And stubbornly trying to do so anyway only chips away at your own resolve, at your own will to do anything at all.” The Prince spoke each word like a bitter, mournful confession that he would’ve never dared to utter outside of the complete privacy offered in the confines of his companion’s psyche. He stared wistfully at the image of his beloved sister, who only now existed in his heart and his memory, yet even so, he couldn’t hide the envious stain upon his expression, the heartbreak that remained in the knowledge that he could never hope to measure up to everything that Mipha had been. There was as much pain to be had in that awful jealousy as there was in the fact that he would never again see someone he so dearly loved and missed, someone who had asked so very, very much of him.

When Sidon’s eyes returned to look upon his Hylian lover, he cast off every last trace of his lingering melancholy, taking a deep breath and setting it free. “In life, things will always fall apart, regardless of how hard we try to hold them together because that is merely how life is. It isn’t your fault when the world behaves in the only way it can.”

“That’s just it, though, Sidon. You do something. You try. It’s a burden, but you still carry it,” Link stated with a scoff, feeling that it was perhaps dangerous territory to tread, having this conversation while the Prince was in his mind, deeply entrenched enough that he could feel Link’s stagnating intent, his bitter resolution to ignore the world threatening to end with every day that passed. Still, in this moment, he let go of his usual secrecy, speaking much more bluntly than even he normally would. “Me? I threw that burden down and walked away.”

“.but that is one of the things that I’ve always envied about you. You were handed an unfairly heavy responsibility and you rejected it,” the Prince confessed with an embarrassed little laugh that belied the sly smile that tugged at his lips. He had the appearance of a rebellious young man, guiltlessly indulging himself in some awful thing that his elders had thoroughly warned him about. “I’ve always
tried to find my own way to carry the burden I was saddled with, ways that most weren’t apt to agree with, but I still carried it, regardless. Sometimes I wish I could just throw it down and maybe that’s why I find it so invigorating to watch you do what I know I cannot. And furthermore I-

The Prince’s flowing line of thought was quickly interrupted by the Hylian’s clumsy dancing, a tiny yelp choking out his words when Link’s foot tread upon his delicate, webbed toes. Sidon let out a little huff of exasperation, his typical patience and forgiveness wearing thin enough that he thought, perhaps, he could very gently critique.

“I’m sorry, my dear one, I didn’t want to comment, but you are rather..” Sidon hesitated even further, searching for the best way to say what was on his mind while he placed a wider gap of space between them, returning to the more standard dancing position. “..unseasoned at dancing, aren’t you?”

“It seems like I’m unseasoned at everything I aim to do,” Link muttered, shaking his head for a moment like it could chase away all thoughts of that damnable golden Zora and how harshly he had derided the Hylian’s fighting abilities.

It wasn’t like he could really help it. When he awakened in the Shrine of Resurrection, he hadn’t remembered anything at all. He’d needed basic instruction from the spirit of a dead King about how to light his own campfires and cook for himself. How the fuck did a King know how to do those things anyway? When had his Royal Highness ever done menial shit like that for himself?

“I’m sorry,” Link found himself apologizing again. He couldn’t help but wonder if he’d really learned to take responsibility for his insufficiencies and the harm they caused, or if it was merely on his tongue so often because of how frequently Sidon, himself, said it. He peered downward, wanting to make certain that he hadn’t actually caused any severe harm to the Prince, unsure if it was even possible since none of this was really happening, but nevertheless he couldn’t chase away the concern.

“It’s quite alright,” Sidon gently declared with a small, forgiving smile, though a touch of cynicism echoed underneath the typical, pleasant sound. “Hylia willing, I may survive.”

“Fff,” the Hylian let out a soft laugh, more of an unsteady breath, in response to his Prince’s sass. It soon turned into more of an embarrassed sigh, then Link looked over his shoulder, reminding himself for the hundredth time that nobody here would really witness his personal failures.

And then he was forced to forgive himself for the very fact that he lacked the ability to succeed at things he’d never done. Only once he’d gotten that out of the way could he bear to force out an unusually humble request. “Uhh..” he muttered hesitantly, sure that this was going to cause him real, physical pain, “..maybe you could.. take the lead and.. show me how I can improve?”

“Certainly,” Sidon agreed rather curtly, making exactly zero fuss of the matter, regardless of how it had been something quite severe, in Link’s mind. You would have thought Link had asked for a swift, painless death and the Prince had delivered it sweetly, without question.

“I’m just.. so used to figuring things out. Learning the hard way,” the Hylian babbled, his own shame refusing to diminish, even when the Prince offered no judgement. All Sidon did was smile and nod, listening patiently and doing little else outside of what Link had asked, tapping his fingers against Link’s own, indicative of the music’s beat.

“At this point, it might be a matter of.. I don’t know.. well..” Link went on, trying his hardest to excuse his lack of perfection to his Prince, who seemingly strove to be the image of exactly that.
“Pride?” Sidon filled in with a knowing smile and a mischievous gleam to his golden gaze. “Aha, well not to worry. I’m happy to show you. Just try to follow my movements, then. It’s a slow dance, it shouldn’t be so difficult.”

“It’s difficult because I’m impatient,” Link stated. At the very least, he could say he knew his flaws like they were shitty neighbors who did shitty things, regardless of how passive aggressively he behaved in rebuke.

The Zora chuckled rather patiently, as though to offer some compliment to Link’s own confessed lack thereof, and the Hylian quieted in attention, observing the Prince’s methods, the way he moved his feet, which one he stepped with, which one he turned with and the matter of timing between each motion.

As often as the Champion compared fighting to dancing in his mind, his body couldn’t process them like they were anything similar. Fighting felt natural, it flowed, it was random and aggressive. This dance was timed, it had rules, it wasn’t something he could brazenly pursue an end to. No, he was meant to experience it in the moment, enjoying it maybe, flowing with it, rather than against it. He had to move with his partner, rather than pushing back against an enemy.

It was another world. An alien world. Funny though, Sidon was proficient at both.

“You’re getting it already, my friend,” the Prince praised, genuinely impressed with how quickly his dear one learned. Sometimes it felt as though Link possessed a body that already knew how to do anything asked of it and merely needed the most minute of reminders in regards to how to go about things.

“Sidon,” Link spoke up again when he’d caught onto the dancing technique well enough that he could follow along while conversing. His voice returned to the previous serious, solemn tone, something in his words painful, aching, difficult. It was only that much worse when he brought his blue eyes to meet the Zora’s own, which were peering up at him in quiet attention.

Link took a breath, reflecting amidst his hesitation, that the Prince had trusted him for so long, even before he’d had proven himself to be anything trustworthy. Sidon had presented his wild, unacceptable ideas to his Hylian companion, seeking council, hopeful enough that he may find an equally rebellious ally in the Champion. But with that said, Link wasn’t sure that what he was about to suggest was anything in the same realm as the whimsical ideas that the Prince nursed, such as talking lynels down peacefully.

“What if I,” he began, dead certain that even Sidon wouldn’t entertain his selfishness, his resistance to the bitter truth that he was the weapon of the Goddess, that he had only one purpose, and his refusal to accept it stood to bring about the destruction of their world. “..what if I never take responsibility for the task which is apparently fated to me?”

“You mean.. the destruction of the Calamity?” Sidon questioned in uncertainty, not quite sure he was fully understanding what his companion had suggested. Link’s hand tightened nervously against the Prince’s own, the fear that he could lose this precious connection peaking as he noticed that the Zora suddenly misstepped, missing the beat he’d been following before with pristine expertise.

“Yes,” Link said with a sheepish nod, distinctly sensing that he’d made a grand mistake which he couldn’t take back. Maybe he could insist that this entire conversation was hypothetical? No, no, there was no reason he should have needed to make those excuses. Even if taking on the mantle of ‘Hero’ and ‘Champion’ was his fate, he hadn’t chosen that, he hadn’t consented to it. He was a person, damn it, not a weapon, not a tool, not some deity’s convenient blood sacrifice to be tossed away for the salvation of the rest of the world.
He wasn’t that selfless, he wasn’t that pure. This was his fucking life and he wanted to do with it whatever he damn well pleased.

But he didn’t want to lose the one he loved, his dearest friend, his truest ally.

He could feel the spiraling storm inside of him, gaining speed and destructive force with every second that Sidon remained quiet. The bitter chill of fear had clashed with the rising heat from his burning anger, and soon enough the resulting cyclone would tear him apart from the inside.

“You’re right, my friend,” Sidon breathed at last, stilling everything in Link with the gentle strength of those words, leaving behind a tranquil, windswept valley in the depths of the Hylian’s soul, abating the violence of his turmoil with utter ease. “The Calamity is not solely your responsibility to deal with, but the world’s.”

It was so typical of Link to fall upon verbal silence, to say nothing at all and letting the void speak for itself, but this time he wasn’t quiet of his own choice, but rather, he’d been rendered speechless, his gaze alone imploring that the Prince say more, to confirm that which he’d already spoken, to explain his reasoning, to reassure the Hylian that he really, truly meant that.

Sidon was looking on him in silent reply, painfully observing the expression on his dear one’s face, that vulnerable, dubious wrinkle of mistrust, that need for validation. It hurt to know that being told something as simple and obvious as, ‘You don’t have to do this on your own,’ was so utterly unbelievable. It hurt to see that his dear friend had been struggling alone for so long, he could hardly accept that even a single person in this world might offer to take the burden off of his shoulders, rather than reaffirming it.

In the Prince’s heart, he had his own reservations, of course. Not in the answer he’d given to Link, because he couldn’t have been more sure of that. But rather, he couldn’t shake the worry and fear that the very same dark force of destruction could hungrily consume the life of yet another person he held so dear. His aversion to loss had become something pathological, something that would never fade, something that would always be with him, yet even so, he weathered his own deep trauma, if only to be reasonable enough to offer his most beloved Hylian worthwhile council.

“Personally..” Sidon began anew, each word like a weight, like something sharp, but still he persisted, as surely he had quite a few words in regards to this awful subject. He spoke slowly, carefully, rationally. “..as much as I acknowledge your strength, I’ve always been a bit unclear on how good one person’s chances could be against something such as the Calamity.” He had to wonder, had his dear sister thought the same? Had she known this entire endeavor was folly, yet said nothing of it, bravely and silently choosing to take up her weapon, all in the hopes of protecting a man she felt had been handed a hopeless task?

“A hundred years ago, my people put their fullest faith into the strength of the holy powers of a young princess, her single Knight, and four Champions piloting unpredictable machines that weren’t even fully understood. The failure of that plot wounded the trust my people once had in yours, and in our sorrows, we placed all of the blame on the poor judgement of the Hylians.” Sidon’s narrowed eyes and gently shaking head alone foretold his disappointment with all of this, his failure to see the rationale for any of it.

“And as someone who can only now think on this from the perspective of a leader,” the Prince continued, his eyes flicking sharply back and forth in thought, his pupils tightening from the distress of this subject, “..I can’t see why each of our allied nations didn’t ready entire armies to face something we all knew was coming, something we all knew was promised to destroy our world, should a small band of warriors fail..”
“I’m sorry, but,” Link suddenly interrupted, his proclaimed impatience showing itself in the way his hands fidgeted against Sidon’s scales, and how his brow furrowed in confusion, in the uncertainty of exactly where the Zora was going with all of this, “...a bit more brevity would be nice.”

“I apologize, my friend, you know how I ramble,” the Prince uttered sheepishly, a nervous chuckle coming from him while he refocused, trying to find a better, more concise way to make his feelings known. “What I’m trying to say is.. I know that, from all sides, you’re being shoved into a task that seems impossible and I never wanted to be just another person unreasonably insisting that you have no other choice but to accept it. Whatever you decide, I will support you. If you answer the call of this awful fate, I will support you. If you turn your back on it, I will still support you.”

“How can you say that?” Link bitterly choked on his words, overwhelmed and unable to hold Sidon’s gaze. He’d been so afraid that the Zora Prince would reject him, yet when he was surprisingly understanding instead, Link could hardly believe it, and in turn, couldn’t accept it himself. Maybe it was because he really, truly, cherished and loved Prince Sidon. He loved him, his people, his Domain, and he wanted to see all of that protected, preserved, so much so that this singular desire had begun to manipulate the Hylian’s breaking heart, chaining him to the duty he hadn’t wanted to accept at all. And because of that, part of him wanted and needed to hear the man he loved tell him, yes, you have to fight the Calamity. Yes, you have to save us all.

“..As a leader, as someone who is responsible for your peoples’ well being, how can you say that?” Link questioned, his words tremulous, his voice as weak as the rest of him in this moment.

“Whatever happens will happen, no matter your choice,” Sidon stated, raising one hand from his dance partner’s shoulder in order to make a sweeping gesture, entirely spitting upon the whole notion of fate and destiny, after all, what good did it do anybody to believe that such things were written, when they lacked any real awareness of how it would play out, regardless? “The best thing that you can do is consider your options, make your choice, and then prepare for whatever decision you make. If you decide to fight, in my personal opinion, you shouldn’t be made to do so in the ‘lone Hero’ style so glorified by Hylian legends. You should do so with as much support as the allied nations can muster, because if you fail, we all will be left to stand and fight to save ourselves anyway.”

Link nodded quietly, scarcely capable of comprehending that somebody believed there even was a choice in this matter. He was even less capable of expressing the gratitude rapidly filling up the hollow parts of him, thanks to the fact that somebody had surprised him in this way. Warily, he challenged the Prince’s patient understanding once more, his voice a cautious sound when he asked, “And if I decide not to fight?”

“..then, we should all be ready to face the Calamity when it comes, and it will come,” Sidon uttered grimly, his gaze only now faltering. It wasn’t disappointment that had caused the increasing heaviness in his expression, but apprehension. “Though, it seems to me that, when the Calamity does break free, if you care about anything in this world, and I know that you do, the choice to fight will still be forced upon you despite your attempt to turn your back.”

“Right,” Link said with a nod of resignation. “You’re right, of course. That’s precisely the detail I’d gotten hung up on. So it seems that the real choice here is whether to take the fight to the Calamity or not..”

Sidon gave his own nod of confirmation, tightening his hold on the Hylian as they turned slowly with the music, wanting to hold him near and give him every possible ounce of tender support that he had to offer. However, there was something else, as well.

“My dear one, if I may comment on one thing, though?” the Prince decidedly added, his words
taking on a careful sound, the ring they held when Sidon was uncertain whether or not he was about to overstep certain boundaries.

“Of course,” the impatient Champion agreed, trying on a new shade of patient trust, instead.

“This incredible guilt that you’re feeling in response to the attack?” Sidon continued, still wary despite the calm expression upon his Hylian companion’s face and the tranquil blue of his gaze meeting his own with ease. “Please understand, I know that you didn’t expect this terrible thing to occur. I know that you wouldn’t have allowed it, had you known it was going to happen... However, you do know that the Calamity is coming. If you actively make the choice to do nothing at all, you may as well throw away all of that awful guilt.”

“I don’t understand,” Link uttered, his brow furrowed in true confusion.

“It’s just that..” Sidon blinked, pausing for a moment to consider his words, “...you can’t continue to guilt yourself over things, if you don’t wish to take responsibility for them at all. If you know something is coming and choose to do nothing, you can’t feel badly for yourself when it comes.”

Despite the critiquing nature of the Prince’s explanation, Link only simmered what he’d just heard for a moment before he laughed quietly, and replied, “...if you had said that to me when we met, I wouldn’t have wanted to hear it.”

“You would’ve told me to fuck off,” the Zora added, chorusing his dear one’s laughter with his own little chuckle.

“I would have, yeah,” the Champion readily confessed to his own difficult nature, all too aware now that for as trying as he found Sidon to be at first, the Prince had actually been the patient one all along.

With some troubled part of his soul now at more steady ease, Link stilled his feet, tightening his hold on the Prince, who still stood at a height that matched his own. He drew Sidon closer, tightly embracing him in the center of the dance floor, all while numerous couples had flocked back to it, waltzing around them without noticing or caring.

It was odd, being able to wrap his arms around the Zora fully, being able to remain standing normally while pressing his forehead tenderly to the Prince’s crested brow. None of that even vaguely compared, though, to the oddity of finally feeling truly vindicated, supported and understood.

“Thank you,” Link quietly spoke, unfurling his tight hold in order to hold that pretty Prince’s face in his palms, though it only served to remind Sidon again about his youthful awkwardness, and he averted his own golden eyes, choosing instead to nod his acceptance of the Hylian’s gratitude.

“This choice, it isn’t an easy one to make,” the Champion stated, his words burning and apprehensive, yet calm and steady like he’d never been before. “I really do appreciate having someone who’s willing to help me actually consider things, rather than pushing me like there’s only one option.”

“You’re not alone, my love,” Sidon purred, offering a small, doting smile that warmed Link to his core. He, too, reached upward to touch his companion’s face, to sweep back his soft, untamed fringe, to trace the delicate point of his ear, to love and appreciate his existence, and to show it in every way he could. “As long as I’m with you, you won’t have to figure everything out on your own any longer.”
“I’d been so sure that you would judge me for being so utterly selfish,” Link breathed, his tone heavy and laden with relief, the echo of all of his fear being set adrift and sent far, far away.

“My own selfishness and fear likely softened my opinions, but.. if it helps you, I have nothing to regret.” At last, the Prince boldly pressed himself ever nearer, allowing the pale of his lips to softly graze his Hylian lover’s, which Link eagerly welcomed and eagerly returned. For a few sweet moments, they both surrendered to their inherent addiction to one another, to this adoration which had morphed itself into a driving force, a means of unification, of understanding, each of them offering strength to uphold the other.

When they parted, their gazes met like hearts reaching out, their hands entwining and holding tightly. And then, it was Sidon whose golden eyes drifted away, his voice softly raising, offering words in place of the lost contact. “Actually.. I may have some matters of import to share with you, as well. However, it can wait until I’ve awakened. For now we should.. enjoy the dancing.”

“Yeah..” Link agreed, reminded again of that other, darker truth he held inside. How long had it been that he’d wanted to let Sidon know what he was going through, what he was so sure that nobody would believe, let alone understand. He’d been given reason, at last, to consider the possibility that his Zora companion might actually hear him out and not simply deem him to be insane.

The fact that his enemies had confirmed the unbelievable truth about his immortality was of no comfort, because what was Link to do, ask one of them to back him up? For now, ‘enjoy the dancing,’ might as well have been the best suggestion he’d ever heard.

Still.

“I have some other things that I want to tell you, too,” Link spat the words, each one clinging to his tongue, though it was only the promise of further confession. “..Maybe by the time I’ve decided what to do about the Calamity, I’ll be ready to talk about it.”

“That sounds fair, my beautiful one.” Sidon answered so easily with a smile, moving his own hands back into the proper places, so that he and his Hylian lover could carry on dancing. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

How about that? Man in is hard to believe how far these two have come. It has been such an adventure. It isn't over yet, but goodness me, the amount of development these two have had with each other is astounding.

My Tumblr and Twitter are: BanishedOne
My art/fiction Tumblr is: BanishedFics
Links are in my profile.
Thank you all for reading. <3
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

When the battle was over, some warriors could be put back together, while others could only be mourned for. Yet others were left to deal with the pain of knowing that their lives were expendable, and only the Hylian Champion could ponder at his own circumstance, a life that couldn't be ended— but why?

“By the grace of my medical skills, you may yet heal with your ability to make facial expressions intact, young man,” the elderly medic crooned, her dusty, pink scales shining in the light from overhead as she put the last, careful stitch into the Guard Captain’s previously gouged countenance.

“Either way, it’s sure to be a nasty scar,” Bazz grumbled, lying still under the old Apostle’s touch, his eyes closed like acquiring medical care for severe injuries was the best offering of rest he’d had for some while. “My father was already riding my ass enough about the fact that I’m still not married.”

“Hmph. That man has no business lecturing,” the woman uttered with a scoff. Bazz’s father, Seggin, was very near her in age, and she remembered him from a time long before he acquired his title of ‘Demon Sergeant.’ “I know the old man well enough to recall that he broke the heart of the one he truly loved for the sake of legacy. Those aren’t footsteps you want to follow in, son. Trust me, choose your happiness over whatever plans your family may have for you.”

“Hnn,” the black Zora hummed, hardly apt to discuss such a subject, though it didn’t mean he hadn’t taken the Apostle’s words into some consideration. It wasn’t as though he wasn’t privy to the fact that his parents shared a loveless soul bond, and that his father had always lived in unsatisfied longing all thanks to his life decisions, but.. like most Zoras, Bazz was secretive and stoic in regards to these personal matters and the medic was overly bold in even bringing them up.

Perhaps not wrong, though.

“Sir,” came a voice to interrupt the awkward exchange, one that Bazz was all too grateful to hear; his Lieutenant. Even with needles being driven through his flesh, the Guard Captain’s head was a mess of worry over what was going on topside, now that dawn had broken at last.

“Go on,” Bazz spoke aloud for the other guardsman to hear, though he dared not move while the pink Zora hovering over him knotted the stitch and cleaned the area one final time.

“Report, sir,” said the Lieutenant, thankfully taking his job seriously when it mattered. “The attack on our Domain has been repelled, for now, according to those stationed in the Uppercity. There is still some possibility of enemies lingering about in disguise, but guard presence in the city is as heavy as possible. Checkpoints have doubled up on security. Also, the unit I took out to pursue the fleeing Undercity residents managed several successful arrests, but we didn’t have the proper numbers to stop them all. Where those who escaped ended up is anybody’s guess at this point.”

A sigh of shame came out of the black Zora while he listened, then he uttered a quiet reply, “I’m sorry for never making it out to assist personally.”
“Oh, not to worry, sir,” the Lieutenant dryly asserted. “We really enjoyed taking orders from the Goddess Knights in your stead.”

A soft chuckle came from the black Zora, and once the medic had turned away from him in favor of cleaning her tools, he gave his head a disapproving shake against the bed at his back. Bazz hated to admit that, sometimes, he actually was grateful for his Lieutenant’s sense of humor.

“Well, I’m sure they were prettier to look at, at least,” Bazz quipped in reply. “Send a team downstream to the fort to gather intel. That’s probably the best point we have to base our search for the missing half of the Undercity.”

“...pardon me, sir,” the Lieutenant uttered in hesitation, his voice thoughtful and slow, “but, do you think that could pose a problem? I mean, isn’t the fort Sergeant, well... an Undercity Zora?”

Pausing, Bazz hovered in silence while he contemplated the notion presented to him. As far as he was concerned, Sergent Betaal had been doing fine work. The previously soft recruits that she’d been handed to train were now full-fledged warriors of repute. Her organization and management of the fort had been excellent despite her seemingly chaotic, hard-headed nature, and even her paperwork was flawless.

But, she was Undercity, and it wasn’t such a terrible leap of logic to think that, if she was capable of accomplishing so much that was already thought to be outside of her character, maybe there were other things she might’ve been capable of.

“Do you think that she knew something about this?” the Guard Captain asked in a grim tone, moving to sit himself upright in order to speak, though the elderly medic placed her hand upon his chest and pushed him back down flat.

“You need time to recover,” she chastised him, finding only irresponsibility in his restless sense of dedication.

“There’s nothing to suggest that necessarily, sir,” the Lieutenant answered, trying to hide the sly grin upturning the corners of his mouth at watching an old Apostle boss his boss around. He cleared his throat, however, and straightened, thinking that now likely wasn’t the best time to be using humor to deal with the increasingly bad circumstances befalling his people. Slowly, he inched into the walled-off cubical of space where Bazz had been taken, coming to stand nearer to the black Zora’s bedside, making it easier for him to focus. “I personally just worry over whether or not she can be trusted, given that she’d have reason to be biased.”

“That is a fair point, I suppose,” Bazz uttered, wanting more so to believe that such an excellent guardsman as Betaal would favor duty and their system over people who had done something truly cowardly, under-handed, and vile. In the end, he was forced to choose caution over blind faith, breathing a regretful sigh over the poor circumstances, even so. “Have the team report to Guardsman Gaddison. We’ll place her in charge of this investigation.”

“Very well, sir,” the Lieutenant stated with a nod. “And what of the Undercities in custody?”

“We’re going to get those answers,” came the determined growl of Bazz’s reply. The attack had shown him something about himself, something that was difficult to admit. He wasn’t the impenetrable wall of skill he’d believed himself to be. He’d fooled himself into thinking that, because he’d had glaring success against monsters, that he was a warrior with strength that could not be overcome. As much as he was vigilant and ready, he wasn’t strong enough to uphold everything he held dear, but by Hylia, he was going to see justice done. “They knew the attack was coming, so they must know precisely where those who escaped went. Beyond the information we can gather
from them, their fates will be a matter of deliberation for our courts.”

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t look good for them,” the Lieutenant stated in a tone much too solemn for himself. He didn’t care much for the Undercity Zoras, or the nonsense they constantly stirred up, but this time they’d made a mistake that was beyond reconciliation. “...I can already tell that much.”

The Lieutenant breathed a sigh of his own, already exhausted in the knowledge that this mess was only going to get even messier. He turned on heel to leave the Guard Captain in peace, hoping that fiery medic could actually force him to get some rest. Before he could part the curtain that concealed the doorway, however, it was brushed aside by someone unexpected, and the Lieutenant nearly crashed right into the Hylian Champion, stumbling on his toes to avoid the much smaller man.

“Whoa,” he mumbled with gasp, skittering aside. “Excuse me, Champion.”

“Champion,” Bazz repeated, the word falling over his lips like the one word alone was news that he’d been anxiously awaiting. Bazz squirmed atop the bed where he’d been treated, trying to rotate his body enough so that he could turn his gaze in the direction of the door without actually getting up.

“Oh, Master Link,” the black Zora regarded the rather upside-down version of his friend who was standing right inside the cubical, looking on him in apparent surprise, a troubled wrinkle casting a faint shadow on that flat, Hylian brow. Bazz, on the other hand, spoke up calmly in relief, “I’m glad to see that you’re safe. After you scurried off with the Knight Captain, I didn’t see you again.”

“Bazz..” came the sound of the Champion’s voice, quiet and unsure as the blue of his eyes danced across the reddened mark held together with ragdoll stitches, bisecting the Zora’s face from the corner of one golden eye, down and across his lips, then ending upon the curve of his jaw. “Yeah, hey.. I’m really sorry about that wound. I guess it was my fault that it happened.”

Maybe Prince Sidon didn’t think that Link had any business feeling guilty over situations he did nothing to prevent, but the Hylian knew all too well that nothing was as simple as that. Still, the pain of his friends, and the impact his stagnance had on their quality of life was the emotional punishment he’d accept for grievances he’d indirectly been a part of. He’d simmer in his guilt, and hopefully the pain would serve as a lesson to him to do better next time.

He was trying. It was a new day, and he was trying.

He quickly averted his gaze, though, having not expected to see Bazz here, and honestly, he hadn’t been properly ready for this conversation, either.

“Don’t think anything of it,” the black Zora spoke up in easy forgiveness with too little effort and a small smile that was either physically painful or difficult. In Bazz’s mind, nobody held the weapon that cut him but his enemy, and even if the blow had been intended to remove him from the picture for the sake of getting at the Champion, he was happy to have been there, blocking the way. He couldn’t regret anything that had happened to him while he stood, protecting the ones he cared about, though the way his doctor was shaking her head didn’t escape him. “Consider it to be a.. physical reminder of our friendship.”

Link’s callused hands bundled idly together while a bittersweet titter was elicited, a quiet tremor on his breath. His eyes were cast downward and he nodded his head in acceptance, hard as it was for him to believe that somebody could care that much about him.

“It’s good to see that you’re unscathed, otherwise,” the Hylian said, taking a few measured steps closer to where Bazz laid.
“Did you need something?” the Guard Captain promptly asked, knowing all too well how terrible Link could be with small talk and assuming that if he’d come to visit, there was likely a purpose.

At the question, though, Link paused, blinking in quiet uncertainty as he considered the inquiry. His mouth formed a tight line of wariness, his jaw clenched like he was fighting the answer, attempting to refuse it passage from his throat. Then, at last, the Hylian nodded half-heartedly, his shoulders shrugging in a ‘might as well answer, since somebody asked,’ kind of way.

“... I might, yeah,” he said, “but, I actually came to speak with your doctor. Can I catch up with you later?”

“Oh,” the Guard Captain mumbled, an embarrassed chuckle echoing in his chest. Silly him for making assumptions; he supposed he was just too used to everyone coming to him for everything. “Of course, Master Link. I’ll be seeing you then.”

With that, Bazz pushed himself upright, though the medic immediately huffed in disapproval, her fins flaring and her tail flicking at how defiant this brash youngster was, completely ignoring her advice. “Young man, you need to rest,” the doctor hissed.

“I will do so, of course, in the barracks,” Bazz curtly replied, granting the old medic a bow of gratitude before he strode rather quickly toward the curtained doorway. “Thank you, Wise One.”

The black Zora disappeared with haste and the grumbling old woman’s silvered eyes shined with renewed flame in her irritation. She had just stitched up a severe wound that easily could have resulted in horrendous nerve damage, yet the one who bore the gash that she’d spent hours mending was going away to get the damn thing wet in blighted water.

She did not possess the patience needed for that kind of willful ignorance.

Still grumbling, the Apostle began organizing her tools, readily granting the Hylian boy her attention at the very same time, if only to move past the neverending frustrations of her job. “So, what can I do for you, Champion?”

Link couldn’t really disguise the uncertainty he was feeling. It was the same seed of ignorance that had him questioning his own sanity, his own experience, in regards to his ability to respawn after fatal events. After that, he couldn’t trust himself so easily, even after he was offered proof and reassurance that his bizarre, indestructible existence was exactly what it seemed. And his ability to trust doctors and scholars? That was even more deeply wounded than his own trust in himself.

So with great difficulty, the Hylian cleared his throat, speaking in a slow, unsure way as he began his explanation, “...you asked me to let you know if I learned anything useful about Sheikah medicine. I can’t be certain of anything at this point, but... I’m curious to know what you could learn from... you know, looking at some of the dead Yiga Clansmen.”

“I see,” the doctor purred in a soft, thoughtful way. “This Yiga Clan which attacked our Domain is a branch of the Sheikah tribe, isn’t that correct, Champion? Is there anything you’re expecting me to find, in particular?”

“No,” he replied, having hoped that she wouldn’t actually ask him anything like that. He didn’t have proper answers and he barely even had fully fleshed questions. That was precisely the problem, though. He was tired of not knowing shit. He was exhausted enough in facing the dilemma that was his fate, and now he had an enemy that apparently knew him inside and out, while they remained shrouded in complete mystery, leaving him helpless and clueless as to how he could even fight back. It was time for him to know his damn enemy and he sure as shit wasn’t getting any answers from
“It’s just that..” Link went on, trying his best to explain, “I learned some things that I hadn’t expected to and I have the feeling now that the mystery goes even deeper.”

“It’s just a tip,” the Hylian continued, shaking his head and making a sweeping gesture with one hand like he wanted to dismiss his own nonsense, all so that this wise Apostle wouldn’t have to. She was quietly looking on him in questioning, her own mind budding with hopeful curiosity, though Link mistook it for dubiousness. With a tiny sigh, he added, “Nothing could come from it, or maybe something interesting could. Either way, anything I learn about these bastards would be helpful.”

“Well, that’s the learning process, isn’t it?” the Apostle chuckled at last, a smile deepening the wrinkles of her weathered visage, “..a curiosity, a feeling that nags at you, giving you no choice but to look further into it with no real idea what you’ll find.”

Nodding, the woman narrowed her eyes, her smile turning to more of a sly grin, then she waggled one knobby claw at the Hylian boy. “I’ll take your tip, Champion, and I’ll let you know if anything interesting does come of it.”

Link pushed back the fabric curtain that closed off the small cubical within the Basilica infirmary, stepping out into corridor which wove between the aisles. Bazz was long gone, of course, and the Hylian undoubtedly traced the Guard Captain’s footsteps on his own way out, taking only a few paces before he turned a corner and nearly ran right into yet another Zora.

He was making a bad habit of that today.

His lips parted for the sake of uttering a word of apology, yet when he took proper stock of who it was he’d nearly clashed with, his mouth snapped shut, withholding the response he’d had in mind. The man who stood before him was a battered, tarnished gold in the light of the Basilica, at last stripped of his armor, his scales rough, his frame even more visibly gaunt without the steel shell to exaggerate the strength of his build. On top of that, he looked as though he hadn’t slept at all yet, so his usual bitchiness must have turned absolutely cantankerous.

“You,” Link grumbled while the Knight regarded him, measuring him with that sharp, penetrating gaze, as usual.

“Champion,” breathed the Zora in response, his voice a tired rumble. Very quickly, he disproved Link’s assumptions that he would behave with any kind of intensified irritability, not that his opinions had softened by much; he was just really, very tired. That and, looking on the man that he’d been ordered to protect, that he’d been forced to cooperate with, something felt intrinsically different, altered to the point that the golden Zora wasn’t sure he recognized his own state of emotions any longer.

He’d seen something new in the Champion. He’d seen something he hadn’t wanted to see. Yet, even so, he wasn’t so forgetful that he could easily abandon his fouled first impression. Did this Hylian even regret his previous wrongdoings? Was there any small hollow hiding remorse within him? Brivere wanted to ask, truly, if the Champion had made any effort to reconcile the vile deeds he’d committed. As much as the Zora Prince was beloved to the Knight, Brivere recognized lovestruck foolishness, and he doubted Sidon would ever attempt to unearth what laid in the past, leaving it to fester there, instead.
He wanted to know, for the sake of his own selfish peace, if Link intended to make right those wrongs and learn from them, rather than making himself into a song of thoughtless mistakes, playing on eternal repeat. He wanted to know that Sidon would be happy and well treated, so that he wouldn’t have any regrets, himself, when he finally let the Prince go.

He wanted to ask these things, but he couldn’t. He knew that if he did, it would only be taken as an act of aggression, an inquisition to be resisted and ceased.

“I guess you survived the rest of the fight,” Link awkwardly commented, turning his sight away from the Zora who stood before him, his own countenance wrinkling in doubt, in distaste for the way their short term support for one another had blockaded the ease of his normal reactions.

“I did,” Brivere curtly replied, as though he were perhaps in a hurry, yet he didn’t move from where he stood, perched directly in Link’s path. No, he waited like he was expecting something, and honestly, the Hylian felt that he might have been expecting something as well, but he was clueless as to what it might have been.

In frustration that overflowed with impatient ease, Link at last let out sigh of resignation, giving in to the inner furies that still burned in his heart. “Look, I’m not very good at trying to maintain appearances, or social subtleties, so I don’t want to play this,” he hissed, unsure if he was actually angry at the golden Zora or himself. Even so, it had always been easier to let others carry the blame for his own self-hatred and Brivere was the freest and easiest of targets. “We’re not friends. I’m not going fake being civil with you because I don’t like you, and I don’t want to pretend otherwise. We were allies of necessity for one night. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Of course,” Brivere replied, unsurprised and seemingly unaffected. Why would he be? It wasn’t as though anybody, save for Sidon, had ever freely decided that he might’ve been unworthy of their vitriol, so why would he expect this to be any different? He wouldn’t make himself so vulnerable as to expect kindness, or even simple tolerance, in place of aggression.

It wasn’t as though he’d hoped for something better. No, that would’ve been quite foolish indeed.

Without resistance or retort, Brivere bypassed the Hylian blocking his way, and Link spun on heel, watching him go in perplexed silence and bitterness that bubbled and boiled over. Link was left haplessly holding onto the soup pot of his violent emotions while the Knight walked away, so that when his feelings splashed free of containment, it was his own vulnerable hands that felt the burn.

And it wasn’t until he felt the pain of those burns that he even got the notion that he’d made yet another mistake, that he’d done something wrong, again.

“..fuck,” he muttered, not wanting to feel pity, not wanting to feel remorse, and inwardly chastising himself when he inevitably did. He never fucking learned, did he?

Brivere, however, put the exchange from his mind as soon as he made it to his previously intended destination. His clicking toeclawls somehow announced his arrival before he even brushed back the curtain to show himself inside the room he’d visited now and again. He knew it was so, because the very instant he walked in, the one he’d come to visit was already peering toward the doorway with anxious hope tightening her expression and shining on the golden surface of her widened gaze. Her upper body was pressed forward, her fingers tight on the edges of the chair where she sat, day in and day out.

“Good morning, Kree,” the golden Zora greeted the woman with velvet calm that belied the tremulous anxiety, heavy in his chest. He supposed the exhaustion was good for something after all.
“How is it a good morning?” she spat like she’d been waiting to hurl those words at the first person who made the mistake of walking into her personal, little prison of thin sheets and stacks of books that only barely contented her. For a hesitant instant, Brivere actually feared that she may have already known precisely what he’d come to tell her, though that really should have made it easier.

No, nothing made it easier. Nothing did.

And she didn’t know, yet. The Knight’s golden eyes met hers in veiled questioning, finding that, despite her restlessness, she still appeared excited at the sight of her one and only common visitor. He quickly averted his own gaze, honestly fearing that she may look through him and see the awful truth before he found words to explain it.

“Brivere, what is going on up there?” Kree implored, shaking her head and patting the edges of her chair so that her speckled forefins flapped against her pale cheeks. “There has been nothing but commotion down here, but everybody is too damn busy to stop and tell me what happened.”

The Knight sauntered to the empty chair that was positioned at the other Zora’s side, and he let his body softly sink into it. It wasn’t exactly the softest of seats, but there was undeniable relief in any rest that was offered to him, and even for as tense as he was, he couldn’t physically hold onto the tension any longer.

“I’m still not entirely certain of all the details, myself,” Brivere began. The night had been one of chaos and struggle and there wasn’t any real information to be gleaned from that. All he had to offer were general explanations to fill the gaping blanks in his fellow warrior’s mind. “I’m sure that you’ve already ascertained that during the previous evening, our city suffered an attack from a relatively unknown enemy.”

“What enemy?” The words spilled anxiously from Kree, her questions coming in rapid fire succession now, as they’d steadily filled her head throughout the night and morning. She needed to be rid of them, lest they’d threaten to damage the innermost corners of her mind, where she’d stowed them. “I mean, what do you know about them? What was it like? Were they strong fighters? Monstrous or some other enemy?”

Somehow, the golden Zora patiently processed each inquiry, waiting for the overly anxious woman to quiet again before he attempted to answer. “I’m told that these people are considered to be a branch of the Sheikah tribe, but aligned to the forces of darkness.”

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“The forces of darkness?” the gray Zora repeated, disallowing the Knight Captain to say much else. She couldn’t help how she recoiled in disgust and confusion, her abundant energy exaggerating her behavior in way that she couldn’t properly prevent and perhaps wasn’t even aware of. The warrior’s spirit in her wanted to get up and fight, failing to acknowledge her predicament, or otherwise...trying to ignore it. “What, like, the Calamity? How does one serve the Calamity, exactly? And what do they get out of it? I highly doubt it would recognize them as allies.”

Kree stilled again once her own rambling verbiage left her without breath, and she sat back in her chair, trying to relax while she took a long, slow gulp of air. “I’m sorry, I got off track there,” she said a bit more slowly this time, her eyes meeting Brivere’s hesitant gaze in embarrassment. He looked like he didn’t wish to risk saying anything further, lest he send her even deeper into the frenzy of her prolonged confinement.

“What did they want?” the fallen warrior asked calmly, trying her hardest not to seem like the raving lunatic that she felt like. “Why attack us?”

“It was the presence of the Hylian Champion, I believe,” Brivere proposed, his voice soft in the
consideration of his answer. As far as he knew, this was their only purpose, however that didn’t mean that he was unwilling to accept that there could’ve been other reasons which he wasn’t privy to. “Their intention and goal seemed to be his abduction, by any means necessary.”

“Tch,” the Zora woman scoffed, throwing up her hands and letting them plop against her thighs in irritation. Her father was a veteran of the battle that resulted from the Calamity, and her mother perished in that same fight. Throughout her life, her elders and mentors had spoken about the Hylian people with deep resentment, resentment which now reflected itself in her. “That seems typical. Foolish Hylians who don’t know what they’re doing, dropping all of their troubles on us and letting us clean up the mess all over again. Isn’t this the same kid who got Lady Mipha killed a hundred years ago?”

“Why is he here?” Kree asked, her tone sharpened with spite and genuine confusion. “Why hasn’t he moved on yet?”

She must have been one of the few who hadn’t caught onto what was going on between the Hylian Champion and the Zora Prince. Brivere doubted that she was oblivious to it, but knowing that she saw marriage as a social contract, a thread to be tied for the sake of status, she probably hadn’t considered that the bachelor with the most power behind his soul bond could actually choose a partner that he loved and desired.

Somehow, Brivere couldn’t help the rising concern he felt for his Prince, in knowing that even if the Hylian Champion made him happy, that happiness wouldn’t come without cost. Sidon’s entire generation had been nursed on the rage of their elders, and only those old enough to remember the kingdom of Hyrule and the Hyrulean people couldn’t be similarly jaded. But the younger ones, ones like Kree, they were different.

These were the people who would form the King’s Council, when Sidon took the throne. These were the people who would make his rule an even greater hell than the current, stubbornly old-fashioned elders.

“These are all very good questions,” Brivere mused. He didn’t begrudge the Hylian people as many did, but as far as the Hylian Champion was concerned, he was unconvinced. “I can’t presume to personally understand the complicated political troubles of a hundred years prior, however—”

“Oh, that’s right,” Kree hurriedly spoke up, cutting the golden Zora off without really realizing that she had. “You hadn’t even been hatched yet when the Calamity struck. You’re so serious all the time, I keep forgetting about how young you are. You’re too damn young to be Knight Captain of the Royal Order.”

“Hn,” the golden Zora grunted, unsure if the women had meant him offense in saying that. It wasn’t like she hadn’t expressed her vehement disapproval of him in the past and the insult she felt in being subordinate to someone of questionable parentage, a bastard son, as it were. “I doubt my age is a more severe insufficiency than.. aforementioned ones,” he commented, his tone flat in passive aggression that was completely intentional.

Surprisingly, Kree had no immediate, uncontrolled reply, and in that strange silence, Brivere stole a glance at her, finding her normally steely gaze turned aside, while the dimples of her cheeks were depressed from how she was fighting to keep a guilty frown from showing.

With a bitter sigh, Brivere shook his head, his long forefins swaying, then he rubbed at his tired eyes, muttering a word of apology that Kree perhaps wasn’t owed. Still, this was no time for petty behavior, as that would only make the news he intended to deliver that much worse. He didn’t need to make a big deal of the fact that this women surely hated him now as much as she did before. She’d
certainly never made an effort to pretend it was otherwise.

The awkward pause between them continued while Brivere debated whether or not to bring up something else to rekindle her formerly passionate longing for answers, or maybe to spit out the awful truth he was hoarding inside himself. Kree no doubt was still consumed by the tattered pride which she was so desperately holding onto, like it was the only thing she truly had left. Her notion of inborn propriety had her stubbornly biting her tongue, never admitting to any fault of her own.

Before either Brivere or Kree could say anything at all, a hapless Apostle strode through the curtained doorway, bowing apologetically as though he’d truly interrupted an important discussion, then he quietly delivered the charcoal colored Zora her breakfast rations. Kree immediately wrinkled the skin beneath her rounded brow in distaste, her pupils tightening in distress that even Brivere couldn’t invoke.

“I am so sick of these egg dumplings,” she moaned, a troubled ring tightening her throat to the point that she sounded very much like a prisoner, desperately longing for escape before every last remnant of her spirit was broken. “They are completely bland and the filling is dry and disgusting.”

“Oh, that’s..” Brivere mumbled, swallowing and praying that his wretchedly empty middle didn’t grumble aloud in pleading. “...unfortunate.”

“What kind of provisions have they been offering you?” the woman asked in a hollow, defeated tone, her cheek falling into one palm, while a single fingerscale upon her opposite hand idly flicked the plate back in disgust. “Anything good?”

The golden Zora averted his eyes from the sight of Kree’s breakfast for the fear that he could easily come to resemble an unfed dog, staring and sitting upright to beg. He wanted to pay proper heed to the fact that his fellow Knight was clearly trying to reestablish the conversation between them. She was, evidently, not so overly proud that she could point Brivere toward the door in the wake of his subtle complaints, and he wanted to believe that meant something.

“The usual things,” he lied. Maybe it wasn’t entirely false, though, because he had been granted fairly basic supplies, right up until he got them taken away.

“Do you want to help me eat these?” Kree offered, her words like a kind of spell that snapped the golden Zora’s eyes back in her direction. He hadn’t intended to react in such an eager way, but the gray Zora sitting nearby didn’t appear as though she’d taken his hurried glance to mean anything at all. If anything, she probably expected that he was as appalled as she was.

“No, thank you. I’m afraid I couldn’t,” Brivere stated plainly, shaking his head while he did. It certainly wasn’t proper for him to take her food, and in truth, he felt for one stubborn moment that he would rather go on bearing the awful sensation of his stomach consuming itself in its desperation, over letting someone see that he was in such dire need. “You’re still healing. You need your strength.”

“Don’t you have your guard shift soon?” Kree commented, thinking it was clear enough that with all that was going on, Brivere couldn’t have had time to properly sleep, so it was all the more important that he fed himself, at the very least. She promptly told herself that this wasn’t for his sake, but for the sake of the duty which she had not so long ago been a part of. Maybe in some small way, she could feel like she was still valiantly standing guard herself, glorious and powerful in the peak of her prime.

“You might as well help me get through these awful things,” she urged the golden Zora, forcefully picking up the plate that waited near her side and shoving it before her former Captain. “Suffer with me.”
If only she knew how deeply he was already suffering as his body cried out for sustenance while freshly prepared food that he’d tried so hard to deny himself was being thrust almost directly into his waiting hands.

“I suppose, if you insist,” he relented at last, not resolute enough to come up with any other answer that wasn’t an affirmative one.

Fighting to refuse had been a losing battle, in and of itself, yet now the Knight had another laid out before him—taking up Kree’s offer while continuing to stow away the part of him that was weak and starved and unacceptably keen for anything edible.

Brivere took one of the offered dumplings, cradling it in his palm and slowly took a bite. It was as dry and bland as Kree had proclaimed, but the tender, spongy texture sliced with pleasant ease beneath the sharp edges of the Knight’s teeth, and just the feeling of food in his mouth was so welcoming, he couldn’t be bothered with how it tasted. He swallowed quickly, involuntarily, like his body was urging him along, more apt to do whatever was necessary to survive, while he fought to conceal that he’d even been driven to such a state.

Upon his second or third bite, Brivere managed to acknowledge that, while it was bland, it had a taste that was pleasant enough, despite being subtle. He even entertained the notion that his sensitive brother might’ve been convinced to consume the outer layer. The springy, yellow flesh had a soft, savory taste, and was slightly oily from preparation, while the inside was dry and difficult to swallow. It was some sort of shaved meat that had been sugared and smoked, and was probably calory rich, which was important in such a time of scarcity.

The golden Zora had rarely been unsure of how effective his trained indifference was. He was masterful at hiding away his emotions, and yet he couldn’t shake the certainty that he must have looked utterly sheepish as he helped himself to another dumpling, all while Kree was still nibbling on the first. She was eyeing the thing as though it were a hated enemy, doing her best to alternate between the outer layer and the filling as clearly one part was easier for her to stomach than the other.

Once Brivere moved on to a third and fourth dumpling, one of which he planned to stash and later offer to his sibling, he decided that it was absolutely vital that he do something to distract the gray Zora from how happily he was consuming her apparently disgusting food.

“What are these?” he quietly asked, fingering through a nearby pile of mysterious, folded papers which appeared to be some sort of written correspondence, then he lifted one into his grasp for further inspection.

“Hey!” she hissed, leaning forward in her chair with such passionate haste that she nearly threw herself to the floor by accident. You would have thought that she was an adolescent snatching her diary out of the hands of a prying sibling, and Brivere visibly recoiled at her reaction, though he sat a bit forward in his own seat out of sudden concern.

With the retrieved parchment in hand, Kree breathed a bitter, discontented sigh while she unfolded the thing, her eyes skimming the words in shame, in sorrow. “They’re marriage proposals,” she confessed, the words an aching admission, and her face wrinkled like they left a bad taste on her tongue. She’d always known that she would most likely be tied into a marriage of convenience, but she hadn’t thought it would feel like such a defeat, a surrender, a last resort.

“This is the best thing I can hope for, now,” she dolefully stated, folding the letter and placing it back with the rest of the collection, then she pressed her face into one palm, suddenly even less capable of stomaching her breakfast than before. “...to marry myself off and produce heirs in the hopes of preserving some of my families’ dignity. My dignity.”
“I recall that you offered yourself as a suitor to Prince Sidon,” Brivere recounted in a careful tone, though he’d found the entire thing to be rather amusing when it had occurred. People were always throwing themselves at Sidon, vying for his favor while he did everything he could to maintain appearances. Seeing a typically brave warrior do it so bluntly, and in such clear embarrassment; it had a sort of charm.

“Yes, back when I actually seemed a prize,” the fallen warrior lamented, still as angry and resentful as she was sad, though this time she didn’t volley her volatile emotions at the golden Zora. “…back when I actually had things to offer. All I have now is my youth, though I’m not sure how worthwhile it is, attached to my incomplete body.”

Brivere could plainly see Kree’s despair, but he refrained from any further comment on her situation than what he’d already previously offered. She’d only ever seen his lectures as patronizing and lacking in true understanding, anyway, so he’d accepted that it did little good. He took another bite from the dumpling that he told himself would be his last, chewing slower now and trying to savor it like it was, indeed, his final meal. He did this quietly, somberly, all while attempting to push away some dark thoughts, which had emerged in response to the reminder of Kree’s accident.

He hated the idea that he was suddenly grateful that she’d been injured in battle, because prior to now, her absence in his hand-selected team of Knights was a devastating blow.

But Kree was alive, and her life was a gift, even if she felt that she no longer held any worth. Because of the horrible accident which had stolen her mobility, her life was still intact. If not for that fateful occurrence, she’d be among those armored souls, slain upon Prince Sidon’s stairs. That was an image that Brivere forcefully chased from his mind, as it instantly twisted his gut, threatening to cast upward even the tiny amount of food he’d consumed.

“Have you had any success, then?” the golden Zora breathed at last, gesturing to Kree’s pile of proposals when she raised her head, turning a look of misunderstanding to him.

“No,” she chuckled bitterly, the insult in that one word enough to burn a hole through her tongue when she uttered it. “This is the third batch so far. I’ve had to aim lower and lower, because nobody even wants me.”

“I see,” Brivere replied, unsure what he should say, what he could say.

“So,” Kree swatted one hand at the man in her midst, not wanting anymore of his poor attempts at pity. She reached for one of her dwindling dumplings, nibbling at it’s spongy flesh and chewing before she continued. “Tell me what it looks like topside. Was it a tough struggle? Were there a lot of losses?”

The gray Zora’s eyes were sorrowful and searching while she stared across the empty space between herself and her visitor. In her heart, she was still a warrior, and she longed to feel the rush of battle again. Her body cried to take up her weapon once more, to fight for the protection of her home, to know that she was strong and worthwhile and needed. But all she had to cling to were the curt explanations Brivere offered and what little imagination she’d grappled onto, rendering her capable of living vicariously through anything he told her.

But just as Kree’s spirit made some meaningless attempt to seek rejuvenation, the golden Zora turned his gaze away in silence, his emotionless expression somehow shadowed and heavy, but giving nothing at all away. She clawed at her own thighs in frustration at that, trying to push verbally. “It’s been busy down here, so I can see that a lot of our people were injured, but.. you know, I’m cut off from everything, so I’m left to guess at things on my own. I just hate it, not knowing anything at all.”
“You haven’t heard from your father yet?” Brivere asked, an edge of spite to his tone from a source somewhere deep inside that even he couldn’t identify. He wasn’t sure if it was the piteous fact that Kree’s father had turned his back, unable to digest the reality that his daughter had been ‘crippled’, and thereby left her to rot without care or support, or if he was holding onto a petty grudge, all because Kree’s father now held the position that Brivere’s own, dead father once had.

“Of course not,” Kree snapped, rightly pissed that even her own parent had openly rejected her now that she was worthless. “He’s probably too busy kissing King Dorephan’s ass. What else is new? Come on, Brivere,” she hissed in desperation, the gray of her knuckles turning pale while she began clutching at the edge of her chair again. “What is really going on? You’re being even more of a bore than usual. What does that mean?”

“Kree,” the Knight uttered, the sound a mournful, hesitant, pained thing that ached while it vibrated in his chest, “..the team is gone.”

“..what?” the woman softly breathed in reply, her voice barely a coo, every inch of her understanding with cruel certainty exactly what Brivere was saying, even in so few words, but there was not one inch of her that did not immediately push those words away, denying them. She began to slowly shake her head, hardly able to breathe, much less speak, and her voice came out from behind bared fangs.

“What do you mean, ‘the team is gone?’” she growled, her golden eyes gleaming from beneath her dark, narrowed lids, her chest softly heaving while she fought to push air inside herself. “What happened? A lot of them are injured, out of commission, they need time off? What do you mean?”

“They’re dead,” Brivere stated, not wanting to feel those awful words on his own tongue, but not wanting to hold back to someone he believed was owed the truth.

“No. That can’t be right,” Kree muttered, leaning to one side like the world had begun to spin, her heavy gaze glassed with tears, refusing to look up and see Brivere before her. She couldn’t conceive of this, she couldn’t. Every one of the Knights who’d served as the Zora Prince’s protectors were abundant in strength and skill. Kree knew, because she had trained by their side, she had sharpened her own edges on their rough surfaces, she had let them mold her with feverish practice, sculpting them in turn, improving them in turn. They had grown side by side, they had dreamt of bright futures, of glory, they had supported one another through difficulties and sang together in times of triumph.

She couldn’t take this, couldn’t endure it, couldn’t process it. She had already lost her beautiful Strata, her most precious friend, and now this? Her allies, her siblings of combat, the ties she’d forged and cherished.. Gone.

She’d been building up the courage to contact them, to let them know about her condition and that she would never be rejoining them.. and even that had felt insurmountable and painful. The warriors she respected and loved, looking on the broken shell that was left of her; that was something she had believed her heart could scarcely bear. But now? They were gone and she had lost any chance at even seeing them one, final time.

No.

“You’re exaggerating,” Kree spat in tremulous sorrow, control of her gasping breaths further escaping, control of her tears long, long gone. “You must be..”

“I only wish that were so,” the golden Zora said plainly, his own sound a stark calm by comparison. He embodied deep, dark water, so still, so cold, housing all of the broken parts of himself somewhere
far from sight. His own grief held no physical form, no words to describe it, just a painful still, a
hollow echo and emptiness.

He’d selected each Knight to serve beneath him with meticulous attention to detail, with careful,
analytical measuring. He’d fought each one, he’d felt their heartbeats through their skills, he’d felt
their spirits through combat. He’d made that careful connection to every, single one of them, and
he’d believed in them with pure certainty, sure that his efforts to make the right choices in turn gave
them the best chance at success, at survival.

He had never thought he’d see the day that they were all so swiftly ended, like nothing.

“How?” the woman begged, accused, denied, all with one word. “How can they all be dead?”

Brivere didn’t possess the emotional or verbal capacity to tackle something as loaded as the concept
of, ‘how can this be?’ At least not when he was equally wounded, and too guilt-stricken to process
such things, either. If somebody had just told him this news, he wouldn’t believe it, he wouldn’t want
to accept that life and reality could be so cruel, that warriors, people that he’d put so much of his faith
in were.. gone

He settled, instead, for an explanation of what occurred, and how. It was all he had to offer.

“The enemies who attacked us attempted to use Prince Sidon as a hostage,” he began, his eyes
staring blindly into nothing while he recounted the event. “They launched an assault on his tower in
order to take him captive and because he is still under the effects of a Spirit Potion, I had the entire
team stationed there, guarding him. The team fell against the unexpected attack.”

“Is that what you wrote into your report?” Kree hissed in anger, in resentment, her wet eyes shining
like furious embers that sought to leave Brivere with worse burns than he’d ever get from the funeral
pyre of those fallen Knights. The golden Knight raised his own eyes to meet hers in his confusion,
and he was certain that he really could feel the sting of her mournful fury. “How can you just say
that, so damn clinically? All of these young Knights, my friends, fell in the line of duty, yet you
describe this awful tragedy with such concise words? Like a footnote?”

“I’m only trying to explain-” the Zora man uttered, steady and gentle while everything in him
trembled in guilt, in shame, in deep, deep loss.

“Do you feel anything, Brivere? Do you feel anything at all?” Kree hissed, her own pain not enough,
yet far too much, her grief seeking blame, seeking retribution. Brivere’s steely calm was insufficient,
it was unacceptable, it added insult to this, the gravest of injuries. The gray Zora shoved the
dumpling still lingering in one hand into her mouth, her teeth gnashing at it in fury, her lips wet and
trembling as she sniffled and chewed. She swallowed, then went on with newly prepared words, like
she’d needed but that one moment to sharpen them up. “You don’t even bother to say their names
when you tell me that they died. To you, they just made up an expendable entity, they weren’t even
people.”

For a moment, Brivere could hear the awful clash of painful contradictions warring in his mind,
spurred by Kree’s insults. His head dipped low in shame, because he couldn’t deny these accusations
and what place did he have trying?

He could still hear the determined authority of Prince Sidon’s voice, of his friend giving him the
order to guard the Hylian Champion with his life. He had wanted to believe that something like that,
his life, was something that his beloved friend cherished, something that he would never ask Brivere
to surrender lightly.
How was it that a man who was his friend also felt no guilt in ordering Brivere to serve that grim purpose, his tool, his sword, his shield, and if necessary, his sacrifice.

It hurt, yes. The words penetrated him, bled him, leaving him hollow and betrayed. It was all the worse because he had always given Sidon his all, his everything, his life and limb without need of those words. Casting off his life for his Prince’s protection and necessity was implied in every detail of his duty, so those words needed not even be uttered to hold true, yet still Sidon had said them, he’d reiterated with sharp, strict cruelty.

Brivere answered that call without question, his loyalty the only part of himself that he could show, without a doubt, to be pure. He’d resigned himself to the concept of his life and his skills being used to shelter somebody more important than himself a long time ago, when he became a Knight. He’d accepted that.

He would have expected that others had accepted it too, that yes, being a Knight could mean dying for the sake of that duty.

Where was that line meant to be drawn? Where was the line between duty and heart?

..maybe there was no line and he was just overthinking things, as always. And maybe Prince Sidon felt no pain in issuing such a command to the golden Zora because.. they weren’t friends any longer. His existence wasn’t something that his Prince needed to think twice about sacrificing.

Clearing his thoughts and taking a breath, Brivere spoke up again, doubtful that anything he could say would make any difference. “I wasn’t close to them in the same way that you were,” he stated carefully, slow and thoughtful with each word. “But I assure you, they weren’t footnotes to me. Their deaths were unexpected and tragic. Their loss, each of them, is disheartening.”

“But,” he continued, prepared to willingly excuse the terrible things that Kree seemingly never failed to say about him, to him, though it hurt, all the same. “I’ve had a little time to process the news and I realize, of course, that you haven’t.. So I’ll leave you to it.”

Bowing his head in one last show of thanks, Brivere stood from where he was seated, and excused himself, just as promised.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Estuu had never much considered the Undercity people to be anything like himself, yet in his world of silence, there was plenty of room for ideas to change. That was especially true when a young Undercity girl came to join him on his mission to spearfish, a mission he was destined to perform poorly at. Yet while Estuu was forging a new bond between himself and an Undercity Zora, a certain Undercity Sergeant was woefully breaking the bond she had formed between herself and a young, noble warrior under her command.

The Champion, meanwhile, sought the aid of an old friend to assist with the dilemma of his forgotten fighting techniques. The Guard Captain’s ultimate suggestion, however, was for Link to make a new friend out of an old enemy.

The Basilica used to be calm, a place of reverence, of tranquility and dutiful study. Estuu had never been a particular fan of the cool air, ever untouched by sunlight, nor the hazy, blue glow, which always made the winding corridors dim and night-like. Worst of all, though, was how sound relentlessly echoed and the only saving grace was that the Apostles were typically very quiet people.

In the night, though, the chambers had been lined with refuge-seeking civilians and Undercity Zoras in some kind of raving hubbub that Estuu didn’t quite understand. He could see, plainly, that his home was a troubled place, and he was lost as to why that was, not because of the naivety of youth, as that had long left him, but moreso because information was difficult to come by when one lacked the capability of expressing curiosity or asking questions.

Nobody ever bothered to tell him what was going on. At most, Brivere would make passing comments about the state of Zora’s Domain, and maybe Estuu had damned himself by being so commonly disinterested, preferring to immerse himself into the fantasy worlds which kept his active mind occupied when the truth outside was too troubling to bear.

The pale scarlet boy comprehended that many of his people had taken shelter in the Basilica, all thanks to some kind of attack. His older brother had explained somewhat vaguely the night before, as he tended to do, before attempting to return to the surface to fight, despite injury and exhaustion. For a short time, the younger Zora was able to disallow it, insisting in any way he could that Brivere stay behind, if only for Estuu to attempt healing.

There had yet to be a single point in time after the young noble’s terrible injury that he wasn’t too overwhelmed to even attempt to produce his magic. ‘Overwhelmed’ didn’t actually begin to describe his awful circumstances, but it was the closest, single word he could find to feeling lately as though his entire self was made up of an armful of disjointed pieces that he was constantly being forced to carry about, trying desperately not to drop too many.

It wasn’t easy, but it never had been. Even so, Brivere had always urged Estuu to hone his inborn skill, utterly ignorant to how awful it felt for him to use it at all. Yet now that it actually mattered, Brivere asked nothing at all of his sibling, and it was Estuu who began to insist of his own accord.

The boy couldn’t understand it. Upon the previous evening, his elder sibling had aided in their
valiant fight to retreat to the safety of the Basilica, but hadn’t come out of it unscathed. When Brivere wasn’t paying any attention, Estuu took stock of every injury, from his scuffed fingers and knuckles, to his bruises and cuts, and worst of all, a deep gash upon the golden Zora’s hip which wept blood with Brivere’s every movement. Yet he wanted to continue fighting?

Estuu couldn’t see why Brivere wanted to risk himself in order to protect people who had never cared about him. However, since there was little that Estuu could do to sway his brother, he settled for fighting himself to force out his halved healing ability. For Brivere, Estuu could force himself. When he had the will, he could push. Nothing good ever came of it, but if he had to choose between his own discomfort and his brother’s health? He’d push. He’d heave himself to his own dangerous ledge, the teetering point where everything was more than the young Zora’s senses could endure, then he’d willingly cast himself off if that was what it took to keep Brivere safe.

Sure, maybe he was smothering and preachy at times, and honestly kind of a bore, but he was Estuu’s only family. He was the only person who cared and who Estuu cared about in turn. That was important, important enough for Estuu to persist.

Once the slow healing process was done, though, Brivere saw the young Zora to a quiet place to rest, then left him behind to rejoin the fray. Estuu tried very hard to sleep through the chaos of the early morning and he probably wouldn’t have been able to rest at all, if not for how lacking he was in strength or energy of any kind.

When he awakened a scarce few hours later, it was to the sounds of shrieking voices and the gnawing pain in his middle. He whined quietly to himself and curled into a tight ball with his only hand tucked beneath one forefin, pressed tightly overtop of his earhole. That was the only way for him to maintain even a shred of stability, until at last Brivere returned to offer a small portion food.

The young Zora could hardly even force down the morsel for the sake of quieting the pain in his stomach because his senses were beyond a state of being on edge, and even worse, though Estuu could handle the spongy, eggy flesh of the dumpling, his gut had apparently turned sensitive in the absence of sustenance. Within the first few bites, the boy’s stomach cramped and the pungent, smoky stink of the dumpling’s center became far too much for him to continue holding so close to his nose and Brivere ate whatever Estuu would not.

“I believe that our enemy has retreated for now. It’s safe to return to the surface, if you’d like,” Brivere told his younger sibling, his voice tired and softened for Estuu’s sake. “Just be mindful and return to the Basilica if there’s any sign of danger.”

Estuu could tell from Brivere’s words that he had to go again, probably to see to some other kind of Knightly duty. He wished that for just a day, his brother wasn’t always so busy. Sure, the scarlet Zora wasn’t the type to enjoy company at all hours, but he had to admit, even his books were failing to fill in the lonely gaps left by the fact that Brivere was hardly around.

As ever, there was nothing he could do. He tried to rest further after Brivere went, but the noise disallowed him any peace. Why didn’t the rest of the civilians return to the surface, too, if it was safe?

Before long, Estuu resolved to merely return to the ruins of his home. There was naught but destruction there and now it was the scene of yet another awful trauma, but at least it was quiet.

Gathering his things, the young Zora set off down the winding halls, his eyes mostly downcast to avoid meeting the glances of the numerous others, especially the heightened city guard presence. They were scouting the twisted corridors, their shining armor threateningly clinking and clanking. It made it all the worse that Brivere was often adorned in a similar manner, because as it was now, that
sound brought on a disquieted feeling, more like blaring alarm bells than the presence of so-called protectors. What were they even protecting in a place that was meant to provide the ultimate safety to the Zora people?

The answer became quite clear as the boy went on, skulking in the hopes of escaping all notice. It was the Undercity people who were the source of all the commotion. Whereas they had been lined endlessly down the halls before, now they were piled on top of one another within one of the grand chambers, and it was being guarded at every entrance, making it evident that leaving was not to be permitted. Many of the apparently imprisoned Undercity residents were hollering in discontentment, screaming for mercy as they were already starved beyond the point of cruelty, and the cries of, ‘Please, we didn’t do anything wrong!’ were all that met Estuu’s ears while he freely passed by.

He kept his head down until he was out of sight, resisting the urge to walk any faster, while his mind simmered his lingering questions in a bitter stew, like he could pickle the wanderings of his thoughts. Why were the Undercity people treated like this? Had they, in fact, done something wrong, despite their cries? Estuu knew that the people from the Undercity were ‘different’ and that because of that, the rest of the Zora people considered them to be inherently worth less.

They’d believed something similar of him as well, until it was revealed that he possessed a rare, useful talent; now he was only worthwhile so long as he was using his magic for their benefit. And these Undercity people, likewise, were only tolerated when they submitted, performing their intended purposes, fishing, hunting, mining, menial labor, without fuss or complaint.

So it seemed there couldn’t have possibly been an excuse for the guardsmen to treat these people so poorly. They’d had no reason to treat him poorly, either, but they did it anyway. They did it just because they could. Maybe this was yet another unnecessary exertion of their force as well? He understood well enough now to resent that.

And in the people of the Undercity, suddenly, Estuu saw something he could relate to.

There were plenty of Undercity people who still needed to have the Water Blight vanquished from their systems and even more dying from it. Estuu’s previously stifled magic was, thankfully, still intact, but.. he was so hungry, he didn’t have the strength or fortitude to push, to question, to fight, to help, to do anything. He only had enough of a will left for selfish, self-preservation.

Rounding a corner on his way out, Estuu stopped, stamping one tiny foot in a way that created a patter that echoed up and down the halls. His golden eyes were lackluster in shine and dull of expression, but as he looked down on his one and only hand, focusing on the pale pink hue of his palm, determination bloomed within the ever silent depths of him.

With renewed purpose, but the same, casual pace, Estuu stole into the armory where the Goddess Knights kept all of their armor and weapons tucked away. Quickly and quietly, he looked over the collection of spears, hung neatly upon a wrack that nearly spanned the length of the room itself, then he picked out a lightweight, barbed spear, which was intended more for fishing than combat.

Just as easily, the young Zora made his way out of the armory, despite the presence of Goddess Knights keeping watch. They were probably inexperienced recruits, and they weren’t clad in armor of any kind. Estuu couldn’t discern if that was because this was light duty, or if it was because they hadn’t earned the right to wear such things yet. Nevertheless, their red shawls made them stick out, and it was easy enough for the young Zora to scamper past while their backs were turned.

One could get into all sorts of mischief by merely looking as though you belong wherever you go. Maybe the boy didn’t quite realize it, but his naturally unemotional appearance often rendered him less visibly suspicious.
With an appropriate spear in hand, Estuu pattered cautiously down one of the winding upper hallways, intentionally going in a direction where he was less likely to run into anybody. He did such things on an everyday basis in order to minimize unwanted social contact, so by now he was an expert. Easily enough, the young boy was met with success, marching directly into one of the numerous blooming bells which opened up to the water outside, and he dove into the darkness of the depths, sure it would cloak the final half of his escape.

The Basilica was far beneath the surface, and even beneath the area of Zora’s Domain considered to be the Undercity. It was pitch black, save for the luminosity of the Basilica, itself, and carved deeply into a cavern which had only a single, narrow entrance before one swam up, up into the Undercity trench.

The trench was a world of dancing, blue light, teeming with both aquatic plants and animals. The support pillars of the Uppercity stretched endlessly downward, chased by spiral stone, which was carved to look as lightweight as drifting ribbons. Attached to the sculpted marvel, there were large, stone bells here and there, where air was trapped, and the Undercity people often used these areas like unofficial marketplaces. There were also more official businesses tucked into caves, though most of those were owned by Uppercity Zoras who found awful ways to profit off of the most vulnerable population. One such business was Zambezi’s Cantina and Estuu chewed at the inside of his cheek just thinking about it.

After locating a spot where the light was to his liking and the fish were plentiful, Estuu brandished his barbed spear with intent. It was quite the task for him to find a balanced way to hold onto a tool meant to be wielded with two hands, and in truth, he’d always been a bit on the clumsy side when it came to tasks which required a lot of dexterity. He might have never become skilled with a bow if not for the fact that he simply enjoyed hunting. The quiet solitude of the task, out in the tranquility of nature, the methodical stalking required, and finally the joy of success; it had all been gratifying enough for the boy to persist until he’d become measurably skillful. Even the movement required to use a bow was simple and patterned, so Estuu found it easy enough once his hands gained the proper muscle memory for the task.

However, that single, most important skill and calming, coping activity had been violently stolen from the young Zora, and so here he was, trying to tell himself that using a spear wouldn’t be too much more difficult and that underwater spear fishing was certain to be as relaxing as bow hunting. Hell, that hardly even mattered, so long as he was able to actually kill a fish and feed himself.

Swimming in a flat, stalking position, Estuu slowly approached a shoal of lively chillfin trout. They enjoyed the cool temperatures of deep, Zora waters, and they even appeared so healthy, you wouldn’t even guess that they were most likely carrying the Water Blight.

With a burst of speed, the scarlet boy set off after his prey, the spear wobbling in his grasp from his pace, and how the water whipped at him as he swam. He paddled rather gracelessly through the group of fish, and they split apart as he shot through them, every one of them avoiding the sharp shine of his weapon, which turned a bit sideways while Estuu attempted his best single-handed thrust.

Sure, the fish were most likely corrupted by the Water blight, but an interesting notion had occurred to Estuu in the wake of his returned magic. If he could purify peoples’ bodies of the wretched poison, then surely he could do the same with prey? Perhaps with greater ease. However, all the rare magic in the world would do him no good, if he couldn’t, at least, capture one of the nimble creatures.

Estuu chased off after the halved group of trout, then an even smaller cluster of them once they split
apart again, until at last he was looping in wide circles after one particular fish and making desperate stabs, all which missed rather embarrassingly.

The only positive thing he could think of, amidst all of his flailing, was that at least the Undercity was much more vacant than usual. He also figured that it wasn’t something to be glad about, considering the reason for the absence of the once booming population.

The boy took a few moments to rest once his prey escaped him at last, rejoining its school while it swam away. His body was so heavy that it could sink into the depths, and even something as effortless as paddling about was beginning to feel wrong in his unfed exhaustion. Still, he didn’t give up yet. Not only was he beyond famished, but he simply couldn’t contend with the loss of self-worth that would come from being a Zora who couldn’t even catch fish.

No, he couldn’t let one failure get to him. Nobody ever did anything right the first time. He just needed to perfect his technique a bit. The scarlet Zora blew a few tiny bubbles in uncertainty, his golden gaze drifting downward to look at how terribly he was holding the spear, then he shook his head, deciding it was better not to think about that.

Slowly, Estuu began paddling toward the shoal once more, stalking them like the underwater predator that he was. His eyes darted here and there, keenly observing the mesmerizing flicker of the schools’ movement. This might’ve actually been more calming, if not for the immense pressure to catch one. When Estuu was sure of the groups’ movement and had oriented himself in a way that felt best for darting after his prey, he sharply circled the school, cutting them off from their escape path while taking several stabs at the shimmering, frantic fish, once again producing disappointing results.

Maybe it was because he was so hungry, or perhaps it was the fact that Estuu was normally driven to frustration with relative ease, but whatever the cause, while he pursuing his slippery quarry, all too aware of how clumsy a job he was doing, the hopelessness of it all at last set in, and he threw the spear away, casting it off like the useless piece of garbage that it was and allowing it to sink into the darkness. However, in tossing it aside he found himself suddenly much lighter and more maneuverable, and his speedy kicks brought him much more close to snagging one of the fish than before.

The boy didn’t even know how he intended to ensnare a trout now that his weapon was gone, but just his ability to get close to them spurred something inside of him, something instinctual, and he stuck to the pursuit, driven blindly by his urge to succeed. He could almost feel the pattern of their dodges while he gave chase, he could perhaps even sense the electrical energy that surrounded them, and it gave him a sharper indication of where they would go. He zipped after the shoal, flitting his fins for all he was worth, then finally he lunged for the finest looking fish within his reach, mouth open, fangs gleaming.

Estuu snapped his tiny mouth shut upon the prey he’d relentlessly pursued, his sharp teeth clamping down and puncturing its flesh, holding it tightly while it flailed for its life. The fish smacked him in the cheek a bit harshly with its tail, and he clenched one of his eyes shut to avoid its violent wriggling. The boy tightened his hold on his capture, as if in rebuke for the slapping, though just as quickly he reached up with his one hand, digging the sharp points of his fingerscales into his quarry’s gill slits in order to get a strong grip on it and spit it out of his mouth.

Immediately, the young Zora’s tongue poked between his lips, and his forefins danced about while he shook his head, desperately sputtering in order to evacuate his mouth of the nasty, slimy flavor which stuck against his teeth. This was probably one of the most disgusting things he’d ever done, and he could hardly believe he’d been reduced to this.

While Estuu was busy spitting and trying to rub his mouth against one shoulder in utter disgust, an
unexpected presence drifted slowly upward from the dark depths below. The small form floating just outside of Estuu’s peripheral moved like an underwater plant softly flowing with the gentle currents, but a tiny shimmer at last caught the young Zora’s attention.

The scarlet boy snapped his head to the side when he noticed that he wasn’t alone, and the jewels which hung at the ends of his forefins shined in the wriggling columns of light pouring in from above. Estuu blinked in surprise, setting his gaze upon a rather sheepish-looking Undercity girl, who he would guess was similar in age to himself, though she was a bit more mealy in size. He hurriedly averted his gaze from the girl, but of course the purpose of her approach hadn’t escaped his notice. Her own small hands had a secure hold on the spear which he’d discarded, and her feet were softly paddling to bring her nearer in offering.

Apparently, she’d dove after the spear with the intention of returning it, and now that she’d located the owner, she swam up to him, holding the shining weapon out for him to take it back. Estuu turned aside in refusal, doing whatever he could to avoid making eye contact with her. It didn’t at all occur to him that she could have mistaken his rejection for discrimination, but then again, she was also probably used to that.

Determined, the girl swam around in front of the scarlet boy, adamantly shoving the shaft of the spear in his direction, but he let out an irritated squawk, paddling back from her. What was with this girl? Estuu didn’t need the spear any longer, not that he’d gotten any good use out of it anyway. And could she also not plainly see that he had no way to take it from her? His one and only hand was already occupied and he’d surely embarrassed himself enough for one day without attempting to grab the weapon with his webbed toes, or worst, his mouth.

No, he’d grabbed enough in his mouth as it was, and he was still lapping at his teeth and spitting fish slime for it.

Again, Estuu turned his head in order to desperately rub his mouth against the scales of his shoulder, likely making it even more clear that he only had a stump in place of where an arm once resided. At this point, he was more bothered by the slimy residue clinging to his face than he was self-conscious about himself, though that was also something of a consideration. He also kinda wished that strange girl would go away, but instead she drifted there near motionless in curiosity, watching him and either wondering why he wouldn’t take back the nice thing he’d dropped, or perhaps finally seeing why he couldn’t.

Then, against all expectations, the Undercity girl let out an unabashed laugh. The sound of it was silvery and soft, echoing in the underwater surroundings, and it produced a stream of bubbles, which shot up toward the surface. With a whine, Estuu paddled back from her again, blowing a small puff of bubbles in rebuke for the girl’s laughter. He didn’t know exactly what it was that she was laughing about, but he wasn’t enjoying being the butt of the joke.

Her giggles quieted easily enough and she soon began to move on to the funny ordeal that was underwater communication. Down here, it wasn’t really possible to talk, so the copper-scaled girl didn’t even bother trying that. Estuu had to admit, it was kind of nice to have somebody else be on the same level as him, in terms of how they went about expressing their own thoughts and ideas. Plus, it was also less noisy.

Pointing, the girl gestured to the still-flapping fish in the other Zora’s grasp, which Estuu had gone to disgusting lengths to acquire, then she motioned to the spear in her hand, patting it. Her speckled topfin flared excitedly while her tail waggled almost as exuberantly as the fish’s; Estuu still had no clue what she was attempting to say. He did nothing in reply, save for keeping his eyes focused on the glint of the barbed spear while he blinked in profound curiosity.
Then, the odd girl decidedly gave up on communication, turning away and flitting her fins as she swam off. The scarlet Zora was left to assume that she’d lost interest in him, or that maybe she just wanted to keep the spear all along? She had been trying to ask if he still wanted it, perhaps?

Before the young girl was out of sight, though, she paddled in a measured circle, and Estuu quickly recognized that she had the spear held properly between her hands for the sake of fishing with it. Her grip was relaxed and flexible, her hands spaced apart on the shaft of the weapon. She set her sights on the same school of fish that Estuu had been antagonizing, swimming with her body straight and her fins flattened, all to make her seem smaller and less threatening.

In keen interest, Estuu gave his feet a few gentle kicks in order to follow after the Undercity girl, maintaining a slight distance so to avoid inadvertently sabotaging what was looking to be a hunt. It was difficult not to be enchanted by how rapidly her behavior shifted, from unassuming to focused. She was patient, calculating, exactly as you might imagine some beast in the night to be, lurking out of sight.

With the sharp beat of her webbed feet, the small girl set off after the school, flashing her fins open to spook them in the direction she desired, then turned and darted around them with nimble grace. She tightened the school into a silvery bundle with persistent precision, molding them and bending them to her will so that in trying to escape her, they only grew closer and closer to their ultimate capture.

When the cluster of trout was tightened sufficiently, the Undercity girl gave a burst of speed, her body a flash of copper scales, her fins tightening against her frame to reduce all drag while she thrust the spear through the gathered shoal, impaling not just one but three in one attempt.

Estuu’s lips loosened, his mouth falling open in astonishment. Okay, no, it wasn’t that impressive considering that Zoras were tailored to be apex predators in the water, but the scarlet boy could hardly believe how grievously this Undercity kid had just outdone him, how naturally she performed an action that he’d been struggling with. Maybe that really shouldn’t have been surprising, either.

Her level of skill was remarkable, admirable; he’d have to concede to that, regardless of the fact that it made perfect sense.

With her haul still flailing at the end of her spear, the copper Zora tilted her head back in Estuu’s direction, sending a proud grin his way that set him to flailing at the end of her spear, too. Metaphorically speaking, of course. She called out, producing a sharp note that carried through the water and grabbed the young noble’s attention, then once she knew she had it, she waved her hand in a gesture meant to encourage him to follow.

The girl bolted off, glancing over her shoulder to make certain that the unsuspecting noble was giving chase, then she picked up the pace, finding some sense of coy amusement in this random game of tag. Estuu merely assumed that she was actually trying to get away, though he couldn’t puzzle out any real reason for her to do so.

He wished he could have told her that he wasn’t in his most energetic physical state, but he was also busy questioning how she was. Luckily, they weren’t darting about for very long before the girl slowed at the mouth of one of the numerous Undercity caverns, which had been bored deep into the stone over many hundreds of years, like an underwater honeycomb. This particular one was shaded, overgrown with water wisteria which nearly concealed the path ahead as the young girl ducked inside.

Normally, Estuu enjoyed exploring mysterious caves and hidden areas which were out of sight. He had quite a habit of skipping his tutoring sessions to venture out into the forests which surrounded his home. Still, the scarlet boy warily followed, considering for the quickest of instants that Undercity
people were often referred to as uncivilized and needlessly violent. Those thoughts had him wondering if this other young Zora had some sort of plan to trick him, or hurt him in some way.

Luckily, the boy wasn’t the type to listen to any inherent sense of danger, much to his anxious sibling’s disdain, so he followed through the blackened tunnel without anymore hesitation than that.

The tiny cave stretched inward, then angled sharply up, forming a much larger pool that opened to modest air-filled cavern, which was very obviously a home. Estuu shyly bobbed in the water, peeping about in the low light of the faintly twinkling luminous stone that speckled the otherwise gray ceiling, dimly lighting the cavern. As with most Zora homes, the basis for all furniture was sculpted from the stone of the cave, itself, though in the case of this place, the craftsmanship was sloppy, and the stone was much poorer quality than the pure blue which formed the Uppercity.

In grand contrast to Estuu’s careful entrance, the Undercity girl hopped out in bubbling excitement, pattering immediately over to another Zora, who Estuu was assuming was her family, especially given that they had similarly colored scales.

“I made a new friend, look,” the young girl squeaked, tapping the spear she had in hand against the uneven stone of the floor.

“Neydri!” hissed the other woman upon the girl’s return, her posture tense as though her nerves were tightly bundled. “Where have you been? The City Guard has been out taking people and locking them up in the temple ever since what happened last night, and you’re off playing like nothing happened? What is wrong with you?”

The young noble quietly bubbled in the pool, feeling strangely anxious over the fact that he was witnessing this exchange, yet he was also too intrigued to flee. The girl he’d followed shrank a bit under her elder’s chastising, and the Undercity woman soon relented, breathing a sigh and turning her deep, golden gaze over in Estuu’s direction.

“You new friend seems shy,” she muttered in a newly calm way, though from the thin sound of her voice, it seemed more like she was too tired and hungry to maintain her own anger. Her frame appeared to be much more weathered and frail than the younger girl’s, her muscles tight underneath papery skin, her gill slits unable to properly close from how gaunt she’d become. One of her battered hands waved at Estuu, beckoning him gently enough while she said, “Come on, then.”

Still utterly unaware of his actual purpose for this unplanned visit to a total stranger’s abode, Estuu obeyed when he was called, dragging himself up at the edge of the pool, water streaming off of his small frame and puddling at his feet as he came to shyly stand in sight.

“No, this child is an Uppercity Zora,” the pale copper woman hissed in alarm that was only muted by her own dwindling strength. Very rapidly, her beckoning turned to swatting, her hand flicking in a shooing motion that one might’ve used to dissuade a pesky insect from buzzing around one’s head.

“You need to go home,” she said, taking a step back like she expected immediate, violent repercussions, pointing at the pool which Estuu had entered from. “Go home before your parents find out where you are.”

“Neydri!” The woman frantically turned to the smaller girl again, getting an immediate whine of exasperation from the child. “What were you thinking, messing with some Uppercity kid? Why are you so reckless?”

“But, but Zala,” the small, copper Zora groaned, holding her spear now in a floppy, half-hearted way that belied her skill with it, “he was trying to fish and doing a really bad job. You should have seen
Neydri’s tone shifted from whining to chuckling with little more than the reflection of Estuu’s embarrassingly poor fishing skills and the scarlet boy let out a quiet huff of shame while he clutched his hard-won quarry closer to his chest, his head lowering so that his gaze was focused upon the white of his webbed toes. He probably should have turned and left, because he was clearly unwanted, save for as something to be mocked.

“Give that kid his spear back so he can leave,” the older Zora woman snapped, flicking her hand at the younger girl. Estuu lifted his eyes to peer over at them both while they weren’t focused on him. They didn’t appear to have a drastic difference in age, in fact, the elder of the two wasn’t even fully grown. Then again, the boy supposed he could’ve misjudged, given that Undercities were generally smaller.

“But Zala, don’t you recognize him?” the younger girl stated like her elder had made some horrid mistake. Estuu perked at her words, though, because he was also quite curious as to how Neydri apparently recognized him.

“This is the same boy who healed me when I had the Water Blight,” Neydri said with a nod of certainty and tiny grin, though the young noble was certain that he didn’t recognize her at all. Given that he rarely looked at peoples’ faces for very long, it was a problem he often had. Insistently, the Undercity girl added, “He saved my life, I couldn’t just not help him.”

“Hn,” Zala nodded in solemn agreement, though she was still quite wary. The boy in her midst wasn’t just an Uppercity child but a noble. His use of magic made that clear enough, but his lovely adornments made it all the more plain. She didn’t want to entertain the thoughts of what could happen, what she could be accused of, if somebody found a noble class child in her home.

With a voice riddled with nervousness, and tightly flattened fins, Zala bowed her head in gratitude. “You have my thanks, young one,” she softly spoke, one hand reaching out to lean the younger girl into a bow as well, though Neydri grumbled over it, not understanding why it was necessary. “Thank you kindly for saving my sister’s life.”

While Neydri was unsuspecting, her older sister took hold of the barbed spear, her fingerscales clicking against the silvery steel as she pried it from the smaller girl’s hands, then Zala took a few steps toward Estuu, her webbed toes making wet patters on the uneven floor.

“Here, please take your spear and your fish.” The young woman offered the weapon to Estuu, giving him a questioning glance like she only just noticed how very young he was. Or, maybe she was coming to the awkward conclusion, as her sister had, that the boy had no way to take back the spear, not with his one and only hand occupied.

“I’m not sure what your intentions are, but..” Zala cooed in concern, her protective instincts extending to the young boy, regardless of the fact that he belonged to the class which directly maintained her own oppression. After all, he was just a child, and she did owe him quite a debt.

“You really shouldn’t eat these fish that you’ve caught. They are sure to be full of Water Blight. You also shouldn’t be out swimming in the tainted water. If you were in it long enough to fish, then you must have been breathing it, which was very reckless.”

Estuu began whining in impatience and aggravation about halfway through the young woman’s endless lecturing. Wow, overprotective much? If he possessed the ability to speak, he might’ve informed this lady that he already got more than enough of this from his own older sibling. It begged the question though, were they alone, too? Had their parents left them behind as well? The scarlet boy was beginning to see a connection between absent parents and overly protective, overly stressed
older siblings.

“And that goes for you, too, Neydri.” The woman turned her attention back to her sister, her formerly gentle tone hardening significantly.

“I was dry swimming,” the copper-scaled girl hurriedly spat in rebuttal, a guilty grin spreading over her pale lips, then she pressed one tiny hand over her mouth, quietly muttering the words. “Well, for most of it I was.”

“Do you want to get sick again?” the elder sister chastised, her tone unquestionably serious and tight in her throat, her pitch turning shrill in desperation brought on by her sibling’s willful courting of danger. “Do you even understand how lucky you were the first time?”

Estuu was shrinking away again, not really caring to be present for this family disagreement, or the resulting noise. He hated being present for his own enough as it was. Neydri must have shared in the sentiment somewhat, though, because she pattered around her sister, coming over to Estuu once again, totally ignoring her sister’s warnings.

“Hey, what’s your name?” the young Zora girl asked, though she had a suspicious look on her face, like she’d caught onto the oddity that her friend had yet to utter a single word. “Mine is Neydri, though I guess you already heard my sister screaming it enough to know that.”

“I don’t think he wants to talk to you,” Zala commented, her words not a judgement aimed at the fact that Estuu was a noble, but rather, a tease directed at her sister.

“Maybe he’s just shy,” said the little girl, her own voice softened, her tone strangely understanding to be so young, perhaps even accepting. That was a rare quality, as far as Estuu was concerned. “Why were you trying to fish? We’re not supposed to be eating fish from the trench, because they have the Water Blight in them.”

“Nnm,” the scarlet boy uttered a little sound in reply, if only to indicate to his new acquaintance that he was listening and that he understood, even if he couldn’t answer with words. He’d learned to do so in his interactions with various tutors who became frustrated by his lack of responses. He knew it wouldn’t stand in place of an actual answer for very long, however, so he set to showing Neydri precisely what he had in mind.

Estuu supposed that this was as good a place as any to see if his idea was viable. He pointed in the direction of the table surface that was roughly hammered into the stone, wandering over to it and clambering onto one of the stools before placing his captured fish upon the surface. Zala watched him with renewed wariness as he further intruded into their space. He could have easily taken the entire haul of trout and left, but somehow he didn’t feel right about not even trying to share, considering Neydri had to capture most of it for him.

The single hand which the young boy had to administer his magic was hovered over his catch, and the Undercity sisters came to stand near his side, watching in interest. Neydri was perhaps a bit too close for Estuu’s comfort, staring in unabashed wonder despite that no magic was coming from the boy.

It was as difficult as ever for Estuu to get a handle on himself, to cut through the sensory interference and the bitter hunger that was keeping him from the one and only useful skill he had left. He’d done it for Brivere during the night, but now that he was attempting to feel the magical energy stir within himself, it refused to answer.

A hum of budding frustration came from the boy, and the two Undercity girls watching him blinked
in confusion, maintaining their apprehensive silence, even so. Why should it have been so hard for him to do this? Every time he’d ever used his powers, he’d been fighting himself. These circumstances were hardly worse than others he’d dealt with; healing in the Basilica surrounded by dying Zoras, healing in a downstream fort filled with firesmoke and the stink of gore, healing his own damaged legs while covered in the residue of a Hinox’s stomach acid, which left his scales stripped and raw.

His healing power had even revealed itself to him in the wake of the worst imaginable heartbreak, like his magic was an awful, sadistic beast that only fed on his agony, his suffering, his fear. What more could it want now? Did it really thrive on its host’s helpless nature? Did it only offer him strength when he was vulnerable?

Well, Estuu wouldn’t oblige it. He wasn’t helpless, nor worthless, nor was he afraid, and this magic belonged to him, so he wouldn’t stop pushing until it was bent to his will.

At last, with a bright flash of blue light that turned warm and pinkish under the scarlet boy’s palm, the magic revealed itself. Estuu gave a squeak of success despite the pins and needles sensation, unsure if the noise really properly communicated the triumph bursting free in his heart. More than anything, it just startled Zala.

“Wow!” Neydri leaned that much closer to Estuu’s hovering hand, so that the light shined upon the glassy surface of her big, yellow eyes, and the coppery sheen of her scales. Her topfin flared while her awe grew, until she pleadingly spoke the words, “Can you teach me to use magic, too?”

“You couldn’t do it, even if he tried to teach you, Neydri,” Zala answered in Estuu’s stead, breathing a sigh to go with her dismal tone of voice. “People from the Undercity don’t have magic in their blood like he does.”

“That’s so unfair,” the younger whined in defeat, her hopes and dreams audibly shattering.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of unfair things about being what you are,” Zala breathed, placing one hand upon her sister’s tail in reassurance, smoothly patting her so that Neydri’s topfin flattened beneath her sibling’s comforting. The elder of the two clearly couldn’t stand to see the younger girl’s spirit stamped down for too long, though, because she soon spoke up to break the sorrowful silence.

“So, young one, are you able to heal these fish of the Water Blight, as you did for Neydri?” Zala asked while she watched Estuu work, her questioning holding a distinct, hopeful tone. She wrung the other three fish from the spear with some difficulty, setting them down as well. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“Mmm,” Estuu hummed in confirmation, nodding his head so that the jewels at the ends of his forefins jingled, and the beads at the hem of his shawl bounced against his brow. He wasn’t sure how much magic was needed to fully purge the Water Blight from a fish, but he felt that he’d maintained it long enough to heal a Zora of Neydri’s size. He sharply bundled his fist, snuffing out the glow of his magic like a dull ember in his palm, then he pushed the trout aside, moving his hand to clutch at his hollow middle, instead.

“Zala, come on.” Neydri reached out to shove the trout in her sister’s direction, catching easily onto her new friend’s meaning. “He made it better. Let’s eat it.”

In greater and greater certainty that there was bound to be some kind of consequence for this, Zala gave her head a wary shake, holding the membranes of her forefins flat. What would the guardsmen say as they entered her home, brutally beat her, possibly even killed her or her sister? What would they say?
‘Bottom-feeders kidnapped a noble and forced him to use his magic to feed them.’

“It’s his, Neydri,” the frightened older sister stated, more jaded by the harsh reality in which they lived than her naive, hopeful sibling. “We can’t just take his food.”

“He might’ve caught that one, but I caught the others,” the girl pleaded, grabbing and tugging at her sister’s hand. Estuu’s golden gaze drifted so that he could glance at the sisters from the corner of his eye, and in quiet agreement, he gave his head a nod.

“Come on, he can’t eat all that on his own,” the coppery girl continued, like weakly trickling water, slowly wearing a path through stone. “I caught enough for all of us. Can you prepare it?”

“S-sure,” Zala breathed in resignation, reaching out to take the fish like she was stealing a treasure right from under someone’s nose, fully expecting to get caught all the while. Estuu couldn’t help but think that she was something of a contradiction, so strict and steely, and seemingly tough, yet also utterly afraid, so fearful that she’d risk starvation to avoid persecution. The boy leaned forward with a little effort, putting one foot onto the stool for extra height, then he shoved the fish the rest of the way into Zala’s grasp.

She could take it as a reassurance if she wanted to, but it was also partly impatience on Estuu’s part.

Soon, the hasty sound of old steel being stroked against the grain of a whetstone filled the chamber with a nasty, gritty ring. Estuu whined softly, but Zala couldn’t hear him over her work, and she continued to sharpen up her cutting knife for the fresh meat that had been granted. He let out an exasperated breath at the noise, wishing he could ignore it by moving on to another task. He couldn’t, but he moved on nonetheless.

While Zala prepared the meat for consumption, Estuu continued with his previous work of purifying the other three fish that Neydri had captured. He hadn’t been expecting to meet these sisters, but it was a fine balance of teamwork that flowed together unusually well and that was pleasing. Neydri caught most of the fish, he removed the toxin and Zala cleaned and served them.

There was one fish for each person who helped, then one extra for something else, for someone else. Through all of this, Estuu hadn’t forgotten about his own older sibling. He couldn’t wipe from his mind how Brivere returned home one night without any rations at all, and even without knowing exactly what happened, the scarlet boy understood that all the food was gone and that it was his fault.

Brivere should have eaten and let Estuu be.

Neydri continued to watch her Uppercity friend with interest, her slitted pupils flitting over the once punctured bellies of the fish that she speared, taking in the miraculous sight of their grievous wounds knitting back together, like they never occurred. The creatures didn’t spring back to life, but their flesh mended under Estuu’s magic.

“That’s useful,” the girl said, pointing to where the wounds were, darting one of her fingers underneath where Estuu’s palm was hovering. He had a feeling that she just wanted an excuse to see if his magic would cause any strange sensations upon her wandering digits. “I got some of them in the gut and the meat always tastes kinda off when you stab them there.”

By the time Estuu had pushed the first two fish aside and finished healing the last of them, he had to shut his magic away with a harsh flick of his hand, then he patted his palm against the tabletop, his fingers twitching from the sting. After not using it for such a long time, having to maintain a lengthy burst left his fingers feeling as though they’d been numbed by the cold, and it likely didn’t help that this cave actually was pretty chilly.
Despite the crisp air, Estuu’s skin was wet with perspiration, his breath coming in slow, deep gulps that made it readily apparent how much of an effort it was for him to even use his magic, especially while his stomach burned with hunger, and his mind fixated on the click, click, click of Zala’s knife against the cutting counter, the sound which promised that sustenance was on its way.

Drained and impatient, Estuu folded his arm upon the table and laid his head against it, whining quietly against his own scales while his tail flapped in time with the sound of Zala cutting the fish. Neydri watched in concern, softly uttering the words, “Hey, you look really pale all of a sudden. Are you gonna be alright?”

Her topfin flared in worry when Estuu didn’t even move in response, and she might have started poking at him, if not for the fact that Zala returned to the table before Neydri could make a pest of herself.

“You do seem very hungry,” Zala cooed, her toeclaws clicking in her approach. She was still legitimately frightened enough by the fact that there was a noble child in her home that she resisted the urge to touch the boy, or check on his health in any way. Surely feeding him would be the answer to his plight. It certainly was the answer to theirs, even if they didn’t show it nearly as much.

Even before the shortage, this had been their plight. They were used to it.

The young woman set down a rectangular stone upon which the meat had been neatly sliced and laid out. Estuu perked at the sound of the food being presented, and he considered it for a moment. Whereas Brivere would usually cut the fish thinly, Zala had sliced it into thick chunks which were still a bit torn, despite her attempts to sharpen the clearly poor-quality steel of her blade.

The boy supposed he couldn’t exactly insist that his food be prepared ‘like his brother does it.’ Maybe that was a childish thing to even want. Even stranger, however, Zala and Neydri didn’t use any silver at all, and instead grabbed at the little chucks rather precisely with the sharp tips of their fingerscales, plopping them right into their mouths with their hands.

That was a little off-putting, and for a second, confusing. Estuu waiting like he expected to be given silver for his own use, before it eventually occurred to him that.. they must not have possessed any at all. A little sigh was the only sign he gave of the defeat perceived on the hidden, innermost corners of his mind, then he set to grabbing at the food and eating with his hand like an animal.

He wondered, though, where that turn of phrase even came from. Animals didn’t have hands, so..?

It wasn’t long before the scarlet Zora was shoveling the cutlets into his mouth, hardly bothered to chew. The meat was so tender that it slid down his throat with ease, and this time his stomach welcomed the food rather joyously, instead of in insult.

And despite Estuu’s initial judgement of the two girls, as the meal went on, it was they who observed his desperation, trying not to make it too obvious. Zala reached over in order to bop her knuckles against the round brow of her sister’s head, to discourage her staring.

Neydri set back to nibbling at her meat, savoring each precious bite, while curling her toes and kicking her feet in delight. Zala found herself stopping after her first few bites and gazing at the plentiful meat with guilt, wondering if she should be trying to set some aside for later, or even for somebody else. She and her sister weren’t the only ones starving in the Undercity.

Blinking and tearing her eyes from the meal at last, Zala spoke up in confusion, doing her best not to sound like she was making any kind of accusation. “I was under the impression that the people of the Uppercity were being fed regularly?” she questioned. All she could assume was that this boy simply
missed the kind of fresh, quality food he was surely used to.

And regardless of Zala’s efforts, there was still a touch of spite in her at that thought- Undercity Zoras had been the ones providing most of the meat to the people of the Uppercity, but rarely could they afford to keep much of their own hauls, as they couldn’t afford to miss out on the rupees they would receive. Even these awful, little caves that no Uppercity Zora would ever consider to be a home nevertheless belonged to the noble classes and the people of the Undercity were constantly required to pay for them.

If the nobles lived in stagnant water, they would have fit right in with the leeches.

“We’ve been eating cakes made from the clay at the bottom of the basin,” Neydri stated matter-of-factly, though even her youthful voice was stained with hopeless sorrow.

Estuu stopped chewing his food as he processed his new friend’s words. Had he heard her correctly? They ate clay? As in dirt? He could remember far, far back, back when he was a legless little hatchling, learning to swim. He was clumsy then, too, but only once did he ever land with his face so deeply in the mud that he got a mouthful of it. It was a gritty sensation between his sharp teeth and a nasty taste that he flailed in the water to escape. His mother’s careful hands helped to brush him off, so maybe it wasn’t such a terrible memory.

“Neydri, shh,” Zala snapped suddenly, half embarrassed, half resentful. None of those fine details really filtered through, and the scarlet boy was left to wonder why she was angry suddenly. “If you wanna keep your Uppercity friend, the last thing you should do is try to make him feel bad for you. Don’t ever make an Undercity Zora feel guilty, or sad. Don’t ever ask any sympathy from them because nothing makes them turn their back quicker.”

Unfortunately, Estuu was actually still curious for an explanation as to why they were eating dirt, however he could see that he wasn’t likely to be receiving it.

“I just hope he really did get rid of all the poison,” Neydri chirped rather blithely, shoving another chunk of trout into her mouth. “..If not, this could be all of our last meal.”

At least it tasted good; that was all Estuu could think as he, too, shoved another piece between his teeth, savoring the way the fish cut so easily beneath the razor edges of his teeth. Worrying about consequences was more of his brother’s thing, anyway.

And while Zala had her questions about the scarlet Zora’s situation, which he couldn’t answer, he also had his own questions about their situation, which he couldn’t ask. He thought back to the sight and sounds of all those Undercity Zoras who’d been corralled into the Basilica, and he wondered. Why weren’t Zala and Neydri there, too? Was it because they were girls? No, Estuu was quite sure he saw some women trapped beyond the guarded archways, pressed together like fish on an overflowing market shelf.

Maybe it was because they were both so young? Zala wasn’t even an adult, yet here she was, taking sole responsibility for her own life, and that of her sister.

And maybe, in the end, Zala was right about what she said. As soon as these unanswered questions and budding sympathies arose in the scarlet boy’s heart, he was assaulted by a most intense urge to flee. He had to tell himself that it was another thing he’d have to endure, though, because he didn’t want to be the reason for the anger he heard in the Undercity woman’s tone.

Having eaten his fill, probably more than that, actually, Estuu turned his attention back to the other fish which were left over. Several pieces of the prepared meat remained, and that had been Estuu’s
fish, so he figured that if he let them have the rest, they wouldn’t question why he was taking another whole fish for himself. He pushed one fish to Neydri, then another before Zala, then he gathered the last one in his clumsy, single-handed grasp. He hoped they understood the division and considered it to be fair.

To Estuu’s surprise, Zala seemed astounded that he was even suggesting that they keep what he was offering. She made no move to reject the offer, though she swallowed nervously and uttered a word of thanks.

“If you walk about with that fish, some nosy guardsman is bound to hassle you,” Zala quickly spoke up in concern, jumping from her seat when Estuu slid from his own. “Here, let me help you.”

Carefully, the young woman took the last trout from the boy’s grasp, her movements slow and cautious, lest this Uppercity child come to the conclusion that she was trying to swindle him in some way. She pattered over to a shelf stuffed with mismatched supplies, taking in hand a broad leaf that crinkled a bit at her touch. She quickly wrapped the trout up in the giant leaf, a Korok leaf from its appearance, then she tucked in the edges so that it formed a neat package.

The package was brought back to the young noble, and he watched curiously while Zala opened the flap of his rucksack and tucked the food securely inside.

“If it were us, the guardsmen wouldn’t hesitate to search a bag like this,” she explained, her words still woven from tones of sorrow and resentment. “An Uppercity kid like you should be left alone.”

With a curt nod, Estuu turned on heel and began pattering toward the pool he’d entered from, taking a few deep breaths in preparation to actually dry dive this time.

“Hey, wait!” Neydri’s voice sharply chased him, followed by the hurried patter of her webbed feet. In her mind, she’d made a new friend and they’d bonded over a hunt and a meal, so what reason did he have to leave so soon? She didn’t even know his name, or where to find him if she wanted to see him again. She surely didn’t know if he planned to ever come back, or if the food had been all he really wanted, from the very beginning.

She wanted some kind of reassurance that such a thing wasn’t actually the case.

Before Estuu could turn around to face her, she reached out to grab his wrist, her touch not at all forceful or rough, but even so, he let out an uncomfortable squawk at the sudden contact, yanking his hand from her grasp and holding his arm close to his chest.

“I’m sorry!” she bleated, skittering back on her toes in surprise, her eyes wide from the alarm of her friend’s reaction. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

Easily, Estuu nodded his forgiveness, his gaze elsewhere, though he could still see the shadow of a reassured, little smile sprawl over his friend’s pale features. For a moment, she hummed a bit sheepishly, pondering how best to phrase her words so that the silent boy could reply.

“Maybe we could go fishing again,” she suggested, her flickering hope a tiny flame persisting in the darkness. “Will you come back and visit?”

“Mm,” the scarlet boy confirmed, giving his head a vigorous nod, so brazenly clear in his affirmative that Neydri had to laugh over it. When she quieted, she, too, nodded her head in acceptance, and stood still as Estuu turned again and dove into the water.
Betaal was almost forced to bitterly laugh at herself. Nothing ever changed, did it? Just when she’d convinced herself that her weakened ability to function around women was under control, she found herself at a standstill outside of Dunma’s tent, her hands trembling, her legs refusing to carry her any further.

This time, though, her nervousness probably didn’t stem from her attraction any longer, and that made the fear even more difficult to reason with. Quietly, she took a deep breath, holding it in her chest before she slowly let it out. She did all she could to keep it hushed, not wanting to alert the younger woman to the fact that she was awkwardly standing outside, gathering her wits.

But then, it was Betaal who heard something she hadn’t expected, and her hand paused as she reached for the tent flap, hesitating for another second longer. Her bright red topfin puffed at the sound of Dunma’s voice, at the sorrow held in it while it wavered on her breath in choked, little whimpers; she was crying. Hearing that, Betaal’s fear melted away and anything else that could have kept her from the violet Zora.

The flap was gently brushed aside, and the Sergent’s yellow eye fell upon the sight of Dunma, sitting on her bedroll with her legs bundled and with one of The Cursed Girl books open on her knees. Her back was sloped so that her head was lowered into her hands and her shoulders were shaking with the effort of her tears.

For a second, Betaal thought that maybe she really should have left Dunma to her privacy. Allowing her to weep over whatever was troubling her might’ve done her some good, yet the Undercity woman couldn’t bear to turn her back now.

“Hey,” Betaal spoke softly to grab Dunma’s attention, to alert the young woman to her presence. The violet Zora shot upright at the sound, her eyes wide and watery, shining like citrine jewels with her tears.

With immediate haste, Dunma shut her eyes tightly and rubbed them against her wrist, her cheeks flushed with warmth in her embarrassment, like being caught crying alone was such a terribly shameful thing. Betaal slowly approached and the younger woman sniffled, looking away from the sight of her superior for a moment before she sheepishly spoke up to say, “Yes, sir?”

The blue Zora couldn’t help the tiny, sad chuckle that came out of her at how serious Dunma always tried to be. She must have known that this wasn’t any kind of official visit and neither of them were on duty as of yet. Trying to keep it light-hearted, Betaal replied with a joking, “At ease.”

“Can I sit?” the Sergeant asked, gesturing carefully to the place by Dunma’s side, receiving a gentle nod in turn. Once permitted, Betaal settled there in silence, keeping only a slight space between herself and the younger woman, unsure if it was for the sake of appearances or because she could feel the fear inside herself slowly creating a much wider gap than the physical one.

Betaal said nothing while Dunma continued to fuss over drying her tears, rubbing at her cheeks until they began to chap. The scarred, blue Zora had never been good at speaking her feelings, and so offered whatever comfort was to be had in her steady presence, instead, hoping that was enough. Her inability to wrangle the use of language in the moment had always been her greatest weakness, well one of them, surely.

Her thoughts and feelings just didn’t flow from her as naturally as her body moved through combat, much as she wished it were so. Sometimes she believed that she’d always been such a natural fighter because that was her way of venting everything she lacked words to express.

Eventually, Dunma broke the silence and that was likely for the best, anyway. It allowed her to
speak when she felt comfortable doing so.

“I thought I was doing well,” she weakly uttered, trying hard to steady her voice, and taking a deep gulp of air to resist the shudder in her chest. “I thought I’d mastered keeping these sorrows at bay. I thought I’d learned how to manage all of the accursed feelings. But it’s like the more time that passes, the harder it gets. I honestly believed that time would heal me, but it just keeps getting worse, and all I want to do is forget everything. I just want this pain to go away.”

Before she could finish, Dunma’s eyes scrunched shut again, her dark lids trying to dam the tears that overflowed, without any success. Her face furrowed in a snarl of bitter woe, of wretched loss that was slowly tearing her apart while she fought desperately to hold everything together. The young guardsman’s bundled hands brushed the wetness of her tears away as they dripped down, onto the pages of the book on her lap, then she gently shut the cover, to protect the paper from her inability to control herself.

“I’m sorry, Dunma,” the Sergeant breathed, her voice soft and hesitant, “..but it won’t go away.”

Sniffling and turning her tear-stained visage toward her superior, Dunma looked on Betaal in fretful questioning, everything in her expression pleading for the other woman to tell her that wasn’t true, and for a moment, Betaal offered an apologetic glance and a half-hearted shrug, because it wasn’t her job to coddle her warriors. She knew that, deep down, Dunma would never really want that.

“At first, the loss hardly even feels real,” the Sergeant continued, her own gruff voice suddenly thin and vulnerable, her single eye gazing somberly ahead. “It feels like the person you’re missing could maybe be off on a long hunting trip or out bartering for supplies, and it gives you the illusion that, eventually, they’ll come home. It’s easy to weather, to forget about, as long as you’re distracted. But the longer somebody is missing from your life, the more real that absence begins to feel, and it becomes impossible to ignore.”

Betaal took a breath, hardening herself, fighting herself, then she continued, “Even once the pain lessens and it feels like you’ve finally accepted that they’re gone, there will still be days when it hits you all over again, when something reminds you of them and you’re forced to face the emptiness left behind by the fact that they’re not here anymore.” she paused, cutting herself off suddenly, her voice breaking slightly as she muttered the words, “ah, jeez,” and her head drooped low.

Perplexed questioning quickly muddled the look of sadness on Dunma’s own face while she watched a tear slowly streak a path down the older woman’s cheek. Betaal’s single eye suddenly had a glassy shine, while the scarred tissue where her other eye once was remained dry and unable to weep at all.

“Wait..” Dunma uttered in confusion, placing a hand upon Betaal’s shoulder, her thumb moving along the other woman’s red fin membranes in a tiny gesture of reassurance. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, no, don’t mind me,” Betaal stated, shaking her head and taking another deep breath like it did anything at all to help, then she gestured dismissively at the other, wanting to pretend this hadn’t actually happened. “I really wanted.. to try to give you advice without making it all about myself for once.”

“No, go ahead,” Dunma weakly replied, settling into a calmer state. “Make it about yourself. That always made it easier for me, anyway.”

Bitterly, the Undercity woman let out a chuckle, her sharp teeth shining as she did. “Yeah, but harder for me.”
“I think you can handle it,” the violet Zora said, low and reserved, only now noticing the tiny gap of space that was lingering between herself and the woman who had been her lover, in secret. Shyly and fully aware of how deep an act of rebellion she was committing, the young guardsman slid her hand across the empty space, her nimble fingers slithering overtop of Betaal’s own bundled fist, which soon loosened to occupy Dunma’s hand.

The Sergeant brushed away her own tears, then glanced downward at how Dunma’s hand was clasped in her own. Unconsciously, the corners of her mouth upturned in the bittersweetness of this familiarity, in how this reminded her of the first day she looked at Dunma and really, truly, saw her.

“I lost my father in action, too,” Betaal confessed, the words feeling like a hammer pounding through stone walls which had been standing for a hundred years. Just that simple admission elicited a cringe of pain from the younger woman, her body bending from the weight of the bridge being formed between them, a bridge of shared suffering and pain. Dunma scarcely believed that she could even support the weight of such a thing, but nevertheless she held steady.

“I was there when he was killed, and umm...” the blue Zora clumsily fumbled through the painful reflections. How long had she avoided going back in her mind to that awful day, a day when the sky burned red, and she was still so young? A day when beasts of both steel and flesh came thundering up the canyons which led to their home, intent on wiping their kind from existence? “Yeah, kind of like you, I tried to ignore my grief for years. I found escapism in all sorts of things- my studies, books, further training as a warrior. That day, at the funeral, I guess when I saw you, I also saw myself.”

When the older woman finished speaking, Dunma quietly nodded. “Thank you, Betaal,” she said after a short pause, her tone soft and sweet. She couldn’t fully elaborate on her gratitude, not if she had all the time in the world, because she truly had so much to thank the other warrior for, but... she hoped Betaal knew how grateful she was. She settled, instead, for something simple, because she also probably wasn’t in the proper state of mind to really give voice to all that was on her mind.

“Your friendship has been a comfort. I would like for us to have more in common than our sorrows eventually, though. Maybe one day I won’t be so pathetic and sad all the time.”

“You’re not pathetic,” Betaal asserted, unflinching, unwavering. “How many times do I have to keep telling you? Your emotions, the grief you feel after losing somebody that you dearly loved, those things don’t make you weak. You need to learn to trust your heart, rather than doubting it.”

“I really should listen to you more often,” the younger woman uttered in a doleful, hollow way, nodding and letting out a tiny, worried sigh. “I never listened to anybody my whole life and it’s a bad habit. You were right about Gaddison,” she added, that simple truth a terrible burden which had been hovering over her and the true reason that she’d kept her distance from Betaal ever since her last encounter with the pastel Zora.

Dunma knew that her Aunt Gaddison was close with the Guard Captain. She knew that this relationship which she’d been hiding between herself and her Sergeant was too dangerous to continue, yet even so, intolerable pain and sorrow made her selfish and left her clinging to the one thing that had given her strength.

“I think she does suspect something,” the violet Zora stated when Betaal said nothing in reply, trying to make things clearer in the case that she’d been too vague. It turned out, however, that the Undercity woman had just been simmering her words, aware of precisely what she meant.

“She does, yes,” Betaal bitterly snapped, her graved tone audibly struggling between her normally vibrant fighting spirit, and sudden, inescapable hopelessness.
“Did she say something to you?” Dunma’s back straightened in alarm, her head snapping more pointedly in the Sergeant’s direction. Betaal didn’t even need to answer, however, for the younger Zora to see that awful confirmation lingering under the surface. Dunma yanked her hand away from the other woman, offering an apologetic glance at even the most subtle sign that this gesture had wounded the other. Betaal must have known that the quick retreat was for her own protection, yet even so, it clearly stung.

“She did say something, but you shouldn’t worry about it,” the Sergeant hurried to reassure, only wanting Dunma to know that, so far, no harm had been done that couldn’t be reversed. She kept her voice low as she went on. “All she has are suspicions and in saying something to me, she only made it obvious that she poses a danger. Now we know to proceed with caution.”

“I’m so sorry,” the young guardsman breathed, her body bowing once more in the mounting pressure. “This is all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Dunma. You can’t blame yourself for something we got into together,” Betaal calmly reassured. It was surreal and strange to her now, how things between them shifted under fire. In the beginning of this short-lived romance, Dunma had been the one who was so confident, so sure, and the Sergeant was filled with fear. She was perhaps spurred on by the exhilarating pursuit of that which was forbidden, but still utterly terrified. Now it was the younger woman who was falling apart, and Betaal who suddenly knew exactly what needed to be done.

“Just be careful, and there won’t be anything to worry about,” the Sergeant said. “We’re just ‘friends’ and that’s all we’ve ever been is ‘friends.’ And..” Betaal paused, her chest clenching, her fingers tightening in the wish that Dunma’s hand was still there to hold, “..if you wanted to be just friends, but for real and not just as a cover up, it isn’t too late for that.”

At Betaal’s words, Dunma flinched as though she’d been struck. Her lower lip was bitten, the point of one canine pushing visibly into it, but not quite enough to break the skin. “Is that what you want, Betaal?” she asked, hardening her tone to avoid sounding as fragile as she was feeling. “If that’s what you want, then.. I’m willing. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know that’s what I should do,” the blue Zora replied soberly, setting a sigh free as she did, “but it could never be what I ‘want’ to do, Dunma.”

“Me neither.” The younger woman’s puffy eyes turned away in thought, a hundred ideas running through her mind. Was this the only option? Was there no way to continue as they were? Was it possible to avoid any fatal mishaps with the lingering threat of Gaddison’s watchful presence? In the end, it was all too risky and she inwardly criticized herself for such careless thinking. “It would hurt, but like I said, I’ll do it if it’s for your protection.”

“Then I suppose.. that’s that,” Betaal stated, wanting to say something to give this awful ordeal some closure, yet the words did nothing to comfort either of them. Instead of closure, all that Dunma could feel was that something wonderful was coming to a quick, harsh ending, and her body shook while she fought herself to keep from crying again.

Apparently, it wasn’t possible to win the war against a tempest of your own making.

Dunma’s previously restrained sobs came untethered and her chest heaved with the force of it, though she pressed one hand over her mouth to quiet herself. Her superior was a quiet presence by her side, sliding nearer in order to close the distance at last. Betaal draped one arm over the back of the younger woman’s shoulders, every one of her cries like blow to the chest.

Maybe Dunma blamed herself, and yes, Betaal had said that they were both to blame, but really..
Betaal knew this was her own doing, and she couldn’t forgive herself for such an atrocious wrong, for hurting a young woman that she adored.

She should have resisted the temptation of her heart from the very beginning. She’d known better, but she’d done the opposite.

Quickly enough, the violet Zora stilled her weeping, and Betaal uttered soft reassurances that there was no need for her to quiet her turbulent emotions so soon, that she could cry as much needed to, but Dunma shook her head in denial, clenching her jaw as she tied the knots of her broken heart tighter, ever tighter.

Forcing a small, sad smile to her face, Dunma rose her watery gaze to meet Betaal’s single-eyed one and she weakly muttered the words, “Just one more kiss wouldn’t hurt, right? To say goodbye?”

“Oh, hey,” Betaal hissed, drawing her arm back in favor of reaching up to cup Dunma’s face ever so gently between her callused palms. “We are not saying goodbye,” she uttered, softly yet insistently. “I’m still going to be right here for you.”

The reassurances did little good that Betaal could see, because though Dunma nodded her agreement, her line of sight dropped aside in doubt. The Sergeant wanted to think that it was just her typical poor judgement of facial expressions, but no, she knew Dunma, and she knew what belief and trust looked like on her pretty face.

“Just so you know,” the blue Zora added, doing all she could to avoid sounding too serious, “General Kita would never say something so dramatic. That’s a total Lorelei thing.”

Dunma’s shining, golden eyes widened at her superior’s comment, her tongue going momentarily still, unable to form the words of any kind of response. Then, against the clutches of her sadness and her loss, Dunma’s chest bubbled with laughter, perhaps more than what was appropriate. At that moment, it felt like she had to laugh as much as possible, if only to release her emotions in some way other than with tears. She reached up to pry Betaal’s hands away from her face, shoving them back and trying to spit the words, “How dare you,” between her desperate giggles.

The younger woman fought off her amusement for a quiet instant, just for it to overcome her all over again. At last she picked up the book which rested on her knees, clutching it to her chest and succumbing to her stupid fit, allowing whatever was left of her tears to escape while her laughter belied them. Somehow, that was so much easier.

It was no huge surprise that this wonderful book would inevitably be the thing that comforted her. It had always offered her wonder and an escape when reality was too difficult to endure. It gave her another home to flee to when her father could scarcely afford food, and they were forced to humbly accept her grandfather’s support for the sake of survival. It lent her words to replace those of her grandfather, when he lectured her father for his bad choices. It provided hope and strength when people claimed that she, too, was a cursed girl, for being born without soul bonded parents. It taught her resiliency and allowed her to feel validated when she was angry over every unfairness in her life, and it even boldly suggested to her that, despite everything, she didn’t have to accept any of that.

“Dunma,” Betaal quietly breathed when the younger woman’s giggles faded away. Dunma’s cheeks were still streaked with tears, but she was placid, calm. When the violet Zora peered over at the other woman, Betaal’s sharp, yellow eye had strayed downward, to look upon the book in her grasp.

“How?” the young guardsman hummed, waiting for Betaal’s gaze to snap back upward to meet her own.
“Hey, um..” the Undercity woman warily began, morphing suddenly back into an inarticulate ball of nerves from the subject matter presenting itself in her mind, begging to be spoken. “..no, nevermind. It’s nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing,” Dunma gently spoke, only for Betaal to shake her head in further denial, letting out a nervous sigh like her breath had suddenly gotten choked from her.

“I’m just.. delaying the inevitable.. because I don’t want this to end,” the Sergeant said, half-heartedly moving her shoulders in a shrug. The puckered skin near her ruined eye furrowed that much more as her face was scrunched into a mournful scowl, a mask of heartbreak. She fought that expression off her countenance, then looked back up to see an imploring gaze upon Dunma’s own face. “But I suppose it has to,” the older woman finished.

As per the younger woman’s request, Betaal leaned in nearer, resting one hand upon the other woman’s tear-stained cheek, idly smoothing gentle fingertips across the wet trails to dry them, then softly, tenderly, she pressed her lips to Dunma’s own, lingering in that bittersweet goodbye for a few sweet and excruciating moments.

The kiss was over as quickly as their secret romance.

Carefully, Betaal moved her hand from the younger warrior’s cheek, down to the book pressed to the pale scales of Dunma’s chest, and the older woman gave it a gentle tug. “Can I.. borrow this?” she asked.

“But you have your own copy,” the violet Zora stated in confusion, her tearful eyes searching Betaal’s face for some kind of explanation.

“I know, but..” the Undercity woman trailed off, desperately wracking her mind for the right words to explain why it was that she needed it. In the end, there were no words she was comfortable actually speaking, other than, “Trust me?”

Hesitantly, Dunma allowed the precious object to be slid from her grasp, her head softly nodding her affirmative; she trusted Betaal with her life, so yes, she’d trust her with this as well.

;

The night had been long and perilous for the people of the Undercity who’d so boldly taken steps to flee the brutal hands of a people who proclaimed to be their own, yet so clearly weren’t.

The Zora River was a cold blur of deep obsidian and blinding, white froth in the shadowed canyon it cut through, and it was hard to see whether or not they were even fleeing in the right direction. If not for the encouraging push of the current, many might’ve gotten lost in the attempted escape. The water roared in their ears, yet it barely blocked out the screams and cries for help which resounded in the cavern. Undercity bodies pressed tightly to one another to stay hidden below the surface, feet kicking wildly, swimming for dear life, yet even so.. not everyone got away.

The City Gaurd came for them, like monsters clad in shining silver. They cut through the river in brutal formation, herding fearful Undercity Zoras to the banks and slamming them from the water while others waited on the shore to ensnare as many as possible.

Desperate, starved Zoras were torn from the river, then roughly dragged up the rocky shore kicking and screaming, pleading and crying, but they received no quarter, no mercy. The armored brutes bound those they captured in restraining cuffs quickly and efficiently, like they’d been waiting their whole lives to do this, like they’d practiced this technique, just in case.
The ones who did get away regrouped at their former feeding camp. For hours, they were ducked into the concealing shadows of the tree line, flinching at every snapping twig, holding their breath and listening for that awful sound of clanking armor, the awful sound of their doom bursting forth from the same river that was to be their salvation.

They waited as long as they could for stragglers, for any who might’ve escaped from the clutches of the guardsmen, then before morning light could make it over the mountains, they fled that much further from the reaches of those who longed to subjugate them. They fled downstream, to the Mercay Island town.

Morning in the Lanaru Wetlands was brighter than any they’d ever seen. Undercity mornings were as lightless as night within their caves, and a deep, dark blue just outside them. Even in all of Zora’s Domain, there was hardly a place that wasn’t shadowed by twisting architecture and the mountainous walls that surrounded their home. But here? Everything was flat and stretched for miles and to the nervous Undercity bunch, it might as well have been as vast and intimidating as open water.

Few among the crowd had ever stepped one webbed toe out of line in their lives, forever cowed by the ruling class and the authority they wielded. And despite the lucky success of their escape, most were discontented, unsure, fearful. The courage which had come from their anger, as a necessity of their survival, had waned away with the night which veiled their exodus, leaving them wondering what the repercussions would be and what would become of those who hadn’t made it this far.

The first of the group to clamber from the river and up the banks of Mercay Island was a middle aged woman with silver scales and clear fins. Even as Undercity women went, she was common in appearance, yet in the light of the sun, the metallic sheen of her scales shined as brightly as any guardsman’s armor. The innumerable others who’d followed her this far on blind faith, alone, now arose from the waters to continue, chasing the sight of her like she was their shining emblem of hope, like every ounce of courage any one of them possessed had to be drawn directly from her image.

The water streamed off of the gathering hoard, the noise of it growing until it cut through the still of the morning like a flooding river basin breaking through all dams and restraints without any warning, and before the sleepy residents of the Mercay town realized it, their entire shore was lined with Undercity people.

They must have resembled an army that had arrived unannounced to overwhelm the tiny camp-turned-settlement, and with that knowledge, the woman at the head of the gathering gestured for the crowd to hold their positions, only allowing a small group to follow her uphill toward the edge of town.

The Mercay Islanders, though slow to react, did not fail to notice. A lone sentry sounded an alarm at first sight of the intimidating approach and those among the settlers who were already awake hurried to see what all the commotion was about. Traders and crafters who were readying their wares in preparation to make the short trek over to Fort Boko now gathered in wait. Fishers who had their spears readied stood back from the crowded shore in hesitation, and hard-working laborers who’d already set to the task of constructing homes dotted the unfinished rooftops, warily watching from their lofty heights. Most notably of all, anybody who was armed had their weapons near, their hands upon them in readiness.

From a wooden house which was built aloft, an old Rito man strode from an open doorway, his head turning here and there in search of the disturbance. His great, black wings gave a flutter that lifted him to a higher perch and his talons tightly gripped the wood of a railing which softly creaked beneath his weight. It gave him just the vantage he needed to see with ease the unbroken line of
Zoras blockading their shore, as well as the small group which had cautiously closed half of the distance between the river and the edge of town.

Fluffing his sparse plumage, the old Rito man spread his wings and took to the skies, casting a wide shadow that circled the ground upon which the Undercity Zoras stood. Many of them nervously ducked, or put their hands up in order to squint through their fingers at the black silhouette watching them from the skies. Hardly one of them could say that they’d ever encountered a Rito in their lives, and if the strange feeling of open skies and open space wasn’t enough to weigh on their fears, the feeling of being measured from above set them on even greater edge.

They knew the feeling of being looked down on, both figuratively and literally, and it was their most natural, gut instinct to react with resentment and mistrust.

The Undercity woman who’d led her small group up the banks, however, was unwavering, and the dozens of others who formed her nervous uprising held their ground at the sight of her resilience. Eventually, the Rito man landed but a few paces ahead of the group with a flutter of his great wingspan.

A small puff of dirt was stirred into the air by the Rito’s landing and the old man waited for it to settle as he took in the sight of the new arrivals. The woman standing at the head of the group was calm and steady, and her transparent fins fluttered against her cheeks from the breeze kicked up by the other. The Rito took another few steps toward the Zoras, regarding them with golden eyes which were sharp and wise, but with wings that were quick on his bow, awaiting any sign of trouble.

“I am Moira, of Zora’s Domain,” the silvery, Undercity woman clearly announced, in the hopes of quickly erasing any suspicion. “I seek council with the leader of this settlement.”

“There is no leader among us, cousin,” the old man spoke, his big beak clicking while he pronounced each word, his voice as deep and harsh as the mountain crows which he vaguely resembled. “We live and let live, here. We cooperate. But if you wish, as the village elder, I may hear you out. What is it that this..” he paused, his golden gaze flicking from one end of the lengthy line of Zoras to the other, “rather large group is seeking?”

“Refuge,” Moira answered without hesitation, gesturing to the great gathering that was still lining the island shore. “Our people aren’t like yours, here. There is no equal cooperation. Back home, in Zora’s Domain, our kind, the Undercity Zoras, carry the burden of all manner of difficult and dangerous labor, yet we live and die in squalor, without dignity. Our efforts uphold the charmed lives of those who live above us. That is why we have fled, seeking better lives, lives of freedom and equality, lives of purpose, but peace.”

“Cousin,” the dark-feathered Rito addressed the Zora woman once more, his demeanor softening as he did, his grip dropping slowly away from his weapon as it became apparent that this group meant no harm, for now. “The people of this village settled here freely, so few among us would be apt to say that you could not do the same. However, there is one consideration that comes to mind, in regards to what you’ve told me..”

“What might that be?” asked the woman.

“Hmm,” the Rito cooed in thought, glancing in the direction of the mountains from which the river flowed, then back to the much shorter Zora. “Our settlement may be brimming with warriors, but our safety here is in part thanks to the might of the Zora people from upstream, the people I would assume are your rulers. Should they send forces to deal with your rebellion, it would be unwise for us to challenge the very source of our own peace.”
Moira sighed in audible displeasure, though otherwise she maintained her steady neutrality. It had been her hope that the people here would see fit to protect those that they welcomed in, but she supposed initial hesitation was understandable, if disappointing.

“We understand,” she firmly replied. “We don’t ask your people to fight in our defense, nor to even speak in our defense, if you should choose not to do so. All we ask is to be granted a place here, and we assure you, our presence will be a valuable one.”

“For now, it cannot be said that you are unwelcome,” the Rito concluded. Despite his claim, however, he still appeared to regard this entire situation with a degree of wariness, with reservations that he left unspoken. He sailed aloft once more with a strong beat of his wings, sharply circling back toward the settlement and leaving the group to enter as they wished.

Moira raised her hand to lead her group onward, and the Undercity refugees followed her command with ease.

As promised, once the Hylian Champion made his way back to the surface, his first destination was the barracks. Bazz had already permitted Link to come seek him out in advance, though the Hylian wouldn’t admit that it took a bit longer than planned, all because he had to work up the nerve to get back into that Goddess-forsaken dive bell. He just knew that one day that awful thing would be the cause of him experiencing death by drowning and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

To make up for lost time, Link quickened his pace, striding the halls occupied by Knights and guardsmen alike, yet nobody questioned his presence any longer. It might’ve been considered weird for a Hylian to be making himself at home there, but not for the Hylian Champion. He had to admit, that was a perk that he appreciated.

Link knew well where to find Bazz at this hour. The black Zora retreated to his office to review various reports, to write up duty rosters, and all other manner of work that kept him pinned down for several long hours before he eventually went out to perform guard rounds of his own and make sure that every little thing was running smoothly.

When the Hylian arrived at the doorway to the Guard Captain’s office, the door was pushed open, but Link had heard voices from down the hall before he even reached his destination and knew already that the black Zora was with someone. From the serious tone, it sounded like an important conversation and though the Hylian opted to wait his turn, he still stood listening, leaning nonchalantly against the frame of the door.

“New cases of the Water Blight are still being reported,” Bazz droned, confused and frustrated, and ever so tired.

“I’m sorry, sir,” replied the guardsman standing before the black Zora’s desk. Link leaned himself in, pushing up onto his tiptoes in an attempt to get a better look at the paper sprawled across the stone surface of the desk; it seemed to be a map of some kind, but he couldn’t be sure.

“My unit completed what was left of the search this morning but the area is clean, sir,” the guardsman went on, trying to hold a steady tone as his superior’s annoyance grew. “We found no trace of this malice creature within the reservoir.”

“This can’t be right,” Bazz growled, his claws scraping the edges of his desk while his grip tightened, turning the scales of his knuckles a tone of gray.
“Perhaps, sir, we’ve been searching for the wrong thing?” the guardsman suggested, though Link’s ears titled back at that notion. If that were true, it meant that he’d given them bad information and in doing so he’d wasted their time and effort. It would mean that his overconfident assertion had cost lives.

“Are there any other leads, then?” asked the Guard Captain while he impatiently tapped one fingerscale.

Warily, the guardsman clinked in his armor with an attempted shrug. His movement was sheepish and half-hearted, but he still softly nodded his head, hesitating to answer, even so. “The Apostles who’ve been monitoring the reservoir have noticed some unusual activity and a few of the sentries in the area have occasionally reported seeing a bright, blue light that wanders past in the distance, at night.”

“That sounds like-” Bazz began, his expression attempting to furrow as he turned all the more irate, but he quickly hissed in pain from the stitched wound across his face, and began again, more softly. “That just sounds like a Wizzrobe has established a haunt nearby. They come down from the higher elevations during the colder months, then wander back into the mountains. It’s no cause for alarm, and certainly not the cause of this plague that’s killing our people.”

“But sir, if I may,” the other armored Zora carefully added, waiting for his superior to quiet and offer him permission to continue. When that permission was granted, he said, “Wizzrobes don’t shake the ground as they pass by, sir.”

“Regardless, I doubt this mysterious light in the distance has anything to do with the Water Blight, and that is our most pressing concern at this time.” The black Zora straightened, taking a deep breath and let it out in complete exasperation. “We’re going to have to complete the search a second time, starting again from the beginning. We have no choice.”

“Yes, sir,” the guardsman breathed, dipping his body lower in respect before he turned and showed himself out.

Link remained silent once the other Zora was gone, watching Bazz settle down in his chair, placing his elbows on the surface before himself and folding his hands together in front of his face. He appeared as though he would’ve loved to lean his head against his hands and shut the entire world out in slumber, but the steady, impatient tap of one toeclaw made it clear that he was really wracking his head for the answers he was so desperate for.

“Do you think I could’ve been wrong?” Link spoke up at last, taking the first few strides into Bazz’s immediate sight. The Zora’s head shot up at the unannounced arrival, his slitted pupils tightening in surprise, though they quickly widened again once he realized who it was.

“Whether you were or not, there’s still no way for the source of this to be anywhere but the reservoir,” Bazz stated, grumbling over the whole matter, before moving past it with a certain degree of haste. “Can I help you, Master Link? You mentioned needing to talk earlier..”

“Right, about that,” he groaned, immediately matching the Guard Captain’s own level of frustration in being reminded of exactly why he’d come, though Bazz shook his head and chuckled over it, unsure how he was meant to take his friend’s response.

“Should we have a few drinks early, then?” the black Zora offered, his stitched lip curling upward at one corner. He reached into one of the inner shelves of his desk, drawing out a glass bottle that Link was now quite familiar with.
“It wouldn’t help me,” the Hylian replied, flicking one hand at the offer. He was sure he’d explained his immunity to Bazz, but that whole night was probably a great, big blur in the Zora’s mind. “And I should think you need to keep your shit straight,” he teased, his boots clicking upon the stone as he approached the desk, pulling out a chair and settling himself there.

“This is exactly how I do that, Master Link,” Bazz dryly joked, though it was difficult to know if he really, truly meant that as a joke, because he still took out a glass and poured it half full.

Link watched, not commenting, unsure if he had any business commenting on his friend’s habits, anyway. Bazz was normally controlled enough, dedicated and vigilant while on duty and obviously a complete fucking mess when he wasn’t. At least he had the good sense to compartmentalize his self-destructive behavior. Link couldn’t say as much, so who was he to judge?

However, for his own selfish purposes, he really needed Bazz sober, as much as he would love for his friend to completely forget everything he was about to explain to him, and ask of him.

It had recently ‘occurred’ to Link that he wasn’t much of a Champion, despite how he relished the privileges afforded by the title and despite how efficient he was at slaughtering monsters for his own sick pleasure. When he said that it ‘occurred’ to him, what he really meant was that he was still wearing dark bruises around his eyes from what happened between himself and Brivere and he really begrudged having to refer to that as a ‘beating’, but hey, it was good for him to be honest with himself, right?

The honesty hurt even worst than the ass whooping.

Also, by much gentler hands than those which had delivered his beating, the Hylian had been waltzed to another great epiphany; the only thing it really hurt when he admitted that he couldn’t do something and that he needed help, was his pride. Apparently, one’s pride had to suffer a bit before growth could occur. Or maybe a lot.

“Bazz, I know that you’re busy, and that you’re job is incredibly important.” Link began, already squirming a bit in his seat from what he was working up to. He’d went over his request several times in his head on the way over, and there was not one, single comfortable way to make this confession and humbly ask for assistance. “But, your doctor did say that you needed to take it easy..”

“Mmmhm,” the Zora hummed, leaning into his desk and narrowing his eyes at the Hylian across from him in suspicion.

Okay, well, you remember how I tutored you in the proper use of a blade when you were younger?” he blurted, his blue eyes wandering while one hand combed nervously through his messy fringe. “Actually, I know that you remember. I’m the one who doesn’t remember. You’re the one who told me. What I’m trying to say is-”

A quiet titter interrupted the Hylian’s babbling, and his ears pitched backward, his gaze turning sharp as he glared across the desk at Bazz. Great, the Zora was already laughing at him and he hadn’t even gotten to the embarrassing shit yet.

“Sorry, I’ve just never seen you in such a damn fluster. But yes, I remember,” Bazz commented, quieting his own laughter with a sip from his glass. “Go on.”

Taking a deep breath, Link leaned back in the chair, letting the air slide slowly from his chest. He might’ve needed several more deep breaths to actually calm himself, but one would have to do. “You remember those things, Bazz, but I don’t. Actually.. I don’t really recall what I taught you, either. I mean, how to do any of it, at least not properly. When I woke up in the shrine, I’d actually forgotten
all of the technique I used to know. I thought that, maybe, since I taught you a hundred years ago, maybe you wouldn’t mind just.. repeating it back to me, as a favor.”

“Wait,” Bazz said, putting one hand up to quiet the Hylian across from him. He had this dubious look on his face like he was sure Link was just pulling his fin. “Wait, stop right there.”

The Guard Captain’s hand fell to the surface of his desk and he tapped at it with his sharp fingerscales in doubt. “Are you trying to tell me that.. you don’t remember how to fight? Master Link, if you’re trying to improve my mood with your little joke, I do appreciate the effort, however, I’ve seen you fight, so it’s not very convincing, I’m afraid.”

“Yeah, see, that’s the thing,” the Hylian went on when his doubtful friend finished, gesturing indistinctly all the while, “I still have a definite instinct when it comes to using a sword and I’ve worked out a lot of ways to hold my own, but I could still use a refresher on.. I don’t know, defensive strategies and proper form, or.. something. Whenever I go into battle, I’m really just wildly swinging and doing what feels natural. That works against monsters and other unskilled enemies, but.. I kind of have my doubts that I’d be able to wing it against the Calamity.”

“Okay,” Bazz breathed, enunciating the word in a slow, careful way, like he was still busy processing what he’d just heard and couldn’t afford to sacrifice any more brain power on speech. “So what you’re saying is that, the years you spent training as a Knight, and everything you learned is just.. gone?”

“That’s what it basically amounts to, yeah,” Link confessed, his voice low, his self worth so much fucking lower, still.

“I see,” the black Zora answered, nodding in understanding that was suddenly a bit too calm. In questioning, Link drew his wandering gaze upward to look across the desk when Bazz relaxed back into his own chair, his yellow eyes blankly gazing as he turned up what remained in his glass and swallowed it down in a few quick gulps.

“Bazz,” Link said, only for the Zora to put one hand up at him, to silence anything he was planning on saying. He then leaned forward again, taking out the bottle once more and this time filling the glass up to the brim, so that he was forced to sip at it like it was a hot beverage before he tilted it slowly backward, slugging it down.

Finally, when the glass was emptied again and set before the Zora, he folded his arms upon the desk, leaning his head forward as though some great and terrible weight had just fallen onto his shoulders. Once he was done digesting this horrid revelation, without any hesitation at all, he uttered the words, “We’re fucked.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” the Hylian growled, crossing his arms over his chest like a chastised child. He let out a huff, then set back to attempting to wring his friend from the sudden spiral he’d been sent into, all for the sake of gaining his assistance. “So will you help me, then?”

“Why not?” the black Zora spat, shooting up out of his chair so that the thing clattered back with an abrupt noise. “Come on, Link. I’ll show you to the training hall.”

“Not ‘Master Link’ anymore, huh?” the Hylian commented, nodding bitterly at that little blow. “That hurts, Bazz.”

Link already knew perfectly well where the training hall was, but he skulked quietly along in his friend’s shadow. He felt so goddamn small, and sure, he hadn’t expected to be coddled, but he had thought the black Zora would be a bit more understanding. It wasn’t like this was Link’s fault. It
wasn’t like he’d asked to be reborn a helpless idiot, that was just the hand he was dealt. More than anything, he was pissed, but that was fine, he learned better when he was guided by the blazing light of his fury. It motivated him, it focused him. He needed that.

The Guard Captain was still trying to fully grasp what he’d been told, as was clear from how he’d turned deadly serious and nearly silent. Once he’d moved past that difficult revelation, though, his previous edginess melted away, leaving him still stern, but calmer.

In the training hall, Bazz picked up one of the practice swords and pitched it to Link, taking the other for himself. There was only one decent pair of single-handed swords, and they were incredibly weathered from use, but the leather of the grips were supple and comfortable. As though to test it, Link gave the item a few quick swishes.

“I want to cut straight to fighting, if you’re ready,” Bazz stated, his tone removed of all comfortable familiarly and general friendliness. At this very moment, Link was a trainee and Bazz regarded him as such. “It will give me a better idea of what you’re capable of, where your strengths and weaknesses lie. This is how we measure all of our new recruits, though it’s been quite some time since I performed these drills myself.”

“Hopefully you’re not too rusty,” the Hylian stated, so deadpan that one might’ve believed he was serious. Bazz, regardless of whether or not he could tell the difference, let out a bitter chuckle at the irony.

Their clash was hard, fierce, and for the first few minutes of it, Link was certain that the Guard Captain had decided that this was to be how he let off steam from all of his stress. Maybe he was punishing the Hylian for having the gall to call himself Champion while he was actually little more than a fucking amateur with some very intense anger issues. Maybe there was someone else Bazz wanted to soundly beat the life out of, or, more likely, he was just trying to do as his friend had asked and was taking it seriously, but Link was too insecure to recognize that much.

The spar didn’t last any longer than five grueling minutes, but in that time, Bazz didn’t let up once. When he finally stepped back to end it, he studied the Hylian before himself, his golden eyes deeply considering each detail, then he nodded his head as though to say, ‘Good enough, I suppose.’

“It’s not terrible, Master Link,” he gruffly uttered between deep breaths. “You don’t fight like a Knight of Hyrule, but you still move like a warrior. The instincts are still there, just as you said.”

“If I don’t fight like a Knight of Hyrule, what do I fight like, then?” Link asked, genuinely curious as to what Bazz would say. At the inquiry, though, the black Zora’s countenance drew softly into an expression of confusion, of unfamiliarity.

“Something else,” the Zora said, something strangely ominous about the way he said it. “It feels like while you were sleeping, you dreamt of fighting styles that nobody has seen before, but they got muddled when you woke up. In a way, it benefits you, because you bring things to the fight that your opponent won’t know how to counter. I think the best I can do for you is guide you through some of the basics, so that you have a better foundation to build on.”

“Fair enough,” the Hylian agreed, a bit calmer now that he was certain that Bazz’s opinion of him hadn’t actually sunken as far as he’d assumed. In fact, once the veil of insecurity was cast off, he felt quite sure that while the Zora’s methods of guidance were strict and bit unforgiving, Bazz appeared to be enjoying himself, unwinding even.

For him, this was nostalgic, even if it was completely flip-flopped. And deep down, that brat kid in the darkest corners of his psyche was reeling in satisfaction because he had always, always wanted to
say that he’d surpassed his ‘Master.’ When he was younger, Bazz had been so hard on himself for his own slow development, wanting to be bigger and better without wait, without work. Like his mentor, he was none too patient.

Link, on the other hand, had always been a fast learner. He was a natural warrior, even when he was a tiny thing; Bazz remembered. He picked up techniques like they were scattered stones at his feet, waiting to slide into his palms and pockets, his forever. It was amazing then and it was amazing now.

Once the Zora had covered the more basic rules for stance and movement and shared a few simple techniques for defensive swordplay, he felt that it was already remarkable progress. His friend was like the finest quality steel with a dull edge, now just a bit sharper, just a bit more deadly. It took a few hours to cover it all, but unfortunately, that was all Bazz could spare.

He pondered it, wondering if he could assign one of his guardsmen to practicing with the Champion, but in the end there was nobody available who Link could benefit from, since nobody else in the guard favored swords.

“While I’m flattered that you came to me, Master Link,” Bazz began, thinking that mentioning his concerns aloud could lead to a better conclusion, “I am very busy, and I don’t have time to train a Champion. My father in his younger days, yes. Me, I’m afraid not. You need to find somebody else to practice with, if you really want to advance your skill set and perfect it.”

“Bazz,” Link groaned, returning his practice blade to the rack, and brushing back his dampened, blonde fringe. “I can’t trust anyone else with my.. secret. Knowing that my training was lost to that ridiculous hundred year nap was already too much for you to bear and not exactly an easy thing for me to admit, either.”

“I’m glad you told me,” the Zora admitted, his voice much gentler than it had been during any of his tutoring. “But I don’t think you need to be quite so forthcoming in order to find an appropriate mentor to practice with. The more troubling matter is the scarcity of people available. Most Hylians nowadays don’t know the true art of the blade, and very few of our people wield swords, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Those who do mostly picked it up as a hobby, an artistic pursuit to add to their repertoire, but they wouldn’t know anything truly practical or useful. We probably have old swordplay books from Hyrule before it fell, if that’s of any interest,” Bazz said with a shrug. “Books can’t judge you, anyway.”

“Sorry, but I’m more of a hands-on learner,” Link dismissed the suggestion without much consideration, though as quickly as he said it, he was reminded of those damned shrines across Hyrule. That shit was as hands-on as it got and he still hated it. Couldn’t he just practice like a normal person, without every single thing being a life or death situation? Maybe Hylia and the ancient Sheikahs weren’t aware, but he could totally get motivated by things other than survival.

“Hmm..” The Guard Captain trailed off for a moment, sorting through a vast collection of people he knew to be warriors in his head. It wasn’t until his yellow eyes glanced across the room to regard his Hylian friend, and his bruised face, that an idea came to mind. Bazz loathed to suggest it, but by Hylia, watching Link’s reaction was sure to bring a smile to his stitched-up face. “Of course, the Prince’s Knight is considered to be skilled with sword play. I’m fairly sure he uses a sword as his primary weapon, in fact.”

“Those books are starting to sound really appealing all of a sudden,” the Hylian growled, his stomach twisting at the thought of the golden Zora and the goddamn awkward situation between them. They both clearly hated one another, yet necessity had forced them to put it aside for a short time, and now things were all kinds of weird. “Bazz, that guy is about as interesting as stale bread, plus he’s impossible.”
Very quickly, the Guard Captain folded one hand overtop of his mouth to hide the smug grin trying very hard to make its way there. He blinked in a curious way, his gaze alone reflecting a silent, ‘Oh really?’

“Then there’s the fact that things between us are kinda..” Link didn’t have a word to express the state of things between himself and Brivere. His fingers bundled, gnarled like claws for a moment, then he formed a fist and smacked it into his other palm, because somehow that meant something that was feasibly understandable.

“Right,” Bazz replied like he actually understood what his Hylian friend was getting at, sauntering over to the weapon rack in order to put his own practice sword away. He gave it one last flick because he’d forgotten how good it felt to use a blade. After, he cleared his throat, and spoke up in his most serious tone, as if he hadn’t just swished a damn sword like a kid with a toy. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about how the two of you caused a scene. My solution to this mess would be to see the both of you assigned to community service where you’re required to work cooperatively.”

“You’re such a sadist,” Link commented, feeling legitimately threatened because he could not tell if the Zora was joking or not.

“I realize times are stressful, but really..” Bazz said, shaking his head in disappointment all the while, then he gestured for Link to follow him. “I need to get back to my office and catch up on some things. Follow me.”

“It’s more than that, Bazz,” the Hylian continued, surprised by how easily this was spilling out. He normally kept this shit to himself, not wanting to allow others to see the kind of mess he held inside himself. He supposed that today he really wanted to put a burden on the trust that came with his friendship, and he fell in stride with Bazz.

“That may be true, but it’s a well-known fact that he’s a perfectionist who practices nonstop,” the black Zora nonchalantly said with a shrug. He didn’t personally care for the little snot, but if it took working with him to stand a chance in a battle against the Calamity, even Bazz could put his differences aside. Well, with a few drinks, definitely. “He’s exactly the kind of person who’d see every little flaw and would be willing to mull away the hours smoothing every rough spot in your own abilities.”

“For himself, sure,” Link snapped, swatting his hand like the idea of Brivere was a fly buzzing around his head. “For me, doubtful.”

“If it matters, you should at least try,” Bazz suggested, his pace hurried as he turned the corner and entered his office once again. He become rather worried that he might have missed something important while he was off helping the Champion. Once he got settled in his seat once more, his eyes went immediately to the sulking Hylian across from himself, and he breathed an impatient sigh. “Look, Brivere and I have had our own disagreements, but.. I don’t know, the more I think about it, the more I can see how the two of you might have.. some things in common.”

The current look on Link’s face was certainly one of those things, but Bazz refrained from saying that.

“Oh, good one, Bazz. You’re hilarious,” Link groaned, actually cringing, scrunching his eyes shut and leaning his head into one palm like this whole idea was an entire headache. The worst part of it was that, sure, it made feasible sense and he was just being childish, but having to play nice with that man for a second time? No, he just couldn’t. “I take it back, Bazz. Can I get that drink, now?”

“Maybe you should try water,” Bazz teased, fingerling through his paperwork for a moment before
he reached for his bottle of Courser Rum and the glass, setting them within his friend’s reach. He waited for Link to take the first sip before he went on. “I didn’t say that the two of you were exactly the same or that you’d become the best of friends or anything. There are obvious differences between you, but possibly common ground.”

“The only common ground between us is ground that we both want for ourselves,” Link blurted, harsh and absolutely thoughtless between gulps of the bittersweet burn that he knew wouldn’t wipe away the image of Brivere in resignation that so resembled disappointment after Link verbally rejected something as simple and easy as civil behavior.

And now? After Link had already went ahead and reinstated his position as irredeemable asshole from Brivere’s perspective, he was now being told that he needed to make nice for the sake of.. saving the world?

Was it even right for him to be so affected? What did it mean, the fact that thoughts of Brivere got to him like this?

“Hmm,” Bazz hummed, shaking his head after a pause. He was going over some document, so his reply came a little late, but once he looked up at the mess of Hylian across from him, he wore a look of poorly met expectations and of hard won wisdom that saw clearly Link’s path to romantic destruction.

Bazz was an old pro at ruining anything he touched, and driving away anybody he loved, so some merciful part of him wanted to offer his naive friend a better chance.

“Take it from me, Master Link. Jealous Bastard isn’t a good look.” Bazz’s voice was a low purr, his tongue slow to speak his words, fearful that he’d be tempted to inadvertently recount more than he actually wanted to share. But he knew what he was talking about; it was a poor look on a friend and an even worse look on a lover. He was able to keep the focus off of himself, though, by adding, “And if the ‘ground’ you’re talking about is Prince Sidon, you’re better off learning sooner rather than later that the ones you love aren’t things you can possess. Your emotions, your love, whatever it may be, they aren’t currency that you can use to purchase people. No matter how much you invest, or sacrifice, you can never own a person.”

“Okay, okay, I got it,” Link muttered dejectedly before taking another swallow from the glass in his hand. He was contemplating if he was comfortable enough telling Bazz any more about his complicated love life than he had the last time they’d been drinking while Bazz was on the job. Had the Guard Captain become his venting receptacle? Was that implied in drinking buddies?

In the end, Link figured it would be better to trash on Brivere some more, so he went back to that. Placing his glass aside, he asked, “For the sake of experiment, what exactly do you think that Brivere and I have in common?”

“Hmm..” the black Zora hummed again, chewing at his pen in thought. He must have done that a lot because the end of the item was all dented. Link had thought that maybe Bazz secretly owned a dog. The other man’s eyes drew upward to regard Link, his gaze deep in reflection, then once he knew what he wanted to say, he gave a little nod. “In a way, I suppose he reminds me a bit of how you used to be, when you first became the Hylian Champion.”

Link squinted, turning his head aside and pursing his lips like he’d just tasted that same sour flavor he always imagined was present on the golden Zora’s palate, the flavor which left Brivere always making that face that he made. After a moment, he rolled he eyes, but let out a little titter, leaning more into the desk. “I’m listening,” he said.
“You know, just..” Bazz paused, leaving his sentence hanging for a torturous length of time. Either he had turned his attention to actually reading something more important, or he needed more time to reach far enough to actually come up with anything that Link had in common with that guy. Maybe Link was just overly eager, actually.

“His dedication and intensity, his silence,” the Zora man purred at last, his voice way too thoughtful, because that implied that he was really, really trying to be sincere about this. “You were a lot like that once, too. You get the impression that he’s a bit too dedicated, that he is always expecting the worst and trying too hard to get ready for it. Like maybe the uncertainty of the future scares him, but he’s pretending that it doesn’t.”

“And that’s what you think of me, really?” Link laughed, sure that he’d caught Bazz in a load of bullshit.

“Sure,” Bazz nodded, though a sneaky grin snaked its way across the gashed pale of his lips. “Back when you were an insolent brat with way too many things to take responsibility for.”

“Oh, well, I guess we’re being honest now, aren’t we?” He didn’t even care. He was so distant from the person he used to be, they might as well have been talking shit about some guy he didn’t know. Turning the glass up, he finished it and poured himself another, then the Hylian leaned back in the chair, crossing his legs while he idly swirled the liquid about with a slow back and forth tilt.

“Oh, Master Link,” the Zora laughed, getting comfortable all over again in his nostalgia from a simpler time, a time when so many people that he missed now were still alive. If only his brooding, angsty, younger self had the capacity to realize how much all those stupid things would mean in the future.

It made him even more glad that Link actually wasn’t dead.

“One thing’s for sure, it was a hell of a lot easier to warm up to you,” Bazz stated, though he was so caught up in recalling how impossible it was to hold a conversation with Brivere, he momentarily forgot that he and Link had something of a rough start. “..uhh, you know, once I decided that I liked you.”

The Hylian’s ears perked up in interest at that last comment, and he peered across the desk in teasing disbelief. “You mean you didn’t like me right away, then?”

“Oh, uhh,” Bazz laughed awkwardly. What was wrong with him? He wasn’t even drunk enough to be making such verbal blunders. “I walked right into that, didn’t I? Well, okay, no, I didn’t like you right away.”

“Why are you being so shy about it?” Link prodded, quietly laughing over how blunt Bazz could be sometimes, only to play it so mysterious at others. “It isn’t like I remember. Come on, let’s hear the details.”

“There was maybe some animosity between us,” the Zora explained rather sheepishly, shaking his head at his own gross misrepresentation of the past. “Okay, there was a good bit, actually, until I stopped going to such lengths to be the most immense asshole possible.”

He’d been very set on proving his bigness and badness back then, trying so hard to live up to the fierce, powerful image of his war hero father, while also dealing with the feelings of insufficiency that came when his father opted to take the young princess under his wing and let paying attention to his own son fall to the wayside.
“I had to put my own pride aside in order to acknowledge that there was a lot I could learn from you,” Bazz started again, once his thoughts were more in order. “After I made the effort to do that, we really warmed up to one another. I told myself that I was just going to take what I needed from you and other selfish nonsense like that, but after a while I began to truly respect you and enjoy your company.”

Bazz was still embarrassed as hell when he gazed at the man across from him, and spotted an almost affectionate smile on his pink-flushed face. Link kicked one foot, averting his eyes in the sense of loss that overcame him from the simple fact that he couldn’t reflect on these memories, himself. His shattered misconceptions were pretty amusing, however.

“Somehow I’d been imagining young Bazz to be a stubborn, gutsy, idealistic kid who tried to play like a tough guy, but always did the right thing,” Link suggested, though the Zora scoffed almost immediately, so he must have been way off the mark with that one. “From what you’re telling me now, it sounds like you were more of a selfish brat and a bully.”

“Yeah, that’s fairly accurate,” the dark-scaled man’s voice was a rumble coated in layers of shame. “As for the stubborn, gutsy, idealistic kid who played it tough and always did the right thing- you must be thinking of Gaddison. For a long time, you were actually closer to her than you were with me, so it’s no surprise that you seem to remember somebody like that.”

How many times had Bazz been off making some other kid’s life a living hell, only for a young, pastel girl to show up out of nowhere, proclaiming herself to be a heroine, before tackling him to the ground? He’d definitely lost several teeth to Gaddison’s knuckles back then, but he liked to tell himself now that it was just her way of flirting.

“In any case,” the Zora brushed off the subject matter before if pulled a one-eighty on him and left him feeling more sad than happy. He hoped Kodah didn’t remember that one thing he did when they were younger. He hoped Kayden forgave him. “Perhaps it would be worthwhile for you to put your differences aside with Brivere as well, even if it is only for self-gain.”

As Bazz had done before, Link slugged back what remained in the glass, relishing the temporary effects while he could, all too aware that they would fade away soon enough. Once he’d swallowed the drink down, he let out a little sigh, and spoke the hardest words that had ever allowed to pass his lips, “Maybe you’re right.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

The noose was tightening. The Guard Captain's mercy had worn thin and he'd resolved not to spare the rod when it came to getting answers from those who were guilty. Yet in the shadows, the freed ones continued to conspire, all too aware that their people still suffered in Zora's Domain and that the inevitable conflict was nearing. Link, too, was preparing himself. He'd swallowed his pride and made a friend of his old rival, because the Calamity wouldn't wait until he was ready to call himself 'Champion,' and only Brivere held the means to lend him that title.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I know that my notes on the last two chapters have been scarce, and I'm constantly running late, but I hope you're all still enjoying the story. I have SOME people to thank. As ever, thank you to my kind donors, I really appreciate the support. <3 Thank you to the AWESOME artists who've done art for this story. You are all BLESSED. Thank you to Draikinator, to WindyRen, to Sidondays, to Alouette-Lulu, and to BunnyBob.

Also, before I let you lot get into the story, let me just mention, we actually have a Coma Baby Discord now! I have links on my tumblr, and I'm gonna try to link on my profile. Everyone is welcome. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This part of the barracks hadn't gotten any proper use in such a long time, and normally, that might have been a matter of pride to any given citizen of Zora’s Domain. These were times, however, that it was hard to be proud of.

The gated door groaned, heavy on its hinges and Bazz’s toeclaws clicked upon the cold stone of the dark, chamber floor while the keys jingled in the hand of the guardsman tightly locking the barred door behind him.

Bazz’s tired, yellow gaze was immediately met by his Lieutenant’s backward glance. The man had a scrap of cloth in hand, dutifully wiping the blood from his knuckles as though he meant for it to be gone before his superior arrived, though he didn’t hasten his efforts in the slightest.

“Sir, I would say that you should be resting,” the other armored Zora began, pausing to chuckle as his eyes danced across the horrid mark bisecting Bazz’s face, “but the stitches definitely make you look more intimidating, so you might as well put it to good use.”

“Hm,” the Guard Captain hummed, not terribly amused. He knew that his immediate underling meant well, but any attempt to improve Bazz’s mood at this particular moment was a lost cause. He’d had to tip back a few more drinks before bothering to come face this awful duty. “How is it going?”
“I’ve been trying to soften them up, but they are surprisingly straight-faced,” the Lieutenant hissed, frustration clear enough in his tone and even clearer in the snarl of contempt he unabashedly wore. It left Bazz wondering, did the other man hate these people because of what they’d done? Or had he always hated them and now had the perfect excuse to do so outwardly?

“If they weren’t traitors, I’d say to recruit them,” the black Zora commented. It was a joke, of course, but it fell flat when it passed his lips.

“Right, sir,” the other Zora snickered, still finding the humor in the fact that his boss had suggested something so obviously ludicrous. “What’s the plan?”

“If you softened them up enough, they should be ripe for talking,” Bazz replied. It was a common practice to have one guardsman go in first making threats and selling the story that there was no hope, only for another to come in later to offer a gentler hand, a sympathetic ear, preying on their vulnerability and their desperation for someone they could trust. It wasn’t infallible, but it wasn’t completely without merit, either. “If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to double down on the stronger ones, make examples of them in front of the weaker ones, then separate out the weak ones and wait for them to sing.”

“That sounds thorough, sir.” The Lieutenant praised the guidance of his superior with a nod of agreement and a hungry smile. “You must have been just waiting to sink your teeth into these people.”

Bazz was under the impression that, actually, it was the other Zora who’d moreso been excitedly waiting for this, and the fact that he was enjoying it so much was disconcerting, but the Guard Captain said nothing of it.

“I’m just doing my job,” he dully replied, his armor clinking with the shrug of his shoulders. A few steps took him to the heavy, steel door which led inside a large holding cell and another one of his guardsmen unlocked the door to let him enter.

The air was already still and quiet with apprehension, and it only intensified when the Guard Captain walked in. The shine of numerous pairs of gold and silver eyes flickered up to gaze upon him, only to shoot away just as quickly. Bazz’s Lieutenant followed at his heels, but held his position near the door as it locked tightly with a clink behind them. The black Zora stepped a bit nearer to the lot of captured traitors, wanting them all to get a good look at him despite the dim pale of the sparse luminous stone lamps.

The cell was lined with benches very likened to those in the grand chambers of the Basilica, where Zora’s might seat themselves before the shrines to Hylia and the three Great Spirits. These differed in the fact that a steel bar was attached to the backside of each bench, something for the restraining cuffs to be fastened to, in order to keep every prisoner in their seat.

The walls, too, had bars bolted to them, so that in the case of the benches being completely filled, additional captives could be hitched tightly to the walls where they’d be forced to stand, indefinitely if the guardsmen so chose. As it stood, this was precisely the situation at hand. The seats had been lined to capacity. Every corner and perimeter of the mass holding cell now occupied Undercity Zoras in tight bindings.

Bazz slowly circled the benches like some strict, scholarly Apostle might while they lectured unruly students. He folded his hands behind his back, taking stock of each individual in his presence: some were steely, others straight-faced but seemingly unsteady, while yet others wore fresh streaks of blood and tears from the rough treatment they’d received proceeding Bazz’s arrival.
“I’m Guard Captain Bazz, the person who’s responsible for each and every one of you, up until you’re all put on trial for the crimes which you’ve committed,” he began, the deep resonance of his voice both steel and velvet, stern yet soft enough to allow room for sympathy. “I’m sure that many of you are uncertain, at this point, what is to become of you, and I’m here to be honest- it doesn’t look good.”

At the black Zora’s words, some of the Undercity Zoras rattled at their chains, their bodies folding forward at what must have stung like a real, physical blow. Before today, they’d thought they had some vague hope of disobeying long established laws, of getting away with their little heist, and with every word Bazz uttered, that hope was dashed, along with any assumptions they might’ve held of having lives beyond this fatal error in judgement.

“What I know at this point is that, because of what you all did and what you participated in, the remaining adult civilians of the Undercity have been confined to the Basilica, at least until we have a better idea of how deep this treachery goes. The children will most likely end up in the hands of the state and will be cared for in the absence of those who’ve been placed in confinement. The Apostles who profess in youth welfare are good at their jobs, so I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” Bazz went on, making sure he laid the guilt on thick. He wanted these people to suffocate beneath the awful gravity of what they’d done. The weight of it left scarcely any room for remorse in his own heart, and he was busy writhing in that very tight confinement, watching helplessly as the world slipped ever closer to chaos.

He couldn’t help but think that his light hand was the very thing that allowed the events of the previous night to unfold. He’d spared the rod and spoiled the Undercity.

“But for all of you, though, and the others who allied with the villains who attacked our city and killed our people,” the Gaurd Captain called over the bowed heads of the captives, his words sharpening, “...the reality is that you’re to be put on trial for treason, for conspiring with enemies of Zora kind, and for being accessories to an attack which resulted in several deaths. It goes without saying, the death penalty is all that any of you have to look forward to.”

The black Zora came to a halt, pausing and giving one toeclaw a few disappointed clicks. He took a deep breath, setting it free in the form of a heavy sigh, then he continued his predatory circling, his lithe frame a veritable shadow in the low light, save for the silvery armor that adorned him. Even that pale, shining surface was a mirror reflecting shadow and faint, ghostly blue.

“The fact that so many people suddenly warrant such a severe penalty in a system as lenient as ours is honestly shameful, by my own opinion, and I admit, I’d be more than pleased to see it lightened for any among you who are willing to cooperate and do your part in amending this heinous wrongdoing,” Bazz stated, his voice softening all over again, striking a sincere, imploring tone. “I want to see justice done, and I want our people to receive proper closure from this terrible event. I want to help and I need those among you who’re willing to do their own part to make amends to help me in return. We are looking for any relevant facts, names of the main conspirators, the location which the rest of your group fled to, anything useful that you have to offer, anything that can help us get to the bottom of what happened.”

At last, the Captain’s slow, methodical process of selection lead him before the bench, where a young, Undercity man was seated. The boy had clearly already had a taste of the Lieutenant’s own interrogation methods, as his lip was swollen and split at one corner, leaving the boy’s dull, gray scales painted a darker tone in his blood. He was small, hardly into adulthood, and when Bazz stopped before him, another guardsman came over to unhitch his restraints from the bar, forcing the boy to his feet.
The black Zora raised his hand to dissuade the other guardsman’s rough handling of the young, Undercity man, but even so, the shackled boy’s eyes dared not rise above the floor, they dared not meet the intense, golden stare of the Guard Captain.

“Tell me what you know, son,” Bazz demanded, not a hint of question to the deep purr of his voice.

“Nothing, sir,” the boy uttered, his trembling voice barely above a whisper, his head slowly turning aside as though the hovering shadow of the armored Zora threatened to consume him, and he needed desperately to look away, lest he’d provoke it with his eyes.

Bazz was unconvinced, but he said nothing, opting to wait in tense silence while the young man stood, rattling his restraints with his nervous trembling. Eventually, the weak-willed young man licked his bloodied lips, wetting his dry mouth a bit before he spoke further in the hopes of wringing himself from the Guard Captain’s attention.

“All I was told was that we were leaving,” he weakly stated, his head dipped low in fear. “Nobody even told me where we were going. I was told that there would be a signal, and when it came, we were going to swim down the Zora River. I didn’t know anything about those people who attacked the Domain. I didn’t know an attack was even going to happen.”

The boy seemed like he was near tears, barely holding them back, and all Bazz could think was, ‘That’s good.’ “You’re doing fine,” he purred, making of himself somehow both a blanket of concealing warmth and a deathtrap threatening to snap tightly upon any frail body he could ensnare with his honied reassurances. “If somebody told you all of these things, then that must mean you know something useful. Who gave you this information?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the boy shook his head. He sounded pleading, almost honest, and maybe in some part, he was being truthful. But even so, he was still doing his best to conceal whatever he could and Bazz saw right through that. “I didn’t know them.”

“Then tell me what you noticed about them,” the black Zora gently questioned, guiding the young man’s admissions with careful prompting. “Give me a description of their appearance.”

“I didn’t really look them in the face too much,” he uttered with a shrug.

“Young man,” Bazz said, harder, fiercer, daring this boy to insult the gentler version of the Captain’s intelligence with his disingenuousness, daring this boy to push away the kind version of Bazz who stood before him, in favor of whatever laid beneath that, because it promised not to be pretty. “Tell me what you do know, whatever you did notice.”

“I don’t know,” the boy whispered, his voice lodged in the tight space of his throat, his chin quivering so that his lips drew back from his teeth. “They had silver scales and clear fins. That’s all I can remember.”

Nodding in apparent satisfaction, Bazz slowly turned and strode away from the young, Undercity boy. The shaking youth was shoved back into a seated position and shackled in place, a breathy sob escaping him from his fear or perhaps his weakness.

Again, the black Zora paced slowly about, his slitted pupils flickering across each downcast face in the crowd, taking in any details that stuck out to him, sifting through them until he honed in on any visible sign of vulnerability. At last, he paused before an elderly woman, thinking it was no wonder she’d been captured. Her body was visibly weathered and already tired beyond what she could handle. Her bones hardly held the position she’d been forcibly bound in, and her gaze was set straight ahead, unblinking as though she were attempting to forget where she was, altogether.
“What about you?” Bazz gestured to her with a single pointed finger, the sharp of his fingerscale poised before the old woman’s wrinkled visage. Before he even finished the sentence, the senior was yanked from her seated position, her thin skin like paper beneath the rough hands of the armored Zora at her back, yet she stifled a hiss, even so.

“What will you tell me what you know, please?” the Guard Captain asked with the same pretense of kindness painting his voice with warmth.

Grumbling, the old Undercity Zora raised her head, boldly meeting the gaze of the man who towered before her. She chewed at her lips in disgruntled consideration, the muscles of her neck so weak that her head teetered about, but her glare held as steady as the Guard Captain himself.

“I’ll certainly tell you what I know, young man,” she grumbled, her voice a wobbly sound, yet sharp with inflamed passion. She made certain that Bazz understood that, the way he’d spoken to the young Zora before, with patronizing authority, was precisely the way she was addressing him now. “I know just who you are, son of the Demon Sergeant.”

She might have waggled a knobby finger at Bazz as she spat the words, were her arms not cuffed behind her back.

“I followed your father into battle against the horrors of the Calamity, into what seemed like a hopeless, last-ditch effort to save our home and our people,” she recounted, and Bazz narrowed his eyes when she did, discomforted but stubbornly unwilling to let it show.

“Many other Undercity Zoras, like me, stood up and fought in that same battle, even though we had no training, and even though we weren’t warriors because we’d never been allowed to train as such. But even so, we all believed in doing what was right. We all believed that things would change, that we would finally be recognized as equals to those of you who live above us, and we even had the naivety to believe that if we did win the fight, it would be for a home worth returning to. This Domain was saved by our bloodshed, our sacrifice, and after the fight was won, this Domain was repaired by our labor. Regardless, nothing ever changed. The nobility are still our rulers to this day and you, young man, you and all of your guardsmen you’re not the hands of justice that you believe yourselves to be. All you are is the militant force upholding the rule of the upper class and maintaining our subjugation.”

“That is what I know, young man,” she snapped with a defiant nod, her teeth still as shining and sharp as any youths’, “...and honestly, son, if that’s not information enough, well, you can go fuck yourself.”

Blinking in surprise, Bazz set his mouth into a straight line, hovering in silence for a tense instant. Slowly, every set of eyes wandered hesitantly upward, the fearful gazes of the Undercities both uncertain and wary, wondering how the armored Zora would react to such blatant disrespect. Would he break the shroud of kindness he’d donned for the sake of preying on their desperation and fear? Would his ego take him on a power trip from which there was no return, at least not for the breakable elder standing boldly within reach of his fists?

What would he do?

The answer to that might have not been one of outright violence, but one of calm, calculated cruelty. His gaze snapped up from the sight of the old woman challenging him, her tail idly flicking against her hunched back while she awaited her fate. It went, instead, to the guardsman whose hand was tight on the chain which held the old, Undercity Zora.

With a soft tilt of his head, the Captain gave his command, carrying on in his circling, seeking out the
next captive he wished to question, all while the guardsman dragged the old Zora to the wall, attaching her restraints there, instead, where she would be forced to stand.

“Guardsman Gaddison?” came a voice which interrupted the pastel Zora’s preparations for duty. Even with the afternoon sun pouring through the stone archway, and the glowing torchlight within the armory, when the woman turned at the sound of her name, she saw little more than the inky silhouette of another Zora. Her hands paused upon the straps which held her armor in place, one raising up to block out the sun’s glare.

Mercifully, the one who’d just arrived took a few steps deeper, into the stuffy, stone-built halls, coming near enough for Gaddison to recognize her to be a courier from Zora’s Domain.

“I have important orders from the Guard Captain here,” the courier explained, reaching into a rucksack that hung upon the fin of her hip, and she drew forth a bamboo tube, holding it out in offering.

“Shouldn’t you be delivering them to the fort Sergeant?” the older woman asked, a touch of bitterness sharpening the edge of her words.

“Captain Bazz asked me to make certain that they were delivered specifically to you,” replied the courier, her hand not drawing back for an instant, but steadily waiting.

“Interesting,” purred the pastel Zora in intrigue, a vague sense of excitement prickling at the flesh beneath her scales. Reaching for the package, she drew it from the other Zora’s grasp, however pausing to gesture to the straps of her armor. It took her so much longer to get it all affixed into place on her own, and she’d be damned if she asked any Undercity guardsman for assistance. “Can you help me with this?”

“Oh,” the courier uttered, having been about to turn on heel when the request was made. Her yellow eyes stole an inquisitive glance at Gaddison, at her svelte build and smooth scales, then the courier sheepishly mumbled the word, “Sure.”

The younger woman’s nimble fingers took hold of the straps and began tightening the buckles, and the pale Zora uttered a word of encouragement, rather preferring when the heavy suit clung tightly to her with no room for wiggling. She wanted to feel like the steel was part of her, like she embodied its strength.

While the young courier fastened the buckles more to Gaddison’s liking, the older woman opened the bamboo tube which held the message from the Guard Captain. She loosened the rolled sheets of parchment from their casing, finding two specific letters inside, one directed at Gaddison, while the other was written to Sergeant Betaal, though it was clear from the context that Bazz meant for the lavender woman to read both, first and foremost.

“There was an attack on Zora’s Domain?” she questioned with concern as her eyes flickered over the words with haste. Something in her chest clenched at that, in knowing that she hadn’t been there.

“There was,” the courier breathed in dismay, something terribly downtrodden about the way she said it, but Gaddison didn’t question it. Instead, she skimmed the letter which was intended for her ‘superior’, then she placed it back inside the bamboo tube.

“Thank you for your help,” Gaddison cooed, the timbre of her voice warm and rich, her words slow and honey smooth. She placed the message tube back into the hands of the young courier and gave
her a tiny smile of reassurance. “Can you please deliver this message to the Sergeant?”

“Of course,” the younger woman breathed with a nod, taking the offered package without question. She dipped her head in respect to excuse herself, then turned to leave the shadow of the armory, blinking while she pattered back into the vivid bright of the afternoon.

The messenger knew well her course to Sergeant Betaal’s tent, as she returned there day after day. She navigated the fort with ease, folding back the canvas flap of the Undercity woman’s shelter to be greeted immediately by that familiar smile. The blue Zora’s smiles always seemed to miss the mark in expressing true joy or happiness, but today it was even further from it, as the shine of her sharp teeth was belied by the dull appearance of her one eye, her attempt like an illusion she struggled to maintain.

“Oh good, just in time,” Betaal greeted the familiar courier in a muted way. She, like the other Zora woman who’d received the first delivery, wasn’t quite into her armor yet, but somehow she looked even stronger, despite that. She was smaller in appearance without it, but it left visible the relaxed definition of the powerful musculature beneath her chaffed scales.

The dutiful Sergeant already had her reports readied for transport and was putting the last seals on a larger package. She gathered it up and turned to approach the courier, casually sliding the smaller packets into the other woman’s rucksack so that she didn’t have to. When it came to the larger one, however, she tucked it into the hands of the messenger, tapping at it with one fingerscale like it was of particular importance.

“Do me this big favor, please,” she implored, her graved voice softened. “See to it that the Apostle Loreen of the Basilica receives this package.”

“Certainly, sir,” the courier said with a curt nod, exchanging the tube for the package. It was wrapped in heavy paper that crinkled, and it was weighty in the messenger’s hand. She held it only long enough to remember its appearance before she tucked it away and returned her attention to the Undercity woman. “Anything else, sir?”

“That’s all, thank you,” Betaal said, offering another poorly executed grin while she pried open the tube with a soft pop. The Sergeant didn’t notice it, but while she fussed with getting the rolled parchment from the narrow casing, the young courier gave the item a concerned, almost guilty glance, but bowed her head to quickly excuse herself without a word.

When Betaal read anything, she did it with the text drawn close to her face, her head turned slightly more to one side, to better center her single-eyed gaze. And despite what many probably assumed about her, thanks to the fact that she was an Undercity Zora, she had a very high level of reading comprehension. When it came to this particular message, however, she was given cause to furrow her features in confusion, and slowly, she backed up to take a seat at the edge of her bed.

“The Guard Captain wants me to personally escort the civilians from the fort to Hateno Village?” It seemed a strange, suspicious request to make, considering that she’d been under the impression that Guardsman Tottika would be heading that mission alone. The ones who’d fallen back were a small bunch, and Betaal was sure that, even if that boy was soft, he could handle it.

Even more odd, the Guard Captain had written out a roster of guardsmen that he wanted assigned to the escort mission. Normally, he allowed Betaal to make her own choices in regards to who’d be selected for any given duty; that was generally what her job description entailed, anyway. This was a bizarre, new level of micro management from a man who, to this point, had been very trusting and offered nothing but approval for the work Betaal did as fort Sergeant.
Having her own job suddenly wrung from her hands was unnerving enough, yet as the Sergeant continued reading, she was only given further cause for concern. Dunma’s name was included in the roster.

What did this mean?

“He wants both the Sergeant and the Corporal to leave the Fort for this simple escort mission? And who’s going to run the..” the woman trailed off, unable to finish her sentence, not just because the very answer she desired had been delivered, but because the answer she received filled her with enough horror and suspicion to knock the breath from her lungs, and cruelly twine her gut like some kind of vicious spindle.

The Guard Captain was making Guardsman Gaddison the acting Sergeant in the absence of Betaal and Dunma.

The constant clink of armor was common enough that the sound often faded into the rest of the background noise of Fort Boko. Still, Tottika had hardly acclimated to such hustle and bustle, nor such a variety of travelers, so he couldn’t help the urge to glance over his shoulder at everything that drifted into his vicinity.

He was on duty near the gate of the fort, which was open and unsecured during the day to allow the back and forth travel of Mercay Islanders, so it didn’t hurt to be extra vigilant, right? Okay, perhaps he was really just a bit on the jumpy side, but he hoped that he wasn’t too visibly spooked when he turned completely around at the faintest sign of a fellow Zora approaching from his back, at that clink, clink, clink that should’ve long been familiar.

“Guardsman, may I have a word?” asked the older Zora who’d come up behind Tottika, accidentally startling him. The pout of Gaddison’s lips held the tiniest smile of amusement and it was by that small sign that the younger of the two Zoras understood that she’d caught onto how tense he was. It left his pale cheeks burning violet in embarrassment, but he straightened and answered her promptly.

“Yes, sir?” he muttered. He easily recognized the more senior guardsman, and honestly, it was difficult not to. There probably wasn’t a young Zora in all of the guard who hadn’t looked on the soft matte pale of Gaddison’s form adorned in gleaming silver and entertained a few smitten considerations. There probably also wasn’t a single Zora at all who didn’t realize that she was the one coveted by the Guard Captain.

Or was it the other way around?

“Guardsman is fine,” she purred, her tone of voice a rich, smokey sound. “I know that I’m a more senior member of the guard, but I’m not quite your superior, yet.”

“I, uhh,” he hesitated, unsure of what she meant in adding a ‘yet,’ “..I just like to be extra respectful, sir.”

“Well, if that’s what you want,” she nodded, folding her arms and studying the young, black Zora before her in consideration. “I understand that you were assigned a post at Hateno Village, but from what I hear, your sister has it well under control. I think, if you’re anything like that twin of yours, we could use some of that raw talent here at the fort, instead.”

“.I can’t disobey orders, sir,” Tottika muttered in uncertainty. He was unsure where this was even coming from. He’d been practically counting down the days until he received Bazz’s word to
complete the move to Hateno Village, and now that he had it, he was itching for departure. He’d only recently gotten the news of success regarding the battle for the Hylian village, the reaffirmation that his sister was safe, but even so.. he was a little jealous that’s she’d been granted the honor of true combat, while he’d been forced to turn tailfins and flee back to this place. He wanted a little taste of that same excitement.

“No, of course not, that’s not what I’m suggesting,” Gaddison gestured dismissively with one hand, her tone taking on a sound a quick reassurance. “I can easily file for the transfer, so long as you consent to it, and once it’s sent off, it will be approved with ease. It pays to make the right friends. That’s a lesson you could learn from me.”

“Um, yes, sir,” the young guardsman meekly agreed, still utterly confused, even so. “Is there a reason you want me to return to the fort after the Hateno escort mission?”

“There is,” she confirmed, her voice dropping lower. “I was recently informed that there was an attack on our home..”

“An attack?” Tottika repeated, his slitted pupils tightening in anxiety and undeniable intrigue. He couldn’t help himself; all the stories he’d heard during his childhood came rushing right back, flooding his veins with adrenaline. There were so many stories of valiant battle against the Calamity, of shining Knights struggling against hopeless odds and ultimately prevailing. He swallowed hard, quickly wrangling control of his voice again in order to continue. “..on Zora’s Domain?”

“I’m afraid so,” the Zora woman breathed, much more solemn about the subject matter than the brash, young Zora in her midst. Her visage was painted in frustration, but also in a mysterious shade of resolve. “However, I need you to keep that tidbit quiet for now.”

Gaddison’s warm honey-gold eyes met Tottika’s bright, unmarred gaze, a certain depth to her seriousness that left the black Zora stunned by his own curiosity, as well as the lingering intimidation. The more senior guardsman, ‘The Heroine’ some called her, had this remarkable intensity- it was stunning, enchanting.

“I’ve told you this because I trust you, guardsman.” She spoke softly, taking a small step nearer, and glancing about for the sake of making certain that nobody could be eavesdropping on their conversation. Tottika held his breath, his heart feeling as though it had stilled at the notion of being trusted by someone like Guardsman Gaddison.

“In truth, I’ve been tasked with launching an investigation into the matter,” the woman confessed, her tongue moving slowly and smoothly across each word. “I believe you to be a rather capable soldier and I could certainly use your strength. I need someone to be my right hand, someone diligent, someone I can trust. Doesn’t that sound like you, Tottika?”

“Yes ma’am..” he breathed, the air between himself and his fellow suddenly static, and he quickly shook his head, his forefins flapping from side to side as he did. “I mean, yes, sir!”

“I thought so as well,” the pastel Zora purred, a small, mysterious smile showing the shine of her sharp fangs. “I’m happy to see that there are still brave, young warriors like you who we can count on. It seems that your instincts are already serving you well; you were right to maintain formalities. As of tonight I’ve been placed into the role of acting Sergeant of the fort, in charge of rooting out any spies or traitors, and I wish to give the first of my orders to you, as you’re a guardsman who I believe to be trustworthy.”

“I’m at your service, sir,” Tottika said, soft and serious, his back straightening in readiness. He couldn’t believe that he’d been selected for something so important, so official. He wanted nothing
more than to please his new superior, to live up to her expectations.

“Excellent.” Gaddison’s tongue was sharp and precise, her warm gaze that much sharper. “Then, listen carefully, guardsman. While you’re on your mission to escort the civilians to Hateno Village, I’d like for you to keep an eye on Sergeant Betaal and Corporal Dunma. We believe that the Sergeant might’ve been abusing her position and that she had a hand in the attack on Zora’s Domain.”

“Sergeant Betaal, sir?” Tottika repeated in surprise. He hadn’t personally served under Betaal for very long, only for as long as he’d been temporarily stationed here, so he didn’t know her well. She certainly wasn’t as familiar to him as Guardsman Gaddison, and therefor, she was less trustworthy on that basis, alone. However, he was perhaps taken aback by the notion that an Undercity woman, who’d been granted such an honor as the rank of Sergeant, would have the audacity to be a traitor.

“Are you paying attention, guardsman? This is important,” the Zora woman drew nearer, strict and demanding, a shining emblem of justice to be done. “Don’t disobey any of her orders, don’t make yourself suspicious in any way. Just watch. Then, when you return to the fort, report straight to me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Tottika answered with a nod, and without an ounce of hesitation.

The sun of the afternoon was shrouded by the clouds of evening. Days were growing shorter, nights ever colder. Normally, cold water was a comfort to a sleeping Zora. It slowed their bodies’ pace into a deep, soothing rest. It calmed, contented, and very possibly even served to remind them of the first chill their tender scales ever felt, breaking free of their eggs and swimming out into the world, into life.

But for one young guardsman, even the air of coming winter couldn’t calm her into serenity at rest, not with the horrid places her dreams had carried her to as of late. She hated it, from the silver of her scales, to the speckles of her lacy fins.

Those dark dreams were difficult to think about, and yet she couldn’t help but Mull everything over in the quiet hours she spent on duty. The awful imagery entwined her thoughts, so that she stood fighting off the tremors which wracked her, and the fretting, glassy shine of tears in her eyes.

Maybe it was the fact that she had other, more dreadfully real fears pestering at her constantly, and that made it easier, overall, for her to turn to gruesome fantasies, instead. At least she could tell herself that none of it was real.

“Tetra,” came the voice of one of her fellows, another young Undercity Zora who’d joined the City Guard not so long ago. Her silver eyes shot up, blinking away the distractions and settling on the image of the one who was calling to her. It was a young man who she’d trained with. He had a dim expression that always left him looking bored or unconcerned, and it often belied how dreadfully observant he really, truly was. “Your shift is long over,” he said with a sly smile.

“Right,” she hissed, cursing herself for getting so tied up in her own head.

She hurried from her post to the armory, where she began hastily unfastening the buckles of her armor. Normally, as a less senior guardsman, she was supposed to polish the steel at the end of her shift, but because of her slippery focus, she was now a bit strapped for time.

Sergeant Betaal was sure to have her ass if she found out that Tetra had fell short on her duties, but..
well, she couldn’t be concerned with that. She had carefully lain plans that predated her royal screw up, so she would just have to hope for the best.

Tetra strode from the dark, masonry halls once she was out of the protective gear, walking quickly but not too quickly. She glanced toward the sky, at how the sun had dipped out of sight on the horizon, and she prayed to merciful Hylia that she wasn’t running too late. She prayed even harder that the person she was meant to be meeting actually showed up, because if not...

No, she couldn’t think about that.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, finding horrid images waiting just behind the dark of her eyelids. There were flashes of a land torn asunder, of waterways that ran thick and red with blood, of Zoras brandishing weapons against other Zoras, their eyes shining with hatred and malice.

In those dreams, she always fled. She ran and ran, too afraid to even attempt swimming, for the fear that she may feel the blood of her kin rushing past her gills, and taste it on her tongue. Instead, she delved deeper into the darkness, into the shadowy edges of her dreamworld which was lined with trees that had grown impossibly tall, impossibly dense. She fought her way into the forest, until she could no longer hear the sounds of conflict, and she could no longer feel her heart tightening in fear, her instincts insisting that these awful things could, maybe, truly come to pass.

In her dreams, she sought sanctuary, finding it in the form of a misty valley, hidden somewhere in the deepest reaches of a shadowy forest. It was always the same, no matter how many times she had the dream; she burst free of the forest and into the dense grasses, glancing over her shoulder to see one clear and distinctive path which laid behind her. And before her, across the peaceful meadow, there were two other paths, yet each of them was blocked by strange entities which both boggled and intrigued the young, Undercity woman.

She had seen a fox once or twice in her life. They were sneaky, little devils who disappeared as quickly as you caught sight of them, always giving you a suspicious glance before they darted into cover. She’d seen them before, while she spear fished in the early morning hours.

But in the dream, there was a fox of a much different sort. It sat blocking one of the paths, its fur a shining, vibrant gold to match its deep, intelligent gaze. It had eyes which studied her as she came near, but unlike the foxes Tetra knew, it never retreated.

The other path from the meadow was blocked by a creature that an isolated, Undercity girl had no hope of identifying. It was a great and terrible beast, a giant feline with a sleek, muscular frame marked by a pattern of stripes. Upon its brow, there was a third eye which was always open wide, watching, seeing. It looked through her, leaving her feeling vulnerable and exposed.

She often awakened before she had a chance to find her way any further than that calm meadow, or past those two, strange beasts. She wished she knew what it meant, if anything. Maybe it was silly to assume it meant a damn thing, at all.

“Headed out, Tetra?” The sentry in charge of watching the gate at night called out as she passed, and once again, she pushed her wandering thoughts aside in favor of behaving like a normal person. She upturned her silvery gaze, raising one hand to the one who’d hollered down from the upper walls; he was another Undercity Zora who’d been a recruit with her, and he smiled when she skirted by.

“I need a quick swim,” she replied, her voice sweet and earnest. Nobody ever doubted her when she spoke and that was in her favor.

“If you come back late, I’ll open the gate for you,” the other guardsmen called his response, and she
nodded her head, picking up her pace at last once she crossed the bridge outside of the fort walls.

It wasn’t lying if it was partly true, though, right? In the shallow waters of the wetland, Tetra dipped herself low, so that her small, silvery frame slipped easily below the surface, and she glided along with the steady paddling kick of her webbed feet.

Much like in her dreams, her secret meeting place was a quiet spot where the shallow waters met a dense area of trees. There was a patch of hilly earth which kept the thicket above water level, feeding the trees while keeping them from drowning at the very same time.

She used to come here almost every night in the summer, back when fireflies lit the tree lined area and it didn’t seem quite so shadowy. Now there was only cold air and the fireflies were long gone. Even the night was a moonless one, and as Tetra drew herself out of the water, she peered skyward once more, trying to discern if it was because of the overcast, or if it was a new moon. An orb cast in darkness hovered overhead, its face encircled in a red glow that ominously peeked through the edges of the clouds. It was a sign that the days were counting down now, until the arrival of the Blood Moon.

But for tonight, the pure darkness suited Tetra just as well. It was her greatest ally in this dangerous game she was playing.

The young woman wove her way between the trees, her silvery eyes turning nearly black from how her pupils widened to let in scarce light. At the sound of rustling leaves, she froze, her fins flaring in alarm, her eyes searching the obscure shapes, black on top of black, on top of a dark figure, on top of more black.

“Tetra?” a familiar voice whispered, and in hearing her own name spoken by a voice she’d been so anxious to hear, the Zora let out her held breath, rushing toward the figure she could scarcely make visual sense of but that she could feel while she hurriedly approached.

The electrical pattern billowed ever so softly around the other person, tickling at the Undercity girl’s senses, warming them with its familiarity. It was her mother, and she rushed into the arms of the other woman.

“You made it,” she cried, bumping her forehead softly against the older woman’s in tender greeting, in relief. “I was so worried. What happened? Did everyone make it out safely? Did the people of Mercay Island agree to let our people stay?”

“Slow down, Tetra,” the older woman breathed, hugging her daughter tightly for a few moments more before she set her free, in favor of answering her inquiries. “For now, we’re welcome at the Mercay Island settlement, though its still strange and uncomfortable. We haven’t properly met any of the people who live there, yet, so it’s still easy to feel that we could be ousted at any given time. As for whether or not everyone made it out,” she paused, chuckling bitterly, “the City Guard reacted as you would have expected. The attack on Zora’s Domain didn’t distract them for very long.”

“Attack?” Tetra sharply repeated her mother’s words, though she was distracted momentarily by a burst of electrical activity somewhere amongst the trees. She concluded that it was probably an animal, hoping it was, anyway, because she was sans a weapon, then she looked back at the dark shape of her mother before her, her heart racing with renewed anxiety. “What do you mean, ‘attack’?”

“Calm down,” the older, Undercity woman cooed. She wasn’t exactly poised about the matter herself, but she’d determined that once she’d made up her mind, she wouldn’t show any weakness from there. She couldn’t afford to set her fears free before her own daughter, now.
“Calm down?” the young guardsman hissed, her hands tightly bundled, the bloody images from her dreams dancing through her mind again, threatening to materialize. “How can you ask me to calm down? The mass exodus wasn’t meant to be a conspiracy involving an attack on Zora’s Domain. How can you ask me to calm down when you and I are the main conspirators and I’m in the City Guard? Mother, the Yiga didn’t tell us the ‘event’ was going to be an attack. They didn’t say th-”

“You’re smarter than that, my girl,” the older Zora sharply raised her voice so that her fangs would’ve flashed in the moonlight, if there were any. “If you thought hard enough, you would have come to the same conclusion I did, in regards to what the ‘event’ would be.”

“Mother!” The guardsman began to turn hysterical at how blase the other woman was being about all this. Her mother was a strong woman, sure, but otherwise she was a fisher. She’d never been anything but a fisher. So how was it now that she got to play like she was some unbreakable revolutionary? It had been Tetra who’d carried the original message to her, about the chance she’d been offered by the unlikely ally she’d acquired while working the fort. She breathed, or so she tried to, then she continued, “...if there was an attack, then that means people must have been hurt or even killed. Those deaths are going to be blamed on us and on the Undercity people. This could easily just make everything wors-”

“Sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good.” Another calm purr spoke aloud, to interrupt Tetra’s fretting. She recognized the smooth sound of it, so she was only startled for a quick instant. Once she recovered, she found herself searching hopelessly for the source of the voice in the shadows, only for them to step forward.

Another figure joined the two women in the concealment of the thicket, a lithe creature shrouded in mystery and hidden cleverly behind a pale mask. The mask, alone, was bright in the darkness, making the Yiga conspirator easier to focus on.

“We lost people, too, and it was all for the sake of granting your people their freedom,” the newly arrived clansman asserted, their tone calm and steady.

“The people of Zora’s Domain aren’t going to let this stand..” Tetra uttered in concern that she couldn’t hope to shake. Her chest was tight with fear, her head betraying her, shoving one worry after another into her face. There hadn’t been a single day of her life that she hadn’t known the Zorana City Guardsmen to be brutes. They would hassle an Undercity Zora for nothing at all. They would pull weapons on them for suspicions and bad feelings. They glared at the people of the Undercity with such bitter contempt, all from beneath the shining steel of their armor, which they wore like a cloak that absolved them from all wrongdoing. If it weren’t for the temptation of a regular stipend, a wage that was steady, reliable, and honestly more rupees than an Undercity girl knew what to do with, she would have never lowered herself to the shame of buffing those goddamn armaments every night.

But once you’ve survived on the bare minimum, it’s amazing what tiny improvements you’d sell yourself for.

“They’ll come here in force,” Tetra went on, her voice shaking with certainty. “...they’ll arrest, no, they’ll execute every one of you in rebuke for what happened. Just having the audacity to leave was an insult enough, but this?”

“They wouldn’t have allowed it to stand, regardless,” the Yiga footsoldier piped up, unsure if this hard truth was reassuring at all. They knew, regardless of whether it was a comfort or not, that it was still the absolute truth, as damnable as that was. And they despised like nothing else how easily fear could cause a people to place themselves in shackles.
“Nobody who possesses the convenience of enslaved masses will willingly give up that which enabled their heightened positions, their ease of existence,” the clansmen went on in the tense silence, hoping their Undercity allies understood. The attack was an irrelevant matter. The people of Zora’s Domain were sure to use it against the Undercity escapees, but if not that, then it would be something else. It didn’t matter. It made no difference. “They will never hand over your freedom willingly. Fighting is the only choice and fighting always means that there will be loss.”

“No,” the silvery, Undercity girl uttered, shaking her head so that her lacy fins fluttered against her cheeks.

“Your friend is right, Tetra,” the older woman said with a sigh, reaching out to take hold of her daughter’s hands, giving them a comforting squeeze. “I knew what this would mean. I knew what would be the result. Even in being sure that they would knock some of us down, I still felt that we had no choice but to stand up.”

“Mother,” Tetra breathed, her voice as thin and frail as a quiet wind. “Why don’t you take the people who got out and flee somewhere further, like Lake Hylia? You always talked about running away there and living at the edge of the woods. Now is the perfect time to do just that, plus you wouldn’t be alone.”

“We can’t do that.” The other Undercity woman hardened her tone, drawing her hands back. “...or at least, I can’t. There are still others in Zora’s Domain who were captured, who didn’t make it, or were too afraid to leave when offered the chance and I can’t turn my back on those people. I have to see this through. Please, try to understand.”

But Tetra didn’t understand, she didn’t understand at all. All she could see was the river of blood from her dreams and her future self like a hollow wisp of the warrior she once was. She saw herself empty and weeping over her lost mother, just like the young, Uppercity girl with the violet scales. Her eyes were so vacant, her spirit so deadened, her body a focused, lifeless thing that moved through task after task after task.

Tetra had started so fiery, so full of grit, so determined. She’d entered the guard brimming with hopes and expectations, chasing the excitement of opportunity. She was tough, physically speaking, and she’d been training herself like she actually expected to fight for her life, but.. not against her own people, not against the people of Zora’s Domain.

Now, her fear drowned out her voice, leaving her in silence.

“What about you, Yiga?” the older woman spoke up in the absence of her daughter’s own reply. She could only hope that her dear Tetra wouldn’t resent her for the choice she’d made. She breathed a sigh and turned her gaze to the pale mask hovering nearby. “Do we still have the support of your people?”

“It’s hard to say at this time,” the masked phantom replied with uncertainty. “My superior operative will likely be out of commission until the occurrence of the Blood Moon. However, considering that our clan’s personal mission is yet unaccomplished, I will remain stationed on Mercay Island. If anything changes, you will hear from me.”

“Hmm,” the older woman nodded solemnly, peering about between the trees in suspicion. She didn’t want to be gone from the island for too long, nor did she want her daughter away from the fort for too lengthy a stretch. “Until later, then.”

Turning back to Tetra and nestling close so that their foreheads pressed together, the Undercity woman placed her palms against her daughter’s arms, feeling the solid strength that was hidden
beneath her silver scales. She held onto the young woman whom she loved more dearly than anything else, speaking words that even a heart as brave as her own was dreading. “Things will probably get more dangerous from here,” she said, “so from now on, you can’t come out to meet me any longer, understand? If you need to tell me anything..”

The woman trailed off, unsure how to finish, unsure if she could bear to do so.

“Such as any plans for aggression that you become privvy to, given your position at the fort, or anything otherwise,” the masked footsoldier filled in where the Undercity woman’s voice left off. “You know precisely where to find me during the day. I’ll gladly carry any message you may need to send.”

“Alright..” Tetra uttered weakly, responding only now because she had no other choice. She was chewing at her bottom lip, her sharp teeth tight against the supple skin, to keep it from trembling. There was nothing she could do to prevent her tears, though, and she slid closer into her mother’s embrace like it was her very last chance.

“I love you,” the young woman spoke the words, though they were muffled against the other Zora’s shoulder. “Please be careful.”

“And you, too, my sweet girl,” the older woman replied, her hands pressed to her daughter’s back, not wanting to let go. She had to wonder, was it too late for her dear Tetra to quit the guard, to run away in the night, but no, she knew better. “I love you so much.. Now go, hurry.”

When Tetra refused to let go, the other woman was forced to push her away, to press her toward the water’s edge like some silly Hylian parent trying to convince their child to swim. At last, the young woman dove in and disappeared into the night, and only then did the older, Undercity woman allow her own tears to fall free.

“Why did you involve yourself in this, Yiga?” the woman glanced over her shoulder, wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand. The masked clansman, though they turned their head in the woman’s direction, did not provide an answer, but instead, cocked their head to one side in questioning.

“When my daughter confided in you, about the struggles that our people were facing, why did you unveil yourself to her?” She remembered it now like it was a dream, the day she’d burned her daughter’s letter from the fort, praying that nobody else had read it in secret. She remembered those dangerous words, about how Tetra had met this mysterious stranger, a warrior behind a mask who wanted to help the people of the Undercity obtain their freedom. There was always that one lingering question, however, that unanswered mystery that she couldn’t wrap her head around. “What do you and your people stand to gain from aiding us? To me, it seems like too big a risk with too little reward.”

“We empathize,” the masked footsoldier answered so simply. “We understand. That is motivation enough.”

“That’s difficult for someone like me to believe,” the Undercity woman said with a bitter scoff. “You’ll have to pardon my hesitance..”

“That’s fine, Moira,” answered the footsoldier, muttering a cryptic encouragement that they had only enough time to finish, before they disappeared into the night with nary a trace.

“Freedom is a funny thing. It comes one, tiny step at a time.”
“What do you mean, I’m not permitted?” the Hylian growled, actually making his best effort to remain patient, though such things, for him, were ever so difficult. The more he tightened his grip, the further it slipped away.

“I don’t understand how you’re confused, Hylian,” one of several Goddess Knights guarding the entryway to Prince Sidon’s tower explained, their calm tone making it clear that they were sincerely confused, themself. These weren’t warriors who typically did grunt work such as standing guard, and in fact, Link didn’t recognize most of them, so of course he realized that they didn’t know him, either. “This is the residence of our young Prince Sidon and as he is currently on bed rest, he simply cannot take any visitors.”

Link folded his hands together, taking a deep breath and telling himself that they were just doing their job, they were keeping Sidon safe in the wake of the Yiga attack and it wasn’t their fault that they lacked information.

“Ser,” he began, talking very slowly, not because he thought the Zoras couldn’t understand his words, but rather because he feared that if he got to speaking too quickly, his voice may jump in volume and soon enough he would be threatening their lives. It was such a slippery slope. “I realize that the Prince is sleeping, but I would still like to check up on him, do you understand? I am the Hylian Champion, the same Hylian Champion who saved the entire Domain from the endless rainfall created by the Divine Beast. The Prince and I are very close and I would very much appreciate being able to see him with my own eyes, please and thank you, Ser.”

The Knight who had been attempting to reason with the tiny Hylian man scrunched his face in worry, in uncertainty. His golden eyes flickered about in thought, then he glanced back at his fellows, as if they had any better answers or ideas. When he looked down on Link again, bending his back slightly for a closer inspection, the Hylian turned his head aside and grumbled.

He hated when people bent down to look at him. Yeah, he was short, but he wasn’t a speck of fucking dust. His fingers twitched, then he bundled his hands together behind his back, because if not, he wouldn’t be able to restrain the urge to smack the Zora face which was now easily within his reach.

What the Knight was actually regarding with suspicion, however, were the weapons Link had in tow. The unobservant Hylian didn’t immediately realize it, but the fact that he was carrying a Windcarver blade and a Duplex Bow, weapons of Yiga Clan make, did heighten the questionability of his identity.

“I took these off of slain Yiga Clansmen,” he blurted when the issue dawned on him, then he hastened to unfasten the items from his person, his tone of voice still a bit too aggressive to sound any kind of reasonable. “I can leave them in your care, if that helps.”

“You certainly could, I suppose,” the confounded Knight uttered as the weapons were shoved into his grasp, without him having much of a choice in the matter. He was left standing there awkwardly holding the items, shaking his head at the oddly insistent Hylian. “However, we still have no proof of your identity.”

“Okay. Okay, how about this?” Link groaned, his voice turning into a tight, restricted sound, much like he felt overall. These Zoras were going to force him to crawl into a window like in cliche stories of romance between teenagers with overbearing parents. The shame. He took the Sheikah Slate from where it was latched to his belt, tapping the object to activate it, then he held it out for the Zoras to see.
This time, all three of them neared and bent low to observe, their expressions a mix of doubt and intrigue. It probably looked like he was trying to sell them an object of questionable origin.

“This is my Sheikah Slate, an ancient relic of Sheikah technology,” he droned like he was teaching an incredibly boring class. “It proves my identity because I’m the only one in all of Hyrule who possesses one, or at least one like this.”

The Knights paused for a lengthy stretch in consideration, glancing nervously between one another and blinking in complete uncertainty. Then, the one at the head of the group spoke up warily to say, “I’m sorry.. I’m not familiar with this object.”

“Are you serious?” Link breathed in defeat that had so thoroughly exhausted his spirit, he hardly had anger enough to lose his cool.

“And,” one of the other crimson-veiled Knights added rather astutely, “to our knowledge, this unusual device could also be stolen.”

“Yeah, perhaps it could be,” the Hylian nodded along like the Knight had made a reasonable suggestion. His ears were pinned back in utter aggravation but he figured that, with the Zora people on high alert, if he behaved in any way other than with pristine manners, he was very likely to end up arrested or thrown out of town.

At this point, he was doing damage control in regards to all the embarrassing shit Sidon was going to hear about him when he awakened.

“However,” Link persisted, really overselling the pushy salesman angle, “allow me to demonstrate why it isn’t, in fact, stolen. As you can see, the item responds to my touch. If I tap the screen here, I can summon a bomb.”

The very instant the glowing orb appeared in Link’s hand, though, the entire group of Knights slightly recoiled, drawing their weapons like they’d just been directly threatened. Yeah, nice Link, try to convince people that you’re trustworthy by pulling bombs on them. Great plan.

With a nervous and rather forced laugh, the Hylian aggressively tapped the slate until the luminous explosive vanished once again. “There you have it,” he said with false cheer and an awkward cough. “But, for the sake of demonstration, if one of you were to tap the same command, it wouldn’t respond at all. Go ahead, try it.”

Link held the Slate out to the armored Zoras, oriented so that the brightly glowing screen was faced toward them. He pointed at the button to indicate it further when they hesitated, then very slowly, one of them reached out to tap the screen with the point of her fingerscale.

“You see?” he said, his false cheer falling flat. The Hylian gave a shrug as he clipped the Slate back to his belt, then he placed his hands on his hips, upturning his gaze to the bewildered Knights. “So then, I’ll be heading up to check in on the Prince now, yes?”

The trio of beautifully armored Zoras all stood in silent exasperation and utter confusion. Not a one of them appeared to have an immediate answer in mind, and certainly not the affirmative which Link was looking for. At the very same time, they weren’t so suspicious that they were considering any aggression, as they’d lowered their spears. Finally, one of them let out an unsure, “Umm,” followed by a sigh of resignation before they said, “I can escort you up, but you’ll have to speak with my superior.”

“Great,” Link answered, trying to sound as though he were pleased, despite the fact that he wasn’t.
Pulling his usual trick of walking too fast for the comfort of any given Zora, Link ascended the stairs with the Knight escort clinking about behind him. He got into such a rush to see Sidon, he’d forgotten all about the fact that he’d actually come to speak with the Prince’s own personal Knight. Maybe that was willful on Link’s part, because if he thought about it too deeply, he would’ve gladly accepted rejection at the front gate and given up.

Well, for a little while, at least. Then, once he’d lashed his own will back into submission, his backup plan would be to wait for Brivere at his home, instead. Something about that was even less appealing, however, because at least this way the Hylian could keep his sleeping lover in his sights, to remind him of why it was so crucial that he swallow his pride this once.

“Halt, Hylian,” a stern-looking Zora woman with mismatched eyes called to Link at the top of the spiral. With just one look at her, he could feel himself inwardly bristling. Already, she gave the impression of being much more difficult to reason with. This was the ‘superior’, or so Link was assuming, based on her no-nonsense appearance.

“Ser,” the other Knight addressed the woman with a little pause for breath, clearing his throat and straightening under her scrutiny when her eyes shifted to him. “This is the Hylian Champion, requesting entry.”

“Your orders were to disallow all entry, were they not?” the Zora woman snapped in a hard, critical tone that had the other Knight shrinking in his goldenscale armor. Link remained totally unaffected, apart from feeling slightly guilty for calling down this apparent hard-ass’s ire on the other Knight.

The Zora woman, whose armor was even more elaborate than those who were guarding the gate, quickly snapped her penetrating stare back to the tiny Hylian in her midst. “What business is it that you believe you have here? Prince Sidon is deep in slumber and can take no visitors.”

All Link was thinking was, fuck, here we go again. Also, no bombs this time.

However, before he could unleash the pushy salesman nonsense on the hard-assed Knight, yet another armored Zora from beyond the well-guarded threshold met his gaze. The observant eyes of Brivere drifted over, the unfolding situation apparently distracting him from some other business. He’d been standing aside in the company of another Zora from his own Knight order, but at the sight of Link, he gestured politely to excuse himself for a quick instant, uttering a word of apology as he did.

“Pardon me, Lieutenant,” the golden Zora spoke up, striding over to join the hard-ass at the doorway of Sidon’s chamber. Link was still doing all he could to discern what the true chain of command was here in Zora’s Domain. The Knight with the mismatched eyes was a Lieutenant, and from the make of her armor, as well as the red shawl and crest she wore, the Hylian easily figured that she was what the Zoras referred to as a ‘Goddess Knight’. That must have made her the immediate subordinate to that Knight Divine who he met the evening previous.

The hard-ass probably climbed to her present rank through imitation of her superior, because that Knight Divine was one icy, unforgiving lady.

“This is the Hylian Champion,” Brivere explained, really just reaffirming what was already stated, and the Hylian pointed at the golden Zora as he did, nodding his head to say, ‘Yeah, I told you.’

“His entry is permitted at all times, as specified by Prince Sidon prior to his consumption of the Spirit Potion.” Brivere uttered this admission somewhat begrudgingly. Unless that was just how he always sounded. That was also possible. The way he narrowed his crisp, yellow gaze when his eyes
flickered to Link, though, served to confirm it. “My lord was quite adamant about it, actually. He even considered writing it into law.”

“Ludicrous,” spat the Knight Lieutenant, her face furrowing into a snarl at such a perceived misuse of judicial power.

Link, meanwhile, let out a snicker, putting on the fancy accent of his princely lover’s tongue. “I, Prince Sidon, hereby decree that the Hylian Champion Link may now and forever more do what he wants.”

Link’s comment swiftly brought the Goddess Knight Lieutenant’s disdainful glare back down upon him and the smile melted from his face. She let out a ‘hmph’ of immeasurable distaste, then tilted her head back in Brivere’s direction with a flick. “And you’re certain that this isn’t merely a disguise?”

At the other Knight’s posed suspicion, the golden Zora looked down upon Link once more, inspecting his appearance with an expression of consideration. Then, after a pause that was just lengthy enough to become uncomfortable, his visage became ever more pinched, as though in sudden doubt.

“You asshole,” the Hylian hissed in insult, his ears tilting back while he pointed an accusing finger at Brivere. He did not come this far just for this piece of shit to get him turned around out of spite. “If you tell them I’m not myself-”

“I’m quite certain,” Brivere growled in interruption of Link’s outburst, breathing deeply in exasperation, and reaching up to push one of his long forefins over his shoulder. The Hylian was left standing there with his mouth hanging open, his words quieting, dying in his throat.

Goddamnit, was Brivere waiting for that? Link wasn’t sure what it was about having his behavior predicted by the golden Knight, but it seriously pissed him off.

“Princes,” breathed the Goddess Knight, her golden eyes rolling, her forefins swaying as she shook her head. “Alright, Hylian, you’re permitted, I suppose.” She swatted her hand to wave Link past, all while glaring at the other quietly lingering guard. “And you, get back to your post!”

“Yes, Ser,” the subordinate Knight uttered with a tiny waver to his voice, his upper body dipping low in respect and apology. Link quickly spun on heel after he trudged past the Knight Lieutenant, looking to the chastised guard while he mouthed the word, ‘Sorry.’

With that whole shitstorm out of the way, Link rolled his shoulders then strode toward the bed where his Zora lover was still peacefully snoozing. He looked peaceful, anyway. If anything, the Hylian’s confessions during their private dance party had likely given Sidon greater reason for concern.

Link let out a disappointed sigh, already finding a way to regret everything he told Sidon while the Zora was present on the innermost confines of his consciousness. He was sure it must have been difficult for the Zora to be sleeping for a solid week while still perfectly aware and active within his own head. Was it like a form of solitary confinement? Was he now busily fretting over the fact that his worthless Champion had essentially stated his refusal to save the world? Link shouldn’t have said anything.

“I’m sorry,” the Hylian whispered, reaching out to inspect Sidon’s hand. It had been smeared before by the blood and filth of Link’s own hand, but all of that had already been cleaned away, like it never even happened. Now Link idly traced the unblemished white of Sidon’s palm, blue eyes affixed on the Prince’s sleeping features in longing.
Seeing Sidon made things a bit harder. It deepened that awful wish, that emptiness that the Hylian felt in not receiving those encouraging smiles, those warm gazes, in not being able to feel the gentle warmth of the Zora’s arms encompassing him. Some needy, childish part of Link was pushing him to clamber onto the mattress and curl himself at the Zora’s side, so that he could lie there patting the Prince and chanting, ‘Wake up, Sidon. Wake up, Sidon.’

It always worked on Link, anyway.

“As I was saying,” began one of the other lingering Knights. It was the Zora man who Brivere had been speaking with before Link ‘intruded’, someone adorned in the silvery armor worn by Knights of the Royal Order. The Hylian was certain that he’d never met him, but the tone of his voice had Link’s ears immediately tilting back to listen.

“Yes, Ser,” the golden Zora answered him, beckoning him to go on, though the older Knight spoke in a terribly uninteresting monotone.

“The First Knight had me draft a roster of Knights available from his own ranks, as well as some of the younger recruits who’ve been in training long enough to graduate to full Knighthood,” he explained while Brivere quietly listened. Link could here a soft rustle as the more senior Knight produced a tightly rolled document from a leather pouch that hung upon the belt at his hip. “It is his own, personal suggestion that you make use of as many of the more experienced Knights as need be. My lord, King Dorephan has been incredibly distressed over the fact that his son was targeted and he wants to make certain that the team is in the most capable hands.”

“Yes, Ser,” Brivere replied once again, his fingerscales softly tapping the item as it was handed off to him.

“And speaking of making sure that it’s in capable hands,” the older Knight continued, “I realize we’ve had this discussion before, but in light of this incident, the First Knight has suggested that perhaps you would like to resign from your position. You know, in favor of allowing a more senior Knight to take your place. You could serve directly beneath the new Knight Captain and could even maintain your current stipend.”

You could tell that Brivere’s apparent superior was trying to paint his voice in a sympathetic sound, but it was so painfully fake that it came out horribly patronizing. Normally, Link might have delighted in arriving just in time to witness this seeming reprimand, but strangely, he had some reservations. The first of them was that, the attack was Link’s fault, so now the golden Zora was in shit for an incident of the Hylian’s causing. And secondly, because Brivere was aware of that very same fact, there was no way he’d agree to help Link now.

“I think it would be a fine idea,” the other Knight of the Royal Order continued, still trying to hold some kind of encouraging tone that fell utterly flat. “There’s no shame in admitting that you simply aren’t qualified enough and if anything, it was the Prince’s whims which set you up for failure.”

“With all due respect, Ser, it could hardly be said that I’m not qualified,” Brivere stated. As Knights went, he put more effort into self-improvement than most others. His reports were prompt and thorough, but this was a man who didn’t even know of any of those details. All this man knew was that Brivere lacked formal training and came from a less than honorable bloodline. Somehow, those things were relevant. “As for the loss, I was not on duty at the time of the attack, and yet-”

“You are the one who selected the team, so you are responsible,” the older Knight snapped, silencing the golden Zora. “Those young Knights died because of your poor choices, because of the imbalance that you caused. Their deaths are on your hands.”
“And, Brivere,” the senior Knight continued, breathing a tired sigh, “it isn’t just the most recent attack, but other incidents, as well. In particular, the Blood Moon operation which resulted in the loss of service from the First Knight’s daughter. It was my suggestion that you offer leadership of the team to her that evening, but you refused, and because of that, the service of a real, Goddess-Blooded Knight was lost.”

Actually, it was because Kree disobeyed orders, but of course Brivere glazed over the cause of that incident in his report for the sake of protecting her. In his mind, the injury she suffered was punishment enough without dishonoring her further. And truly? Would it have helped him either way? If he had been truthful about the incident, then when his superior looked over the report, all he would see were the words of a bastard admonishing his Goddess-Blooded daughter. A ‘real Goddess-Blooded Knight.’

His head turned aside, the tip of his tongue pushing between the sharp edges of his teeth, which threatening to chew it off for the sake of preventing him from saying anything back, anything at all.

“Son, I’m afraid that your failures are beginning to wrack up,” the other Zora droned on in Brivere’s chastised silence. “If you refuse to take the demotion, you’ll only be doing it out of stubbornness and pride. As well, should another grave loss occur because of the fact that you’re poorly qualified, you may well find yourself removed entirely. You need to really consider the options as they are now and what consequences could result from the choices you make.”

“Understood, ser,” the golden Zora breathed, bowing his head low. “I will consider the offer.”

“See that you do,” the older man said, showing himself from Sidon’s chamber shortly after he finished with the reprimand.

A tense, lengthy silence stretched out from the moment the other Knight stepped beyond the threshold, until the clinking sound of his armored gait was no longer audible from the tower stairs. Link continued to listen, unsure what to say, if saying anything at all was even appropriate. He didn’t usually worry about timing, and that much probably said something. In his continued silence, his ears flicked, listening to the quiet sound of Brivere taking a deep breath, holding onto it for a moment, then setting it free.

He sounded like he wanted to scream but settled for a sigh, instead. This was precisely one of those times when Link would’ve preferred to stay turned inward, to keep his tongue to himself, like it was another one of his painful secrets.

Glancing over his shoulder, Link found the golden Zora’s crisp gaze already turned to him, somehow expectant, but quiet. He evidently didn’t want to say anything, either.

“You know...” the Hylian started, a bit more timid about it than he wanted to be, “that makes me kinda grateful that the Calamity completely obliterated any superiors that I had to answer to.”

“If you could refrain from comment,” Brivere began, sincerely imploring, every inch of him so taut that it was ready to snap and too tired to even be bothered to do that much, “I would be most appreciative.”

Slowly, Link turned around to face the golden Knight, but Brivere wasn’t looking in his direction any longer. Instead, he’d backed himself against the wall, letting the structure hold his weight while his head tipped backward and his dark lids shut tightly.

“...can they really just.. remove you from your position?” Link asked. The Zora would probably mistake his curiosity for eagerness, but no, that wasn’t quite the case. Link disliked Brivere, but as far
as he’d seen, the Zora was an excellent warrior and he put every ounce of himself into protecting the Prince. He did a better job than the Hylian could ever hope to do, and yes, Link resented that, but he could also acknowledge that it was valuable.

“I’m certain that you’ll be absolutely elated to know that, yes, they can,” the Zora snapped, his tongue sharp on each syllable.

“Hm,” Link shrugged, “I somewhat doubt that Sidon would allow it.”

“The Knights of the Royal Order answer to the King, first and foremost…” came the doleful explanation of the golden Zora, his voice hollow and hopeless. He opened his eyes as he spoke, tilting his head so that he could look on the still form of Prince Sidon, the muscles of his face fighting him to keep him from displaying the heartbreak, the fear that he felt. “..My lord, as a trained warrior and a royal, carries some ranking power, but not enough to overturn any decision made by the First Knight.”

Brivere let out a tiny scoff, his head falling back again with soft thump against the wall. “Considering he has already threatened to remove me himself, I doubt he’d even make a fuss at this point.”

The Zora pushed away from the solid surface, straightening himself, reining in these unconcealed vulnerabilities that stung, exposed to the air like raw wounds. The last person he needed to spoon feed his suffering to was the Hylian in his midst.

“A better question is, why ever are you?” Brivere asked, turning a pointed stare in Link’s direction. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but is this or is this not a pretense of cordiality?”

A bitter chuckle came out of the Hylian and he lowered his own gaze to the floor. He never thought he’d be made to feel embarrassed about how thoughtlessly blunt he could be, but there it was, back to bite him in the ass.

“It is somewhat, yeah,” he sheepishly confessed.

“And did you not declare that it was not your wish to uphold any such pretenses?” the Zora further prodded, genuinely confused, especially considering that the Hylian had so far failed to gloat over what he’d just witnessed. If anything, he sounded sympathetic, and that was rather concerning.

“It turns out I might.. have.. been a bit hasty about that,” Link sputtered, every word physically painful. “Actually, I may have use of an ally of circumstance for a bit longer. After that, though, we can cut straight back to hating each other.”

“How reasonable of you,” the Zora stated in an unamused deadpan, his eyes darkened beneath narrowed lids.

“Yeah, yeah,” Link waved his hand at the other. “Okay, well, before I ask any favors, maybe we can do something to make it fair? I could help you with selecting your new team, perhaps?”

Even if the Hylian was attempting to be equitable, the Zora felt naught but insult at that suggestion. He had just been admonished for his apparent inability to complete his work to an acceptable standard, yet this Hylian, who Brivere had observed to be impatient, thoughtless, and absent of consideration, believed he could actually help.

“You’re hardly qualified to judge the strengths and weaknesses of Knights,” Brivere bluntly stated, “nor would pitting them against you give me any decent measure of their skills, only your lack thereof.”
“You are such a fucking asshole,” Link hissed, pointing one finger in the armored Zora’s direction.

“As are you, which is why I don’t bother to waste my time holding my tongue any longer,” the Zora replied, his tongue moving so quickly that each syllable snapped from him like an arrow flying off a drawn bowstring. As ever, he was calm and steely, irritated by the Hylian, but not concerned enough to waste any more energy than that.

That is probably what annoyed Link the most. Constantly being beneath Brivere’s consideration.

“Can you just hear me out, then?” the Hylian growled, the sound coming from somewhere deep in his gut. He’d been far too patient for far too long, and by Hylia, he was about to lose his grip on the very last shred of his steadiness when he was, at last, right here at his goal. “We’ve already fought each other, so you have a good idea of what I can do when I’m fighting somewhat seriously, and you never fail to comment on how poor my technique is, or how sloppy I do things. So, as much as I’d hate to say it, you probably would be the best judge of where I could use improvement. Maybe you wouldn’t mind taking those insults that you love to hurl and attach some actual advice on how I do better? Because—”

Link stopped, his head falling into his grasping hands, the weight of everything just so much, too goddamn much. “. . .because I can’t afford to stay at the level I’m at right now,” he growled against the flesh of his palm, his voice strained and ashamed, his body quaking with anger and fear.

To this point, the only teacher he had in all this world was pain and suffering. Death, and his ability to return from it, had taught him how to survive. It had guided him in the art of struggle, in how to be so fully enraged, so fully broken, that nobody could ever hurt him again. It showed him how to place all fear aside, how to fuck up in the worst possible ways until, finally, he got it right.

But that wasn’t an option now.

“Hm,” Brivere nodded knowingly, his demeanor suddenly softened. “You mean, because of this ‘Yiga Clan?’ Why ever are they so adamant about seeing to your demise? Attacking all of Zora’s Domain was quite a length to go to and they sacrificed no small amount of their own for the sake of it.”

“I don’t even know,” Link murmured in bitter frustration. He’d been asking himself the same damn question, and his musings had been pretty inconclusive. He pushed himself backward, settling at the edge of the water mattress. It hardly moved beneath his weight. “All I really know about them is that they are loyal to the Calamity, and I guess they think just my existence is a threat, even though. . . I haven’t really done that much to see to its destruction. You’d think that they’d see what a worthless excuse of a Champion I am and lay the hell off, but I guess not.”

Perplexed, surprised, the golden Zora was taken aback by what he was seeing. Even so, he drew nearer by a few paces, his toeclaws clicking against the stone. The Hylian reacted to his approach like a nervous feline, his blue eyes snapping up to regard the Zora with mistrust, with questioning, his ears folding backward. It was a wonder that his mess of blonde hair couldn’t stand on end.

What did this mean, the fact that this Hylian who despised him was also dumping his fears and vulnerabilities onto his shoulders? Was it because he’d inadvertently witnessed Brivere’s own trying moment, was that what built this bizarre bridge of trust? Or was it because of their severed partnership and that Link simply couldn’t forget how it felt to have the Knight as his ally?

Most likely, in Sidon’s absence, this troubled Hylian was desperate for a shoulder to cry on. Or rage on, as it was.
“Do you think they will try it again?” Brivere asked, sure that he shared that concern in common with the fallen Champion.

“I don’t know,” Link breathed, his eyes turning glassy, like a mirror that reflected nothing at all. “I didn’t know that they would the first time, or I wouldn’t have led them here. I didn’t think they’d have the gall to try it. I just thought they would lie in wait like the sneaky cowards they are.”

“Then, by being here now, are you not simply daring them to try it again?” Brivere reasoned, his observant gaze shifting from the bent Hylian to the vulnerable Prince. “It’s a bet that they were willing to take once, so why are you now standing here like they won’t strike a second time?”

“What can I do? What do you expect from me, Brivere?” the Hylian cried, so bound and torn by his own raging emotions, he couldn’t hold them inside himself any longer. He didn’t know or understand how this damnable Zora always managed to do so. “I can’t go out and face them all on my own because I’m no match for them as I am now. They can track my movements, they can follow me wherever I go, so I can’t run or hide, either.”

Link’s hands were suddenly shaking again, his desire to cease this unfair existence at peak. Giving up seemed more like a light at the end of a tunnel, rather than a defeat. Letting himself be destroyed sounded like such a damn relief.

“Everyone is waiting and expecting me to save the world, to restore safety to all of Hyrule, but I can’t even be sure of my own safety any longer,” he said, one hand coming up to cradle his head as it fell forward, his fingers knotting in the blonde of his fringe.

For a moment, Brivere found himself reflecting on that one memory which loved to recur, which he loved to go back to, time and time again. That day in the woods, when he’d found the fox chased into its den by the wolves. It was a small, dingy, helpless thing in the shadows, trapped in the one place it thought it would be safe, while the beasts outside steadily tore apart its perceived safety in their attempts to dig it out. It was weak and fearful, knowing there was nothing more it could do to save itself, and the pack licked at their chops, ready and waiting to tear it apart.

Link was afraid and vulnerable, he was helpless, desperate. He’d let his own weakness be viewed and by a person who’d taken every chance to tear him down for how underwhelming he was. But prior to now, Brivere had scarcely seen any inkling of self-doubt in the Hylian. Now that he had, he understood.

“I see,” he said with a nod, opting to say nothing of the fear which was so evident in the Hylian before him. He’d been here all this time for security, to feel safe. But now the wolves were coming to dig him out. “Very well... if I can be of assistance, I shall render it. But certainly not tonight and I should like something in return, if you can manage.”

The Hylian’s ears pricked upward at Brivere’s acceptance, and while the Zora thought his reaction would be that of surprised gratitude, when Link inclined his neck to peer into the face of the golden Zora, he did so with suspicion written on his features.

“Did you have.. something in mind?” He warily posed this question, every word hesitant and somewhat dubious. “You should probably be a bit more specific, because they way you said that sounds.. kind of..”

For all of three seconds, Brivere found himself waiting for the Hylian to finish his thought, thinking that maybe he’d misplaced a word and was attempting to remember it. Then, he reconsidered the
potential of the statement as a whole and took a swift step back, his whole body flinching away from the horrendous misunderstanding that had taken place.

“Great,” the Zora snapped, his gaze sharpening like it was intended to physically pierce the Hylian. “Just when my opinion of you was softening, you prove yourself to be vile all over again.”

Link, in defense, threw his hands up, quickly blurting a rebuttal, “You’re the one who-”

“No, another word,” Brivere interrupted, his eyes scrunching shut for a moment in the excruciating pain of his embarrassment, and his hands drifted upward to rub at the tender flesh beneath his forefins.

“As I’m sure you noticed,” the Knight began again, leaving that last topic in the dust as quickly as possible, “...my brother was recently injured quite severely and it has taken a rather hard toll on him. I...” he trailed off, the deep purr of his voice heavy with regret, “I don’t always have adequate time to spend reassuring him, I’m afraid. But from what I’ve seen... you care.”

He couldn’t deny it. Sure, he would never quite forget the Hylian’s poor judgement on prior occasions, but from what he’d seen more recently, Link was invested in Estuu’s safety and happiness.

“No only that,” Brivere continued, “but Estuu rather likes you. Maybe you could... spend some time around him, do something to raise his spirits. If you can do that, then I will work with you regularly in the training hall of the barracks, for as long as you need.”

“We have a deal, then,” Link breathed with a nod of his head, “Umm.. shake on it?”

The Hylian extended his hand outward and it was quickly and easily accepted, one callused palm meeting another in truce.

Chapter End Notes

My Twitter and Tumblr are : BanishedOne
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Links are in my profile. <3
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

In the darkest of times, some were bound to draw closer together, while others were destined to fall apart. Brivere and Estuu shared in a brotherly moment, having a quiet heart to heart that was much needed for both of them. Bazz and Kodah spoke of the past, and of wounds not only unforgettable but unforgivable.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends. I'm sorry for the lateness, as this is yet another two-week chapter, though I know most of you understand~ I hope you'll all enjoy this chapter, regardless of the time it took. Also, there is no Link in this chapter, I'm afraid. His scenes were so long that they will most likely need their own chapter. So horray for Link epics?

OH, ALSO, a little warning about animal abuse in this chapter!

Please enjoy this chapter, my friends. <3

Carefully, Estuu arranged the items atop the blue stone counter, stepping back to observe. His arm was folded close to his body and the tip of his tongue was poised between his teeth in thought.

He’d lain the trout down on the cutting board that his sibling often used for food preparation, then he’d situated Brivere’s favorite knife for slicing fish directly next to it, but at a very slight angle. It was somehow more aesthetically pleasing that way. If these small clues weren’t enough to express Estuu’s intentions to his older brother, well, he also wrote a short note, mostly because he got bored of waiting.

Brivere was taking longer to get home than usual. At this rate, he was hardly going to have time to eat before he needed to sleep.

Then at last, the clinking of armor signaled Brivere’s approach and Estuu turned to face the doorway, standing a bit on his webbed toes in pride. The end of his tail swished from side to side as his excitement built further. He couldn’t wait to show Brivere how cleverly he’d outwitted their shortage. Ever since their rations had been taken, the older Zora had been more or less going hungry.

Surely he, too, would be astounded and overjoyed at Estuu’s wit.

But then, when the armored Zora clicking down the hall finally turned the corner and skulked into the entryway of the young noble’s home, Estuu was taken aback. His eyes laid immediately upon unfamiliar blue scales and metallic armaments which bore the design of the City Guard, not the Royal Order.

The boy’s stare sank to the floor in immediate avoidance of eye contact, his tail now flapping in
peaking nervousness. Perhaps it was just instinct, but as the uninvited guardsman strode into the room, Estuu remained planted where he stood, perfectly still like he was being faced with a predator which was triggered to attack by movement.

Estuu’s yellow gaze drifted aside for a moment, to look upon the fresh fish he’d set out so perfectly, then it darted away again. The guardsman had come to stand in front of him, so that the boy’s floored stare could only see the stone beneath his own feet and the armored Zora’s webbed toes before him. His fish was well within sight for the invading guard, and all it would take was a single glance for him to notice the food and either take it or intervene in some way.

Even worse, what if he read Estuu’s note, and not only took the fish, but also took the boy away, to force him to use his magic for the sake of purifying food day in and day out?

“You are the young noble, Estuu, correct?” the guardsman asked, his voice a rumble that Estuu could scarcely read. Was he tired? Unconcerned? Angry?

With soft, small movements, Estuu nodded his head in affirmative, yet even so, the lone guardsman didn’t immediately reply. The other, blue-scaled Zora hesitated, looking up like he expected there to be others around, not just this lone child, but he soon cleared his throat, his hand falling to a leather pouch near his hip.

“I’m sorry for the late hour of my arrival,” he spoke earnestly. “We are very behind schedule. Here, I have this for you.”

The armored Zora produced a tightly rolled sheet of parchment from his pouch, and it was sealed with a small cuff which encircled the document, bearing the seal of the spirit Dinraal. Estuu regarded the item, his big, deep eyes shining in veiled consideration, his hand twitching in caution, but slowly, he outstretched his fingers to receive the delivery.

Just that easily, the guardsman bid him good evening and showed himself out. The very moment he was out of sight, Estuu breathed a heavy sigh of relief, though his nervous tail flapping continued.

Quickly, the boy pried the sealing ring from the scroll and unfurled the document in order to look over it. A fair bit of the legal jargon was over his head, but he was enough of an avid reader to understand what was being asked of him, though even in understanding, it left him all the more confused.

It was a court summon. He hadn’t received such a thing for several years, not since that incident with the Undercity woman. The flick of his tail intensified with the growing worry that he was in some kind of trouble again. Did they know he stole that spear from the armory of the Goddess Knights? Did they have some kind of issue with the fact that he went fishing?

No, those reasons couldn’t have possibly been correct, because there was no way in the void that he’d receive such a hasty court summon for things he’d just done today. The guardsman even stated that they were behind schedule, so it must have been something further back. Estuu let the parchment curl inward in his one, tiny hand and a single foot patted the ground in impatient, anxious contemplation.

If he were in big trouble, then the guardsman probably would’ve arrested him, but surprisingly the encounter was curt, and almost polite. Estuu knew better than to trust guardsman now, but they’d almost never regarded him so gently, even despite his nobility. At best, he’d always been given the side-eye, as it was well-known that he lived within a loophole of the system, owing his own rise in rank to his mother’s infidelity and oh.. also, her death.
After the incident, the one which Estuu was infamous for, the City Guard treated him with even less care. He’d made work for them, he supposed, because for weeks while he awaited his trial, he’d been under strict house arrest. Guardsmen were forced to watch the exits of his home at all hours and everybody within his stretch of residences thought it was an awful disgrace.

Brivere, meanwhile, had been even more distressed by the situation than Estuu. Remaining indoors suited the boy just fine, but the golden Zora was still occupied with readying himself for the final round of the tournee, though it had to be postponed for a short time, due to the fact that the Undercity woman lived. Thanks to Estuu’s actions, Brivere had been the one to shoulder the burden of all the awful questions, the accusations, the disdainful stares.

And yet, for such a long time, Estuu maintained within the secrecy of his own mind, that his only regret was the fact that the woman survived his killing stroke. The society in which he lived had taught him well which lives held value and which did not. It had taught him while he quietly observed, that those who stepped beyond their assigned roles had no place among them. He learned that lesson in the most brutal way possible, when his mother died by her own hand, and people dared to say that she had it coming.

Even worse, that by her spilled blood, Estuu’s own talents had been fed and bloomed forth. The loss of a nobody had empowered someone more worthwhile, and so it was, therefor, a fair trade.

So then, he figured, would the loss of that woman, Betaal, not be the very thing which empowered someone more worthwhile? Had she not daringly stepped outside of her own role? Did their people not hate her for it and hunger for her defeat?

Furthermore, if one lone archer could slay her, what business did she have pretending that she could flawlessly shelter the lives of the most important members of their society?

Until now, he hadn’t understood. He hadn’t comprehended how his strike didn’t end her. He hadn’t seen the reasoning behind the fact that she was granted days to recover, because he’d healed her straight away, after she’d shot back upright, the shaft of his arrow still buried in her head.

His thoughtful gaze drifted downward, his entire body wanting to recoil from the sight of his own severed limb. He understood now, of course. He understood the gravity, the horrid sense of loss, the adjustment to living life as less than what you were before. He thought of Neydri, who’d called him a friend with such great ease, of Zala who’d allowed his presence despite her fears and treated him fairly though she could have easily done otherwise.

For the first time, he felt guilt.

The Undercity people were just that; people. They had worth. They were no different than anybody else.

“Estuu? Are you alright?” A familiar voice snapped the boy back from the great distance he’d traveled, in his reverie. When he glanced up in response, he found his elder sibling paused in the doorway, looking on him in concern. “What do you have there?”

Brivere strode over with the soft click of his toeclaws and the metallic chime which came with his every movement. The younger Zora held the rolled parchment out to the elder’s reaching hand, and he waited while his brother looked over the item.

Daringly, the golden glimmer of the young Zora’s gaze wandered upward to observe the face of the other. He only did this when others weren’t paying attention, and he now watched in tense questioning while the pale yellow of Brivere’s own eyes flickered back and forth as he read the
Brivere’s face showed very little, even now, when he had no reason to hide. It was a habit, something he did unconsciously. Still, the concentrated narrow of his eyes held questioning and concern, and a further pinch to his face expressed mild confusion; he evidently didn’t know what the summon was about, either.

The tired, golden Zora let out a sigh, then set the roll of parchment aside. “For now, Estuu, you should put the summon from your mind,” he said, walking over to where a makeshift nest of cushions lined the floor. He somewhat wished that he had the rupees saved to afford one of those fine water mattresses like the one he watched Sidon lie upon day after day. The artisans who crafted such things priced them knowing full well that they were the finest of luxuries, however.

Estuu followed after Brivere with a few quick patters, waiting a bit impatiently while the golden Zora began the process of stripping off all the armor that he’d donned more than a full day and night ago, now. He stretched with relief once the heavy layer was shed, looking to his waiting sibling to add, “The date on the summon is several days away, and if it were anything truly urgent, they would have included a statement encouraging you to seek the council of an Apostle serving under Dinraal.”

The boy nodded his head in relief, the beads of his shawl gently moving against his softly crested brow. The Apostles who served under the Great Spirit Dinraal studied the laws and carried out legal matters, or so that was how Estuu understood it. Even the Prince sometimes bore the crest of Dinraal, as the royals were considered to be a branch of that denomination.

Estuu once had to seek the council of such an Apostle. It had been for his trial, of course, and Brivere did most of the talking, but the impression the young Zora got of the studious man was that he was cocky, and only sought to defend Estuu in some misguided pursuit of glory. Brivere had been stuck repaying the fees for so long afterward, Estuu had to begin classes a few years late.

If the golden Zora hadn’t won that tourney, they would have been in quite dire straights.

Remembering his former excitement, Estuu let out a squeak, and padded back toward the kitchen nook, coming to stand beside the short stretch of countertop, then he reached up to pat his one hand against the smooth surface, hoping to draw Brivere’s attention there.

The golden Zora followed his sibling’s prompting, wondering where this sudden burst of energy was even coming from. When he’d left Estuu earlier in the day, the boy was still overwhelmed and weak. Now he seemed rather sprightly, which was surprising.

“What’s this?” Brivere purred in confusion, his slitted pupils widening ever so slightly at the sight of fresh food laid out so conveniently. One hand laid atop the counter, his fingerscales clicking there while his gaze danced across the cool scales of the fish; it looked so plump and healthy, deceptively so. Despite that, his first reaction was that of mistrust.

“Estuu, this fish, we can’t ea-” Brivere began, only to be swiftly interrupted by the smaller Zora’s insistent tapping. Laying nearby, there was a handwritten note, which Brivere quickly reached for, drawing the delicate sheet into his grasp, and closer, in order to read it.

“I used my magic on this,” the golden Zora spoke aloud while he looked over the printed words. “It should be purified of the Water Blight. It’s for you.”

Certainly, Brivere had questions. He wondered how his sibling acquired such a prize, given his condition, and why he seemed as though he was disinterested. He must have been rather famished as well, but instead of moping like he was tired and hungry, he had this proud shine to his golden eyes,
while he stared upon the trout in an accomplished way.

But rather than spoiling the mood that had been brought on by Estuu’s thoughtful gift with needless prodding, which Brivere knew all too well that his sibling despised, he let out a sigh of quiet fluster, saying instead, “You wrote this note with your left hand?”

Brivere’s gaze went to Estuu in curiosity. The boy had never been able to master penmanship, no matter how he practiced. It had always taken him hours just to get through a few sentences, and even when he showed the greatest care, the strokes were sloppy and difficult to make out. So, the most curious matter presented by the fact that Estuu had even written a note was this: he’d done it with the hand he’d never practiced with. And yet, it was legible.

“The handwriting here is rather good,” Brivere praised, averting his eyes from his brother as a rare smile graced his own features. He turned his vision back instead to the fish which had been gifted to him, taking the cutting knife eagerly in hand. “You should keep it up.”

“Estuu..” the golden Zora began again after a moment of pause, chopping off the inedible parts of the trout, “do you mind if we have a little talk?”

He somewhat expected his young sibling to groan and walk away, but against what Brivere assumed, Estuu softly nodded his head and slid himself up, onto one of the stools across from where Brivere stood. The golden Zora supposed that his strangely sharpened prediction instincts weren’t infallible, after all.

Once the boy had settled into his seat, Brivere paused, hoping to get his thoughts in order. There was a great deal that needed to be said and most of it involved difficult topics which had never been breached prior, so he doubted that this would be easy. He glanced in the direction of the court summon scroll which lay discarded, but not forgotten.

Before Brivere could even utter a single word, though, Estuu rather bundled his hand while his tail began to flick, the edges of his fins making soft patters against his back. The golden Zora smiled and shook his head, saying, “Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble. It’s not that kind of talk. It’s more of a heart to heart. Because of your inability to speak in reply, I feel that we haven’t had enough of those and I don’t think it’s fair for me to keep everything to myself for that reason.”

Estuu gave a nod of his head, decidedly making an effort to smile back, though it was more of a stretch of his lips that didn’t hold any real expression. Brivere couldn’t help but feel endeared by the fact that he tried, however. That made it all the more difficult for him to bring up what he wanted, but he persisted, regardless.

“You receiving that court summon reminded me of the last time and of the reason for it,” the golden Zora spoke softly, though his brother visibly shrank at those words. Carefully, as Brivere filleted the fish, he dislodged the bones with one clean tug of the spine, putting them aside for disposal, along with the creature’s innards. “It got me thinking about.. the day our mother passed,” he stated with solemn difficulty, stepping aside to rinse his hands in a basin of water.

“Hnn..” the boy hummed, breathing a doleful sigh and folding his arm before himself on the counter. He thought about his mother often, and how could he not? She was someone important to him, someone that he’d lost forever, and he was honestly afraid that one day he wouldn’t remember her any longer. But Brivere rarely made the effort to speak of her and Estuu often wondered.. did his brother blame him for their mother’s death as much as Estuu blamed himself?

“That day,” Brivere began again, something in his features darkening at the painful reflection, “I took you out for the very first time, to teach you how to use a bow, how to kill. I can’t help but think that
it was some sort of cruel irony that, within the same day, you learned that you had both the power to take life and the power to save it."

The older Zora’s hands were quick and nimble with the cutting knife once the fillets were rinsed, and he sliced the meat in the usual way, methodical and perfectly even. The scarlet boy couldn’t help but focus his gaze there. Something about it was oddly pleasing.

“Here, have some,” Brivere insisted, taking out a utensil and sliding it across to his younger brother. “I can’t eat it all, anyway. Go ahead.”

And while Estuu’s interest may not have been out of hunger, necessarily, his previous meal had left him unsatisfied, if only because it hadn’t been prepared in the way he was used to. Now, he couldn’t resist the offer as it was posed, and hurriedly reached for the silver, taking the utensil in hand and using it to slowly peel away the first thin slice of meat. A meal really wasn’t a meal when it didn’t ‘feel’ right. This felt right and Estuu was beyond pleased when he shoved the first bite into his mouth, then rocked from side to side in his glee.

Brivere let out a muted titter, amused but ever so tired. He was likely rambling nonsense in his own exhaustion. “I doubt you can see where I’m going with any of this, because in truth, I hardly do, myself,” he confessed. “However, I do still believe it to be necessary.”

“After our mother passed and your father refused to take any responsibility for your care,” the golden Zora continued, trying his best to make sense, “I recall how distant you turned, how unreachable you were and how very unsympathetic you could be. I remember plainly how your fascination with killing seemed to grow beyond what was practical, into something that was morbid and concerning.”

As he recounted these difficult truths, Brivere spoke slowly, gently, though Estuu very quickly became guarded, which was readily apparent in how very still he was. The boy knew that his brother would never understand, even if he could explain himself.

He’d done what he needed to do, in order to cope. The hunting soothed him, and the killing.. well, perhaps it was heartless, but it gave him some tiny means to have control in a world that left him feeling utterly helpless. Sometimes it even felt as though, in seeing his mother die, every ounce of empathy he had was expended by that single trauma and now he couldn’t be bothered to care.

He was only just coming out of that emotional lull, allowing his feelings to sharpen up once more.

“I thought perhaps your different parentage was to blame, and that one day you would turn out as uncaring toward the lives you destroyed as the man who fathered you. Even so, because you were my only family and the only person I had left in this world, I ignored those fears.” A mistake, now that he was thinking on it. The last thing Estuu had ever needed was to be ignored. Brivere could only try not to fault himself too harshly. He had to remind himself, in defense, he’d been an adolescent when the responsibility of his sibling’s care fell to him. He certainly hadn’t been ready for that.

“And then, the unthinkable occurred,” Brivere gravely muttered, speaking in an even quieter tone, nearly fearful that the walls may grow ears and listen in. He went silent for a spell, moving the food to a plate and gathering up utensils of his own, in order to settle down and eat. Hopefully, this talk would enable him to consume the food slowly, because he was utterly famished.

“Estuu..” Brivere nearly whispered once he was seated. His watchful golden gaze trailed across the countertop to study his sibling’s reaction, wishing like anything that he had his Prince’s ability to connect to the boy’s mind, to hear Estuu’s thoughts and feelings, to understand. “I didn’t say as much, but I never once believed your claims that what you did to that Undercity woman was
accidental. I always knew better. I know that what you did, you did with intent. And even knowing that, I still protected you.”

The golden Zora’s utensils shifted about between his fingers in idle thought, then his shoulders moved in the slightest of shrugs. “When people would say that I put you up to it, I didn’t confirm it, but I never spoke up to deny it, either. I let their suspicions turn in my direction, because I knew that, at the very least, you would be sheltered. It was for the same reason that I tried to restrict you from ever using a bow again, because how could I protect you, if you were always out, trying to prove your own guilt?”

Brivere paused, wanting to know whether or not his younger sibling was still on the same page. “You know that, don’t you?”

Hesitantly, Estuu nodded his head. Maybe he hadn’t always understood, and he hadn’t cared enough to accept that his brother’s restrictive, sheltering ways had been with his safety in mind, but he got it now. It was still unfair in his opinion, though, that he couldn’t express his own reasoning.

“Okay,” Brivere stated with a nod, apparently pleased enough by Estuu’s small gesture of confirmation that he could continue. “Brother, what I really needed was for you to answer something for me. And this time, please be honest.”

The golden Zora paused, taking a deep breath to steady himself. “Have things changed yet? Has the time for living in fear of you come to an end? Are you different, now?”

At the wariness and doubt that Estuu perceived, he let out a little huff, followed by a squawk of bitter frustration. How could Brivere say such things? How could he speak like he still believed his own brother to be a monster? That hurt in a way that Estuu couldn’t communicate, much as he wished it were so, and he kicked one webbed foot against the side of the counter in a show of rebuke.

Even if he were a monster, a cursed child like everyone liked to say, there was one little detail standing between him and the realization of that. With a sharp, bitter gesture, he indicated the stump of his right arm. There was no way for him to be even a small measure of the terror he once was and he was so sure that everyone around him was utterly relieved, even his own brother.

The monster had finally had its claws slashed, and its fangs pried away.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Brivere calmly replied, persisting, even in the wake of his sibling’s budding anger. “Never try to fool me into believing that you’re incapable, because I know better. Estuu, please. All I want is the truth and to know that I can trust you, even when I’m not there to supervise. You have to tell me if you’ve changed, if your respect for life has returned.”

Why did the doubt hurt? That was all Estuu could think. He knew his sibling’s wariness was well deserved, so why did it hurt? Why did he resent it? He did the only thing he could do; he nodded his head. He wasn’t sure if he could impart sincerity into that tiny gesture, but nevertheless, he did it.

“I see,” Brivere breathed, finally feeling that things weren’t so tense that he couldn’t pause to have a bite of the meal he’d prepared. He took a moment to reach for one of the thin cutlets, delivering it to his mouth and slicing the tender meat between his teeth with indescribable pleasure. Any food at this point was a delight, but fresh food was an utter indulgence.

“I want do something that I haven’t done for some time, Estuu,” Brivere stated once his first bite was swallowed down. “I want to trust you. I want to believe in you.”

Estuu perked a bit at those simple declarations, albeit shyly. The elder Zora took that as a good sign
and continued. All of this rambling did have a purpose, and thankfully, he was finally coming up on it.

“There is one other matter I needed to bring up,” Brivere said, stopping again to have another bite, then he pushed another morsel encouragingly in his sibling’s direction. “I realize that you can be quite hesitant about things that are sprung on you at the last minute, so I thought I’d tell you in advance. The, um..”

The golden Zora stopped, his tongue falling still in refusal. Okay, maybe this was going to be a little more painful than he first assumed. Clearing his throat, Brivere steeled himself like he was mentally preparing for some kind of lashing. The words he wanted to speak were in the pit of his gut like a stone, heavy and impossible to stomach. Estuu, meanwhile, nibbled at the food which had been offered to him, waiting in silence that was somehow more curious than before.

“.the Hylian Champion might have mentioned that you have a desire to,” Brivere’s eyes were narrowed, his face taking on a furrow of discomfort, “perhaps.. go horseback riding?”

The moment the words were uttered, Estuu slapped his cutlery aside in excited disbelief. Had he entered some kind of parallel dimension, like in a fantasy story? Was this really his brother, or one of those masked warriors in disguise? Was this some kind of test to measure his reactions or trustworthiness? He didn’t trust it at all, yet he also bounded into peak excitement without room for logical consideration.

All Brivere could do was laugh quietly over it. Estuu was usually a challenge to read, thanks to his silence and his naturally unexpressive face. The fact that his joy was suddenly so plain to see rather heartened the golden Zora, and all doubt as to whether or not this was a good idea melted away.

“So then, would you like to take a short vacation from Zora’s Domain, to go out riding?” Brivere asked, only to receive a veritable squeal in reply. Estuu began bouncing in his seat, his palm patting in joyous rhythm against the counter.

“Alright, alright, don’t fall off the stool,” Brivere purred in his usual protective way, his tone warm, his satisfaction impossible to shroud. He hadn’t been the best at caring for his sibling, and he hadn’t always succeeded in seeing to it that his brother was happy, so when he was rewarded with success, happiness found him in turn.

Though, he couldn’t lie to himself about one thing. He was still bitter that it wasn’t actually he who possessed the means to offer his sibling some small joy, but rather, the Hylian Champion. And speaking of..

“I told the Hylian that you’re absolutely not to ride on that insane animal that he appears to adore for Hylia-knows-what-reason,” the golden Zora snapped, his sheltering sharpness returning with natural ease. “However, if you promise to be cautious otherwise, it may be a.. permissible adventure.”

He would have to secure a bit of paperwork, but he already had plenty of that to handle. What was a bit more, if it meant Estuu’s spirits would be effectively raised? Judging from the way the boy was still bouncing in his seat like he was already imagining being in a horse’s saddle, that seemed a safe assumption.

“You’re happy then?” Brivere breathed, a small smile upturning the corners of his pale lips. “Good, I’m glad to see it.”
His shift was finally over, and strangely enough, he felt a remarkable satisfaction in that temporary freedom.

Everyone always said that he worked too hard, but could it really be considered as such when he preferred to be on the clock? It seemed to him that Guard Captain Bazz was the man he wanted to be, the part of himself that he could be proud of and take seriously. The person he was at the end of the night, when he was no longer ‘Guard Captain,’ well, he wasn’t so sure about that guy.

Or so, that had been his manner of thinking, until late. Now his after-hours nihilism was bleeding into his on-duty persona, and once his job was done, he didn’t know who he was any longer or if he liked the Guard Captain that he was during the day. All of his doves were having their wings clipped, while his devils clamored in the Blood Moon of his heart.

His options as of his ended shift were limited. Normally, he would away to Zambezi’s Cantina to chemically discard his doubts, fears and all of his overwhelming sorrows, but the Prince of Drink was now a corpse and the food shortage hadn’t spared indulgent vices.

So, the only remaining choices for the black Zora were either for him to skip straight to shutting himself in his personal quarters in the barracks and weep over the aching loss of his best friend for the umpteenth time, or for him to reach out to his short list of remaining friends.

He did owe Kodah a bit of a check in, so his choice seemed very clear.

From the barracks, the Seabed Inn was a short distance away. Bazz was out of his armor and gladly feeling the cool night air against his scales when he brushed aside the heavy curtain that closed off the doorway to his friend’s business. Even so, most still easily recognized him as the Guard Captain and addressed him as such.

The Seabed Inn was, even now, a full house. Most of the Zoras occupying the space were nobles whose homes had been destroyed by the quake or merchant class folk who would otherwise be sleeping in the communal pool, if not for the Water Blight. Bazz was quite sure that Kodah had begun to steeply discount her prices or waive fees altogether because her business had turned into a shelter more than anything.

In the wake of all that was happening, Kodah was doing her own part. It perhaps outshone and surpassed Bazz’s own contributions, and that both heartened and discontented him. Was his friend simply doing an incredible job or was he not doing enough?

“Bazz, what are you doing here?” the pink Zora whispered when Bazz strode into the back area of the inn. Plenty of people were already packed into the sleeping areas, still and quiet in slumber, while Kodah looked over her books and ledgers in the soft lamplight of the luminous stone. Her golden eyes were wide and shining as they were lain upon the Guard Captain, then hurriedly they darted away from the sight of him.

“We’re friends,” he softly spoke in reply like he was telling a secret, a confused smile curving his lips ever so slightly. “I came by to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine,” the woman curtly snapped. Her tail was rigid down her back and her dark lids hung low over her downcast eyes. She looked as though she were trying to focus on her work, too busy to be bothered.

“I’m... glad that you’re getting by.” Bazz searched for each word with care before he spoke them, doing his best to keep the concern from furrowing his features. It still stung and pulled at the stitches. “I know that you’re a strong woman, Kodah, but.. I doubt you’re just ‘fine.’”
Not looking any higher than the books laid out before her, the Zora woman’s own countenance creased but she said nothing at all in reply. Her fingerscales nervously skimmed the edges of her work surface before her fingers furled and her fins pulled close to her body, rendering her appearance smaller.

“Do you need anything?” Bazz persisted, his voice a gentle, sincere rumble. He took a step closer, his claws clicking on the stone, and at that quiet sound, Kodah’s golden gaze at last upturned in visible wariness that the black Zora merely pretended that he couldn’t see.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked.

“Thank you for helping me when the food shortage began, and thank you for your efforts to help my husband, but,” the pink Zora blurted, her voice straining to remain at lower levels. Almost as soon as she began, her sight dropped aside once more and the tip of her tongue traced her lips, moistening them. Her chest expanded with her sudden breathlessness and she shook her head. “. . . I don’t know, Bazz, I think maybe it would be better if you kept your distance for a little while.”

“What...?” Bazz questioned with a little laugh, like this was a joke, like he believed his friend had any reason for joking. “I don’t understand, where is this coming from?”

While the black Zora prodded, Kodah let out a sigh of quiet exasperation, the gold of her eyes flickering across the numerous sleeping Zoras nearby, every little shift unnerving her more. She didn’t want to cause a disruption, and she supposed she was silly to have assumed that the discussion could be cut short so easily, considering how stubborn Bazz could be.

Saying nothing more, Kodah strode from the room, turning herself sideways to push past the black Zora without making any contact. In confusion, Bazz turned to follow, his attention on the woman’s back as she exited the inn and walked out into the night.

Kodah’s stride was quick and diligent and she continued walking, even once she was beyond listening distance from the Seabed Inn. She turned a corner and began up one of the steadily curving pathways, her feet making tiny splashes in the softly trickling flow.

“Kodah?” Bazz called in confusion, unsure if his friend planned to stop walking at any point. It was only at the sound of her own name that she finally did. Her arms were folded against her chest, her head tilted downward while the black Zora caught up to her, coming to stand before her with uncertainty.

What was this about?

“I’d been praying for the Goddess to send me relief from the dreams I’d been having each night.. dreams of my dear Kayden as though he were still here, only to wake and remember that he’s gone..” Kodah began unprompted, the silvery sound of her voice weak and wavering. She, like Bazz, had an overwhelming amount of pain to cope with, and duties that offered her little room to actively mourn. From his perspective, that was what made their friendship all the more important.

“But the images that replaced those dreams, they weren’t at all what I wanted,” she uttered, her fingerscales tightening against her folded arms, her shoulders shaking from how it appalled and sickened her just to recount the horrors produced by her own burdened mind. “Now all I see throughout the night are visions of people being torn apart. I hear their agonized cries and I’m roused from sleep with a panicked start, because each time I’m so sure that they were really there, crying out.”
“You went through something traumatic, Kodah,” Bazz stated, still nursing the swell of anger inside himself at the sight of his friend, held captive beneath the danger of an enemy weapon. “It’s normal to be haunted by something like that.”

“Oh, stop it, Bazz,” the woman hissed, shaking her head in frustration. “You’ve never been dim-witted, so I know that you must know what I mean. I’m not talking about the attack. I’m talking about what you did.”

“What I did?” he repeated. “What do you mean?”

“The fact that you can’t figure it out tells me all I need to know about you, Bazz, it really does,” Kodah muttered, her voice dropping low in disappointment and underlying ire. “What you did with your magic was monstrous and unnecessary. I can’t even fathom how anybody with a heart could do what you did, even to your enemies.”

“They were threatening your life, killing our people,” Bazz reasoned, outstretching his palms and holding them out flat. “Kodah, you told me to stop them. I asked you, and you told me to do it.”

“No, Bazz! Don’t you dare put what you did on me! Don’t you dare try to make me feel like I was responsible!” the Zora woman snapped, her golden eyes narrowing as her tail went rigid and flicked behind her in insult. “I told you to fight them Bazz! I thought you could defeat them, arrest them, you know, the thing that is dictated by our laws, the thing that is your job! Don’t act like it was to save me because you and I both know that in that moment, my life was in total suspension. The one who had me could have easily killed me and it wouldn’t have changed anything. Your magic didn’t give me back my life, and it could have been the thing that ultimately ended it.”

“Kodah, I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry,” Bazz quietly muttered, blinking in surprise at the unbridled fury which he hadn’t expected, even from her. That bitter anger served only to confuse him, however, because the way he saw it, he’d committed no wrongdoing. For criminal activity, sure, he’d make arrests, but amidst an all-out attack? They’d have no hope of defending their Domain if they reacted so softly.

Perhaps she was truly upset because her rescue hadn’t been ideal.

“We were under attack,” he continued, hoping to quell her rage. “I didn’t think that kindness or mercy had any place in that kind of environment. Our enemies were fighting us with every intention to wipe us out if they couldn’t have what they wanted, and I did what I had to in order to see to it that we prevailed. It wasn’t anything more than any of my guardsmen did or any of the other Knights fighting in defense of our home.”

“Of course it was,” the pink Zora hissed, her sharp fangs exposed from beneath the curl of her lips, though her features quickly took on a look a desperate woe. “They surrendered, Bazz. They begged for mercy and you slaughtered them in the worst way imaginable. You didn’t do it because it was your duty, you didn’t do it to protect anyone. You did it because you wanted to.”

Kodah turned her back to the black Zora, her hands lifting to be pressed over her eyes. It was as though even her sight betrayed her, like the gruesome horror was burned into her retinas. She had scarcely caught more than an instant when the brutal event occurred, but she still couldn’t forget those awful screams and the way the blood seeped in little trails over the stone beneath her feet.

Unsure what he could do, Bazz remained planted where he stood, fighting the tangled morality which was confounding him more than anything else. Kodah was still in a delicate state of mind from the loss of her husband, and the attack had only served to exacerbate it. The Guard Captain, out of genuine concern, didn’t want to add further to her mental wounds, not even to defend himself.
“Do you remember what you did when we were younger..” Kodah whispered, her tone going some place dark, to match her wandering thoughts, “..when Kayden and I were out playing around the Veiled Falls?”

“Kodah..” mumbled the Guard Captain, though it was impossible to hear whether it was a plea for mercy or a warning.

“Do you remember it, Bazz?” she spat, turning sharply to the black Zora, her forefins swinging with her quick movements. She had lived as though the event had faded from her memory, never bringing it up to Bazz. She never even mentioned it again to Kayden, but she was sure he had never forgotten it, either. “Kayden was out there feeding the frogs, the ones with bad legs that couldn’t swim well. There were sixteen of them that he’d saved, sixteen of them that wouldn’t have survived if he hadn’t gone out to feed them every day.”

“Kodah, please,” Bazz interrupted, imploring, “I remember.”

“Then when I started going with him to the falls, you caught onto what he was doing,” the Zora woman’s voice raised in volume to drown out Bazz’s attempts to stop her. If she had to live with this memory because of him, he could endure listening to her retelling of the awful event. “You followed us to the falls and you pushed Kayden over, then you started stomping on every one of the frogs that he’d saved, all while we were screaming and crying, and begging you to stop.”

Afterwards, she had draped her arm over Kayden’s shoulders while he cried, trying not to look at the sight of the disfigured creatures, the way some of them still squirmed while their broken bodies failed them. Kayden wouldn’t even walk the trails toward the Veiled Falls after that. All of his life, he never went back, not even for festival events when they were adults.

“Yes, Kodah, I know,” Bazz gruffly intoned, his voice holding steady, belying the torrent of emotions coming untethered. He’d made the horrible mistake of believing that all the good he’d done in his adulthood had somehow reconciled the awful child that he was, the boy who feared that his inability to measure up to the ‘Demon Sergeant’s’ gruesome fame was the reason behind his father’s refusal to acknowledge him, ever.

Kodah had made the mistake of assuming that Bazz could endure having his inner darkness and shame unearthed.

“I was a cruel, little brat and a terrible bully,” he growled. “I know, and believe me when I say, I do regret those things, but that has nothing to do with what happened during the attack.”

“I had thought you changed,” Kodah breathed. “Back then, after you started hanging around Linny and Gaddison, your pitiless behavior abated. After several long, long talks from Mipha, you did seem different and I believed that you were.”

The Zora woman was still, all but for the slow shaking of her head, her golden eyes looking on Bazz like he wasn’t there, like he was a ghost from the past that she was saying goodbye to. “But the truth is, you never changed,” she uttered, morose yet steeled, saddened yet poised to make the final cut in the delicate ties between herself and the Guard Captain. “You just got better at hiding your cruelty.”

“Don’t say that,” Bazz snapped.

“Don’t tell me what to say,” the woman replied no sooner than the words left the other Zora’s mouth. “I think you should really face the truth, because if not, there will never be any hope of you changing. But either way, stay away from me. You’ve already left too many awful images in my head that I’ll never forget, and.. I don’t want any more.”
With the finality of her declaration, the pink Zora began home, intent on heading back to her inn, despite that she was much too stirred up for paperwork now. However, the other didn’t share Kodah’s belief in this conversation being over, and Bazz swiftly reached out to grab the woman by the arm, to cut short her retreat.

Kodah winced only slightly from the tight hold on her wrist and her eyes snapped up with a glare of warning. Her fins were flared and her tail was flicking against the back of her shoulders, but her obvious annoyance wasn’t enough to regain her freedom, as the black Zora refused to set her free when she attempted to yank her arm from his grasp.

“Kodah, please, just listen to me,” Bazz tried to assert as gently as possible, desperate and honestly fearful of the fact that his list of friends was shrinking to nothing before his eyes. “I’m sorry that I hurt you, that I frightened you. Your suffering wasn’t my intention, and I’m sorry.”

His fingers on the woman’s wrist loosened, enough to be conscious of her discomfort, but not enough to give back the option of refusing to hear him out. “Please don’t do this,” he begged with complete and utter sincerity. “Don’t walk away like this. I’m not perfect, and I concede to that, but I still need you. You’re my friend and I need you.”

“Take your hand off of me, Bazz,” Kodah stated, her voice soft, but pitched low in warning, in growing anger and resentment, and perhaps even fear that she wouldn’t let show. Her eyes didn’t leave his for an instant and her challenging glare hardened further with each second that the black Zora declined to heed her words.

He could do nothing without further sullying the pink Zora’s opinion of him that much further, so in silent, aching resignation, he let her go, and she swiftly pattered from his vicinity, back to the Seabed Inn.

He remained where he stood, all alone, processing this, his newest loss.

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The mood at Fort Boko hadn’t been so tense since the Blood Moon, or at least that was how the Sergeant was perceiving it. If she were to judge, actually, she was personally much more tense now than she had been then.

Fighting monsters was nothing, but managing this secret struggle which was waged behind the scenes? That was much more like a real fight to the death. And because of the nature of it, she couldn’t allow her frayed nerves to be outwardly viewed. She had to make certain that she showed her enemies no fear, no weakness.

..but it was equally difficult to maintain appearances when her spirit was being stamped down by the suspicion that she was already, somehow, losing this war. All she could hope was that her armor concealed her vulnerabilities, all of them.

The Sergeant walked the ranks of the gathered team, checking over the roster which had been written specifically by the Guard Captain, making certain that each member of the group was present. Her single eye flickered back and forth, from the list to her unit, from the hard, straight lines of Bazz’s handwriting, to the faces in her company.

There was Tottika, of course, as he’d been part of the original assignment. As well, there were a small handful of the Undercity Guardsmen, which was a bit overkill for something this simple, but Betaal could suppose that Bazz was being ultra cautious in the wake of the attack on Hateno.
There were workers from the Undercity, who’d been sent to offer aid with any labor, which essentially translated into carrying luggage for the Uppercity civilians; Betaal couldn’t help but notice that Dahlia was among them and she had an incredibly pleasant look on her pretty face. The Sergeant knew intimately well that it could only mean that she was annoyed almost beyond what was tolerable. Still, when Betaal caught her eye, the fellow Undercity woman gave her a quick smile and a nod.

Lastly, there was Dunma, who was standing at the corner of the group, a bit ahead of the rest. She was at attention, standing taller than most of the others and looking as serious as ever. Betaal hadn’t failed to acknowledge, however, that the younger woman had some measure of confusion written on the pale of her face. She surely didn’t expect explanations at this very moment, but her doe-like golden eyes were certainly searching for contact with her Sergeant’s, for a nonverbal reassurance that they could expect to talk things over later.

Betaal didn’t look up at her at all, instead passing the roster to her without a glance and uttering the words, “Corporal, double check that everyone from the roster is present, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Dunma replied, her words strong and sharp, giving no indication that anything was amiss. Good, that was precisely how she needed to behave, and nobody would be any the wiser but the Sergeant, herself, because she already knew that Dunma had a habit of being even more rigid about things when she was worried or upset.

Neither had any choice but to weather it, for now, while watchful eyes were on them.

The rest of the forces within the fort were gathered separately from the escort team, and barring all who had late duty, though most of them could likely still see and hear everything going on from their posts. Betaal turned on heel to leave Dunma to her work, facing, instead, the impressive collection of guardsmen under her command.

The group couldn’t quite be called a legion, but their numbers still stretched to cover the empty floor space of the fort. The majority of them were Undercity, shining and powerful in the silver steel of their armor and their heads tipped back in unison, their eyes going straight to their Sergeant as she came before them. A soft smile of pride tugged at one corner of her mouth, but it was chased away by the words she knew that she was about to speak.

“The carefully selected team which you see assembled at my back is to be deployed for an escort mission to Hateno Village for three days, starting tonight. The team will be headed by myself, Sergeant Betaal, as well as Corporal Dunma,” Betaal called over the rest of her guardsman, speaking as concisely as she could.

The official explanation for the three day stationing in Hateno was for the sake of communication, making thorough reports of all guard dealings in the Hylian village, and she supposed that made sense. It just didn’t make sense for her to be the one to do it.

Betaal swallowed, the muscles of her throat moving with some effort, then she took a deep breath, in preparation to make the most difficult declaration of all. “While myself and your Corporal are deployed, the fort is to be under the control of Acting Sergeant Gaddison.”

At the announcement of her name, Gaddison stepped forward with a few soft clinks of her armor. She came to a stand near where Betaal was positioned, intent on taking her place before the assembly. The Sergeant stepped aside to take control of the splinter team and the final preparations before setting off, however, there was one thing she couldn’t fail to notice.

As Betaal turned, Gaddison made it a point to approach on the Undercity woman’s sighted side. Her
single-eyed gaze glanced upon the taller woman’s face for but an instant; it was just enough for her to catch the soft grin upon Gaddison’s lips and the sly gleam that twinkled in the narrowed gold of her eyes.

Meanwhile, from the ranks below, one silver-scaled guardsman stood at attention, watching the exchange with nervous interest. Tetra felt safe within the neat lines of other armored Zoras, but as the new Acting Sergeant began her introductory spiel, and Sergeant Betaal filed out of the fort with her escort team, the young guardsman quickly began to suspect that she wasn’t, in fact, safe at all.

It didn’t take long for the new Acting Sergeant to start in on the topic of performance reviews for all of the newer recruits, which Tetra understood to mean that they were either going to find ways to cut the guardsmen from the Undercity loose, or investigate them in some way. She resisted the urge to fidget with the straps of her armor at such a consideration.

This woman, Guardsman Gaddison, had only just arrived after the Undercity exodus, and now she was taking control of the fort and handling ‘performance reviews?’ There must have been more to this, Tetra was sure of it.

“Psst,” the young Undercity woman muttered to an equally young, Undercity man who was poised at her side. She tilted her head only slightly, not enough to be noticeable, then she spoke in question, “So they’re sending the Undercity Sergeant on a simple escort mission for three days? And handing control of the fort over to this Uppercity woman? Does that seem suspicious to you?”

“Hmm,” the young man hummed in a slow, sleepy way, not moving at all. He was so still, Tetra strained her eyes in sideways glances, trying to discern if he’d heard her, but without turning her head to look at him. After a strangely long pause, his voice issued forth like smooth molasses, slow and pensive.

“Only if there’s a reason for it to be,” he said, cocking his head to one side in intrigue. “Is there?”

Chapter End Notes

How was it? I do hope it was enjoyable. Oh, before I forget, I need to say my thank-yous, though I'm unsure if its safe any longer for me to say why I'm thanking them. I do believe, however, they will know why. So, thankyou to hrtbrokentweets/Twitter, to Mist who is Beelzebumons/Twitter, to WindyRen, JunkTrash, Miauzen, and to a mysterious somebody, who has all of my love and gratitude. <3 You all are awesome, and seriously do help me tremendously in keeping this story coming. Thank you all so much.
Chapter Summary

All of the courage in his realm couldn't keep him safe, when time for the Yiga Clan to close in was nigh. Thankfully for a certain Champion, though kind souls were in short supply, he just so happened to stumble upon them in his time of need.

Link chose to remain within his Prince’s castle that night, after his bargaining with Brivere was done. He laid beside his unstirring Zora lover, comforted by his closeness, by the feeling of his solid form so near. He wanted to believe that the steepened security presence would also give him reason to sleep peacefully, but even so, he did not.

When the lamps of luminous stone were covered, and Sidon’s sleeping quarters were shaded in dark tones that left all of the corners blackened and the floors hazed ever so slightly with soft, ghostly blue, it was not calming in the least. Link would stir, hour after hour, roused by the slightest noise, sure that in every shadowy area, if he looked hard enough, he could make out the waiting silhouette of a Yiga Clansman.

He wasn’t safe anywhere. Not even here. And because of him, Sidon wasn’t safe, either.

Link curled himself closer to the Zora, his head against his chest, the rest of his body easily imagining, remembering, what the weight of Sidon’s arms felt like around him. The Zora occasionally moved as he slumbered; a twitch of his fingers, a flick of his tail fins, a quietly muttered word that was unintelligible, but he did not wake. Link dearly wished that he would. Somehow he knew that Sidon’s smiles would not fail to chase away the fear inside him which was growing, deepening, swallowing him so that he had no hope of escaping on his own.

At some point during the night, Link leapt upright in response to a noise that he only realized afterwards had merely been in his dreams. His ears were perked and twitching, his fingers grasping for weapons which he didn’t leave nearby enough to grab in any kind of hurry. He’d considered it, and then reconsidered, knowing that the vulnerable Prince could easily be on the receiving end of his instinctive response to night terrors.

He wasn’t willing to risk that.

In Link’s mind waged a war of voices, each calling out to him, some demanding, others threatening. He could hear Zelda’s cries for him to awaken growing desperate, disallowing him uninterrupted slumber. It was garbled and mixed with the threats of the Blademaster, who’d held Sidon captive, and the footsoldier from the tower, muttering strange and cryptic things before cutting into Link’s skin, only to find a mess of black underneath.

In his dreams, the Champion screamed in agony when the murk from within pulled itself free of the confines of his flesh, dragging his organs with it until the beast of shadow forged itself in Link’s own image, a second Link made of viscous obsidian, just like the man on the other side of the mirror; the original was left, gasping and hollow as the light faded from his eyes.

In short, Link was pretty much done with sleep for one night. However, what he knew would come next was not any easier.
The Hylian pulled on his trousers, buckling his belt, then he slipped on his gloves, his bracer. He fastened his weapon strap around his chest, arming himself with the items he’d stolen from his slain Yiga enemies, as well as the empty, jeweled sheath where his dirk was once nestled. Link’s fingers slowly moved across the lacquered finish in regret, the blue of his gaze glancing toward Sidon before a doleful sigh was set free.

Finally, Link pulled the heft of his rucksack up, so that it rested against his back, its weight strapped around the Hylian’s shoulders. That was the last of his preparations, and yet as he took his Sheikah Slate from his belt, his fingers hesitated to touch the screen.

Slowly, Link backed himself to the edge of the Zora Prince’s bed. In thought, his glassy-eyed stare drifted to the windows which encircled him, taking in the sight of the morning sky, still a deep, hazy blue that was hardly short of black. Sunrise was hours away and all was silent. The birds had yet to even wake. And somewhere out there, in the seemingly sleepy darkness, the entirety of the Yiga Clan were waiting with baited breath for the chance to ensnare him and end his pitiful existence.

The Hylian’s eyes lowered to the Slate in his hands, reflecting the glow of the screen. Before him, the map was opened, his destination selected and all he had to do was press, ‘Confirm.’ One hand drew away, raising upward as though to finally tap in confirmation, before pausing there again.

It was so quiet that, to the Hylian, the slow sound of his breath was like wind rushing through a narrow cavern. His fingers furled and unfurled, trying hard to rid themselves of the quake that rendered them a trembling shadow before the glow of the Sheikah Slate. At last, he closed his eyes and let one fingertip meet the screen.

His destination was Hateno Village, and no sooner than his particulated body drew back together upon the dais of the shrine which resided there, Link set off hurriedly on foot, one hand tightened upon the Windcleaver blade at his back.

He somehow imagined this to be the beginning of some great and terrible hunt, sure that he could recall such things from the Hyrule of a hundred years prior. There were flashes in his mind of Knights and Nobles on horseback, a baying breed of Hylian hound which hadn’t survived the Calamity in order to exist in the present day, and fleeing quarry, ran off its feet.

Link had some kindred feelings lurking in his heart, the memories finding him with strange ease in the dark of the morning and with the racing pace of his heart as his boots thumped the frosty grass beneath his feet. He could recall blurred images of a wild pig, it jaws open wide as it gasped in exhaustion, its mouth frothing, its squealing voice resounding through the timbers when at last the hounds cornered it and tore it apart. It didn’t have strength left to run, it didn’t have the will left to fight, it could only lay and squeal while the dogs ripped at it.

The Hylian’s eyes squeezed shut for a quick instant, then he blinked. They were wet from the way the cold air of the morning whipped against him, but the view of his mind’s eye was sharpening. He remembered the bounce of being on horseback, his own tiny hands clutching at the furrows of another man’s armor and how very wide the back of the other man seemed in front of him.

Was it Link’s father? He couldn’t recall that much.

When the dogs were called off, the boar was bleeding and still. It wasn’t on its feet, as it was too gored to stand, but through the blood smeared in the wiry hair of its face, its eyes were still visible. It stared up at the man on the approaching horse, resigned and ready to have its suffering ceased.

Link didn’t look away, but his hands tightened on the man in front of him while he drew his bow and nocked an arrow, taking aim for the pig and letting his arrow fly.
Despite the sting of the morning air in his lungs as he ran, he let out a bitter chuckle. That damn pig was probably more dignified at its end than he would be if the Yiga Clan honed in on his location. They could track him whenever he used his warp capabilities, but he was hoping that if he covered ground quickly enough, he might escape the hunters on his trail.

There was one other thing, also.

Link’s pace slowed, his ears pushing forward, his blue eyes shining in the darkness. The hills outside of Hateno Village were a softened color without the sun, the shades of green not quite so vivid, looking a bit more blue than in the golden light of day. Standing in the still of the rolling fields was a dark, but familiar figure, a short, bulky frame that Link knew as well as his own, maybe even better.

She was still, asleep with her head held downward, but her tail gave a flick every now and again. Link knew better than to think that he had any hope of sneaking up on her, not with how very quiet it was, so the moment one of her ears shot backward at the sound of his boots in the grass, he ran for her.

Before she could fully wake or spin around, he was already on her back and she was bounding ahead, bouncing across the ground with hooves that pounded the earth with such force, you’d have thought she was a Goron rolling across solid stone, rather than a horse peeling across a grassy field.

“Did you enjoy your vacation days, my Lady?” Link greeted his enraged steed, his voice wavering with her bucking, his legs as tight against her sides as his fingers were in her mane. She felt a bit bigger than before, and he smiled to himself. “Sasan and Finley must have been feeding you well. You’ve gained weight.”

At the very least, while he was astride his Crazy Girl, Link firmly believed that the Yiga Clan simply weren’t as much of a threat. Or maybe it was that he was a much greater one.

The fields rapidly turned to steep, winding pathways, and Crazy Girl created a veritable storm cloud of dust and dirt when she clamored down the well-worn road. With a few minutes of quiet chatter, the mare finally recognized that it wasn’t a stranger on her back but her rider and greatest nemesis. Link could tell that she knew it was him, because some degree of her rampant, wild nature tuned down, replaced instead by calm but seething hatred.

It was right in time, too, because it would’ve done Link little good if his horse unwittingly delivered him into the waiting hands of the Yiga Clan. Crazy Girl let out a warning bellow as she rounded a rocky ledge, momentarily crossing the path of a wandering stranger. In that quick instant, Link regarded them; they were unarmed and carried with them only luggage and a lantern to light their path.

The stranger, too, glanced up when the Hylian rode by, and their gazes met as though in recognition, like two friends who’d not seen one another in some time, or like the Hylian Champion was a person of interest that the stranger had been waiting to see. The early morning traveler slowed, in no apparent hurry, with no real destination in mind at all, and with a renewed sense of dread, Link made a few sharp clicking noises with his tongue, tapping his heel against his horse’s side.

This was how things would always be now, he supposed. Every traveler was a danger, every unknown face was suspicious. More than ever, Link was isolated and afraid, because it was not just the monsters who meant him harm any longer, but any given person he met along the way stood to be an enemy in disguise.

Tiny stones were sent toppling down the steep mountain side as Crazy Girl’s hooves knocked them aside, and she skidded haphazardly into each turn. Link dared not slow, however, choosing instead...
to lean in close to his horse, feeling the strength in her frame while she ran, trusting that with his life more than he trusted losing a second of time in running the path with more care.

Maybe that traveler had been a regular person, who just happened to be out walking before sunrise? Link wanted to tell himself that, because the idea of spending the rest of his life in hiding was suffocating. It was perhaps even more terrifying than simply facing down the Yiga Clan.

And yet, much as the Hylian wanted his fears to be unjustified so that he could feel silly about it later, when Crazy Girl stamped down into the valley at the foot of the mountainous terrain of Hateno Village, she came worryingly to a complete stop, her ears flicking here and there, her nose raised to the air like she felt her rider’s suspicions and shared them.

Link’s ears pricked and tilted as prompted by his horse; wherever she listened, he turned to listen as well. Laid out before them was a flat area, enclosed by steep walls of stone and overgrown with foliage. Clumps of greenery shot up from dense crowns that dotted the thick grasses, the long, wide leaves swaying slightly in the breeze coming down the mountainside. They were cow ear plants, and though they were much more common in Faron, they survived in this valley where precipitation collected, leaving the ground swollen and soft with moisture.

Amidst it all, there was a quiet ruin; it was a kind of stone formation that had been destroyed during the Calamity, but the masonry construction was still at least half standing. Typically, it was inhabited by the red moblins and bokoblins who loved to swarm the paths leading to Hateno for the sake of robbing traders and travelers.

Link had been through this way enough times to remember it. In the evenings and mornings, prior to dawn, however, the entire valley had always been acrid with the stink of the monster’s campfire. That smoke was the signal, letting Link know when it was safe to pass through, but this time there was no smoke, nor any smell to indicate a monster presence at all.

Crazy Girl very clearly didn’t trust it, and neither did Link, but what choice did he have but to proceed? The path ahead was his only path, and he tapped his heel against his horse to urge her onward.

The mare shook her mane in complaint, but continued as prompted. It was out of character for her to go anywhere slowly, so when she did precisely that, Link found himself swallowing in apprehension. The narrow corridor that passed through the dense overgrowth led directly toward the ruin and continued at the opposite end of it. One could easily see all the way through, but it was impossible to see what lurked in the shadows within the stone walls.

Loosening his bow from his back, Link took the weapon in hand and nocked an arrow in preparation. The wood of the bow was curved in such a way that it gave the shot extra strength, and the leather grips were pliant beneath the Hylian’s tight grasp. The clip clop of Crazy’s hooves counted down the moments before he passed into the shadows of the dilapidated building, and Link timed his breathing with those dwindling seconds, drawing his bowstring taut as they passed beneath the stone archway and into the ruin.

Link liked to think that there was absolutely no element of surprise in moves that were completely predictable. In his paranoia, he fully expected to find Yiga Clansmen awaiting him, an ambush set and ready to be sprung. But because he expected it, he also told himself that for that reason alone, it was fairly unlikely.

And yet, within two resounding clicks of Crazy’s hooves against the uneven stone floors, Link’s horrors came to life from the shadows, no longer mere illusions dreamt up by his tattered mind, but fully real nightmares from which he couldn’t simply awaken. A handful of footsoldiers lunged for
him and even in a panic, he aimed his readied arrow for the nearest of them, and struck enough of a blow to debilitate the single enemy, sending them back with a muffled yelp.

But before Link could nock another arrow, a footsoldier who was also armed with a Duplex Bow took aim for the mounted Champion and shot him down from his steed. As he let out a hiss of surprised pain, he tried to tighten his thighs against his horse, but the attack had startled her enough that she half reared, pawing at the open air before her while her rider plummeted harshly to the stone.

Even the relatively short fall from Crazy Girl’s back disoriented the Champion for a few sharp, aching seconds. His sight was black, and his body was only aware of the pain in his shoulder from the arrow jutting out of it as well as the hard landing he’d endured. The first thing he saw when clarity returned to him was the moss growing between the cracks in the masonry, his blood dripping to the dusty surface, and his horse still standing where she’d been when he toppled off.

Thankfully, Crazy Girl’s very existence formed a impenetrable barrier that the Yiga Clansmen had to pass before they could set upon their prey. She was not the kind of beast to run from that which threatened her, and instead charged at the nimble footsoldiers, her teeth snapping, her hooves swinging.

Within the closed quarters, the small band of warriors scrambled from the threat. Crazy kicked at the walls, sending debris and rubble flying, her body twisting around in a frenzy so that her shoulder caught one of the footsoldiers, knocking them aside before they went beneath her merciless hooves moments later. Link, too, grabbed his bow and rolled away, then he made a run for his life. It wasn’t a tactic that he was used to employing, but he wasn’t ready for this fight. He wasn’t strong enough, or maybe it was that he lacked confidence. Or, more simply put, he was afraid.

Three of the clansmen who were still standing blocked the Hylian’s escape, weapons brandished and ready. He dodged at their initial swipes, side-stepping and skipping back on his toes, leaping instead toward the wall with the intention of going up and over. The stonework was jagged with plenty of footholds, and within moments Link was at the top. He was so pumped with adrenaline, he didn’t even feel the twinge of pain from his injured shoulder, though his muscles were surely bundling into knots around the protruding shaft of the arrow.

The Yiga archer aimed to give Link another arrow wound for his trouble, however, and the Hylian scooted along the narrow ledge to avoid the strike. His fingers went to his mouth and he whistled to his beloved horse, leaving dust from the stone upon his lips. Before the footsoldier could release their arrow, Crazy Girl spun around and bolted for the archway, knocking the archer back and ruining their shot.

The trio that had been blocking Link’s way now ran aside, scaling the wall in pursuit of him and dodging his fearsome horse at the very same time. His balance teetered as he spun on his toes, running parallel to his escaping horse down below and leaping from the top of the archway, landing hard upon Crazy Girl’s back.

The horse’s head shot up in alarm and her ears turned backward while she puffed; it was difficult to say whether it was because she didn’t know who actually landed astride her, or if the landing itself had hurt her back. It certainly didn’t do Link’s tailbone, nor the space between his legs any favors, but he would welcome any pain that signaled a successful escape on the horizon.

Quick hands went to the Hylian’s belt and he drew the Sheikah Slate from where it was hooked, tapping desperately at the screen as opposed to his previous hesitation. A glowing orb was soon summoned forth from the device, and he tossed it over his shoulder in the hopes of either killing his enemies or preventing any pursuit. One finger pounded at the screen for detonation, the same hand grabbing at Crazy’s mane immediately after, knowing that she would bolt all the more tenaciously at
the resounding boom of the explosion.

Stone was sent aloft in the blast, and Link ducked low against the back of his galloping horse, just praying that his little last ditch attack didn’t damn him in the end. He would’ve felt rather sheepish if an errant stone ruined his escape and inevitably led to his capture. He tilted his head to one side, stealing a glance back as smoke engulfed the ruin, catching sight of the archer who’d landed one successful strike on him before.

They were clear of the explosion, having rushed from the archway and into the trees. Their legs were wobbling beneath them, as clearly the shock of the bomb had left them disoriented, yet even so, they’d nocked an arrow and took aim for the fleeing Hylian.

“Hyah!” Link yelled, tapping his heels against Crazy’s sides in desperate haste. In his mind he was chanting a plea which fell on deaf ears; his own. He needed Daruk’s protection. He needed to summon the magic for his own safety and escape. He tried to will the shield to spring forth in the dwindling seconds allotted to him, but to no avail.

Before the Champion could make use of his fallen comrade’s gift, the hiss of a flying arrow met his ears and a flare of pain seared through his middle. His horse whinnied in complaint or perhaps distress, but bolted ahead nonetheless, so that Link was left fighting to maintain his hold on her.

All he could do was breathe and hold on. He had one hand laced in his horse’s wiry mane for dear life, while his other shakily fumbled to return his Sheikah Slate to his belt. He took another breath like he had to remind himself. It was shallow and painful. The sound of Crazy’s galloping faded away. The scenery rapidly bypassing him faded into a blur of dark. He took another breath. Had he exhaled the previous one? He wasn’t sure.

The sting in his middle turned to heat and pressure, and once Link’s hand was no longer burdened by having to hold onto his Slate, his fingers examined the wound, searching blindly for it and missing in lightheaded wariness. The pinch of pain returned when his hand located the arrow; it had passed through the backside of his hip, missing the bone and as a result was jutting out of the front of his lower abdomen, painting an uneven circle of crimson in the blue of his Champion tunic.

For anyone else, this could’ve meant certain death. For him, all of the associated pain and suffering were still assured, as well as the innate fear that accompanied the possibility of dying. If death came to claim him now, it wouldn’t be the end, but it would mean shooting back to a moment previous to this one and being forced to fight all over again while also enduring the phantom pains of his previous demise.

Link did nothing drastic. He placed his hand over the wound so that the shaft of the arrow protruded between his fingers. He applied pressure to slow the blood flow as best as he could, clinging to his horse because he was sure that if he fell off again, that posed the greatest danger to him. What he needed to do was put space between himself and his enemies, and Crazy Girl handled that for him in spades. She could accomplish it so long as he held on.

By the time they made it to the ruins of Fort Hateno, rapid blood loss was threatening to become a total loss of consciousness or shock, and Link wasn’t exactly cognizant enough to discern. Numerous slain Guardians were scattered about the field before the stone walls and barred gates, and in the Hylian’s hazy awareness, he was suddenly sure that they were all alive and moving.

The ground was quaking, fires blazing out of control. The stink of blood and mechanical fluids permeated the air, the ground and Link’s very being. His flesh was marred by slash wounds and severe burns, every inch of him devoid of strength and brimming with pain. He had nothing more to give, nothing more to offer.
“Stop!” he heard a voice cry. The sound of fear and desperation shook him so that his eyes went wide and his ears perked in alarm. He blinked and the Guardians were still once again, weathered and overgrown, just harmless reminders of a horrible disaster.

However, as Crazy Girl darted between the slain machines, Link caught sight of a silhouette standing amidst the wreckage; a petite, young woman in a tattered, stained gown, with flowing, golden hair which was muddied and mussed. Her blue eyes shined like mirrors as he passed her by, watching him in condemnation while he went.

The riding Hylian bypassed another mess of destroyed Guardians, and the image of the disdainfully waiting Princess was momentarily obscured, only to be replaced by that of another, once the same patch of grassy field came into view again.

“Stop!” Link heard again, this time called aloud by someone else, someone other than the young Princess. His eyes focused on the blur of color now perched where Zelda had been, recognizing with ease the stately red and white figure of his beloved Zora Prince. Yet, even from afar, Sidon’s expression was unmistakably disappointed and pinched in insult. His golden eyes glared like he was regarding the lowest of scum, though aside from his clear and obvious anger, there was something else, some kind of unspoken hurt which could never be undone.

While Link stared, the Zora turned aside, but before he could step away, his body went rigid, his scales fading from their bright, lively coloration, and into a pale blue which crept over him, until at last his legs turned brittle, and he crumbled into a thousand pieces, his body a shattered ruin alongside a hundred others.

“S-Sidon,” the Hylian rasped, decidedly clamoring down from his horse’s back, in an attempt to run toward the startling image he’d seen.

However, despite what Link believed he could see, the truth of the matter was that Crazy Girl had come to a slow canter in front of the Dueling Peaks stable, and the man working the front began shrieking at the mere sight of this young, arrow-filled rider. He leapt through the front window, rushing to the aid of his clearly injured fellow as Link toppled off the side of his steed.

Another worker hurriedly came running from around the side of the building at the sound of her brother calling out in a panic. She tried to settle the injured Champion’s enraged horse, but Crazy Girl kicked her back legs out when she was approached, then darted out of reach.

“Leave the horse,” the man swatted one hand at the other worker, “help me move him inside.”

Few of the stable occupants bothered to get out of their beds. They raised their heads for the sake of knowing what was going on, catching sight of the two workers carrying an injured Hylian inside and laying him down atop the same table they’d expect to have breakfast set out upon in a few more hours.

To most, it was of little concern. People were attacked and injured all the time; that was simply the world they lived in. But they had paid for their beds and by Hylia, they planned to sleep until sunrise, regardless.

One well-traveled woman had yet to sleep at all, however, and found herself moving all of her work abruptly aside as the injured young man in blue was lain carefully upon what had previously been her work surface.

“Whoa, shit,” she hissed, cringing at the sight of the boy, though she didn’t fully recoil, nor was she even moderately surprised. In fact, once her papers were straightened out in her hands, she leaned
over the wounded Hylian for a better look at his wounds, then she shook her head in concern. “Ya’ll gonna get this kid a potion, or what? Better hurry.”

“Fresh out of potions,” the man who worked the window grumbled, turning to grab an additional lantern from elsewhere, then he brought it back to the table, setting it near the injured young man in blue.

“Who in the Calamitous hell runs out of potions?” the woman said with a scoff. She set her work carefully aside, atop a stack of crates near the wall. Turning back to the table, she took one hairtie from around her wrist and pulled back her thick mess of brown hair. She could already see that she was going to need it out of the way. Next, she rolled up her sleeves and leaned over the boy who’d been lain upon the table. His skin had turned pale and cold, and was moist beneath the woman’s careful palms as she examined him. His lashes fluttered, so that a sliver of dull blue was apparent from beneath, but his awareness was gone, as would be his life soon without some kind of assistance.

“Pardon me,” spoke a young trader, who’d been resting on the floor against one of the walls where the lantern light didn’t reach quite so well. He strode about half of the distance between where his enormous pack of trading goods laid, getting enough of an eye full of the injured Hylian to know that this matter was serious. For the same reason, he didn’t really want to come any closer.

“I may have a potion on hand,” he reassured, though his own tone was a bit nervous or maybe doubtful. “Um, just a moment.”

The woman glanced over her shoulder as the lanky, young man turned and rushed back to his pack, digging through while muttering, ‘Where did I put it? Where did I put it?’ She let out a sigh, her features furrowing in aggravation. Finding anything in that mess of stuff looked like an impossible task.

“Take your time, Beedle. The kid clearly has plenty,” she snapped, then she looked to the stable workers who were just standing there, apprehensively watching the kid bleed out, but doing fuck all about it. More than ever, the woman hated being the kind of strong-willed person who was always destined to take control in situations such as these. “Don’t just stand there! Bring me some clean cloth and warm water. And alcohol of some kind.”

“Uhh, right!” one of the stable workers mumbled, while the other ran off to help hunt down the items without a word. The one who bolted out of the door bumped shoulders with another occupant of the stable on his way inside, but in her rush she didn’t stop to apologize. He was unperturbed, given the situation, and continued without a fuss, his claws clicking on the wood of the floor as he came over to investigate.

“What do we have here?” the Rito man spoke, his deep voice both concerned yet calm. “Another piteous run in with the GoH?”

“Looks like it,” the woman growled, utterly sick of watching innocents fall to that group’s tyranny. Every day they grew stronger and everyone else grew more fearful. She and her small group of companions had perhaps joined hands with the intention of resisting in whatever way they could, but so few of these stables remained out of the GoH’s control and now it was almost too dangerous for them to continue on together. At this point, traveling as a team meant that it was possible for them all to be slaughtered in one fell swoop.

The woman took out her hunting knife, setting it down while she kneeled upon the bench, fiddling with the cloth of the boy’s tunic and attempting to bundle it, then raise it up enough to see how clean the wound was.
“You’re lucky,” she mumbled, speaking with the intention that only her emergency patient would hear, not that he could at all. “At least the arrowhead didn’t get embedded in your gut, or you would’ve had a real problem.”

The stable workers returned with the requested supplies and the Rito man shuffled out of their way, choosing to stand nearer to his female companion, while taking care not to block her scarce light. “Were it not for the early hour, I would play our young friend a song to honor his courage in this grievous circumstance he’s found himself in,” the man softly cooed, though his bright blue plumage fluffed in discontentment. “I did at last complete the work I’d been composing; my song condemning these horrid Guardians of Hyr-”

“Kass, you have a family,” the woman cut in to interrupt her Rito friend, though she didn’t look up at all as she did it. She was too busy grabbing up the cloth that she’d been offered, wrapping it over the sharp of the arrowhead so that she could safely take the shaft of the arrow in hand and hold it steady. Then, with her other hand, she began sawing at the wood with her knife. Still, for all of her concentration, she managed to shake her head at the big, dumb bird in her midst. “You should probably consider what you have to lose before you go singin’ about dangerous people.”

“Hmm,” Kass hummed, turning his head aside for a moment, his eyes narrowed and his wings crossed over the broad expanse of his chest.

“Here we are!” the lanky trader cried out at last in success, a bit oblivious to his own volume. He rushed over to the Hylian woman’s side, sliding a small, glass bottle of heart potion into the space within her reach, trying not to look at the gory details all the while. However, his curiosity very slowly got the better of him, and his eyes wandered down to the arrow which the other Hylian was attempting to snap and dislodge.

It didn’t take her long to accomplish her task, and the trader reached out to draw the cloth away from the arrowhead, ‘hmm’ing’ to himself while he cautiously observed the item. “If I were to judge,” he began, unassuming yet sure of himself, “I would say that these arrowheads don’t look to be of Hylian make. They resemble the style you’d be more likely to find nearby, in Kakariko Village.”

“In that case, this poor fool had a run in with the Yiga Clan,” the Hylian woman grumbled, not liking them any better than the GoH. She’d seen her fair share of the carnage they were capable of, in her travels through the Faron area. They defended their little patch of forested hell, like air made of soup and sweaty asscrack was worth killing over. The only thing she could say positively about them was that they seemed to be the only people taking an active stand against the GoH, and in that way, they were valuable.

Sliding the shaft of the first arrow carefully from the young man’s flesh, the woman scoffed, then added, “Or maybe he just upset the absolute wrong Sheikah.”

“Take the cloth and put pressure on the wound, will ya’?” she commanded her other traveling companion, who was still busy looking at the discarded arrowhead. She figured, if he was gonna stand there, he might as well help. Despite his own squeamishness, at the woman’s word, he snapped into action.

“Oh my..” the Rito man suddenly muttered, his golden eyes widening in disbelief. He’d at last turned his attention back to the poor, injured Hylian laid out before him, and taken notice of a detail which had escaped him before. The feather’s which crested his head stood higher in the thinly veiled excitement of his grand epiphany. “This boy is..”

“What?” the woman’s head snapped up, her own dark eyes burning into her Rito companion at the notion of information that she wasn’t privy to, especially when it sounded important. “Who is he?”
“I can scarcely believe what my eyes have beheld this morning,” Kass breathed in awe, though his heart had very clearly turned even heavier, in light of the situation, and he settled himself down upon the bench, at the wounded Hylian’s side. “Traysi... He is the one we’ve been waiting for.”

“Pfft,” the Hylian woman scoffed, brushing off her friend’s nonsense. As much as she had adored chasing proof to back up mythological claims, word of mouth wasn’t proof, it only qualified as gossip; she would know. “You mean, the fictional hero from your songs?”

“I beg your pardon,” Kass snapped, though his voice was ever smooth, even in insult. “He is quite real.”

“How do you know who he is?” Traysi asked, her own doubt very clear. She made an attempt to gently pull the other arrow free from the young man’s shoulder, but as she expected, the shaft broke free from the head, leaving the thing lodged inside. “Shit!”

“You’re not the only one with a head full of intriguing information,” Kass asserted, leaning to one side to get a better view. “I have my ways.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Traysi brushed him off as soon as it became clear that she wasn’t getting any straight answers. She needed to focus anyway. Luckily, the shoulder wound was shallow, so she could see the base of the razor sharp item sticking out. The problem was that it was likely lodged in bone, so it would take a bit of prying to set it free. The Hylian woman let out a breath of exasperation, then she nestled her fingers right into the bleeding wound in order to take hold of the arrowhead. She tried to show great care, but it was a matter of wriggling the thing free, which sliced the surrounding flesh all the more, sending new streams of blood flowing.

And though he hadn’t made a peep through everything else, when Traysi began attempting to pry the sharp object from his shoulder, the young Hylian in blue let out a weak cry of pain, his body wriggling away, instinctively fighting that which was hurting him.

“Hold onto him,” she hissed, her blood-slick fingers nearly losing their grip on the arrowhead as he began to fight. The trader leaned his weight in all the more, and Kass finally got back to his feet, offering a spare wing to keep the injured Hylian steady.

“There, there,” the Rito man cooed when the young man fought to open his eyes, looking about in delirious confusion. “You’re safe now. You’re going to be alright.”

For Link, everything was a blur and all that he could fully register was the pain that he felt. Whatever strength was left in him melted away with the small effort he gave, struggling against the heavy hands pushing him down.

Who were these people? Where was he? He blinked, trying to will his eyes to open, even for a moment, so that he could get some idea of what was happening to him. For all he knew, the Yiga Clan had finally captured him. They were cutting him again and all the while, the fallen Zora Champion was unflinchingly watching, her body a dull glow that Link could make out in the corner of the room, between the wall of unfamiliar bodies surrounding him.

“There, the arrows are dislodged,” Traysi spoke in triumph, when at last the arrowhead embedded in the wound pulled free. She tossed it aside, rinsing her bloody hands and wiping them very quickly before she set to cleaning the wounded areas. It was important to clean before healing, or else you risked having the sealed wound go sour later.

“Kass, can you see if you can get him to take some of the potion?” the Hylian woman suggested, now that the young man was still. It didn’t take her long to have the blood mostly wiped away and
the wounds gently patted with the strong-smelling shit that the stable workers had brought over for the sake of disinfecting. It sure didn’t smell like it was worth drinking, so it was no major loss.

“Of course,” the Rito man cooed, his demeanor still quite calm despite his great concern for the injured young man. However, as he reached for the bottle provided by his trader companion, a flash a magical light engulfed the wounds of the boy in blue. The vivid glow rested atop the young Hylian’s skin for a few moments, then evanesced, leaving the room awash in the orangy hues of the lantern light once more, and rendering the trio of companions quite silent.

“Did y’all just see that or am I going crazy?” Traysi decidedly broke the silence, looking over the area of flesh that she had only just been cleaning. “His wounds disappeared.”

Another long pause fell over the group of friends, and in utter astonishment, the trader, too, bent over the previously wounded young man, finding the bleeding gouge in the middle of his abdomen to be completely healed over, even before the potion was given to him.

“Amazing,” he said with a grin, not questioning it, so much as he was glad it happened. Immediately after the strange, healing light disappeared, the boy’s breathing began to even out and his tense frame relaxed.

“He’s the one, I tell you,” the Rito man softly uttered like this was both a miraculous discovery and a secret of the gravest nature, which even the walls could be listening into. “He is the last true Knight of Hyrule. His arrival signifies great change. He has come to finally put this uncivilized world in which we live back into order.”

“He looks like he’s doing a right good job so far,” the woman bitterly mumbled in utter disbelief and mockery. As soon as she did so, however, she felt a tinge of guilt. She hated to spit on her friend’s hope, but it was just so difficult for her to believe in anything anymore. “At least he’s stable now.”

“Hey!” Traysi quickly added with a grin, looking to the Rito man, who’d turned sullen at her previous doubt. “Get it? Stable.”

“Hnn,” Kass’s beak opened in something of a smile as a soft chuckle came from him, though he was mostly humoring the Hylian woman and her attempts to lighten the mood. “You really should get some rest. And you as well, Beedle. Allow me to look after him if you will.”

“Right,” Traysi sighed, getting up from the table and making a small effort to clear the space before the Rito flapped at her, shooing her off to bed.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Link kept his word, despite his troubles, arriving in Zora's Domain to deliver on his promise to chaperone Estuu on an adventure that was sure to raise the boy's spirits. That was, so long as Link could avoid the dangers which threatened him, while also keeping the young Zora from getting into mischief of his own accord.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dear friends~
I know that you've all been waiting for three, long weeks for this update and I dearly hope it delivers. It is kinda cool how this is chapter 60, and it feels like a big milestone and also it just so happens to be a huge, adventurous chapter. So, without further ado, the epic Estuu and Link roadtrip. Please enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He’s late,” the golden Zora stated, though he did so in a way that left his voice rumbling in his chest like a quake even moreso than usual. His annoyance had hit peak because the bells from the city were tolling the midday hour, and not only did he have work that he was meant to be doing, but this only served to remind him yet again that the Hylian he’d made an effort to trust was irresponsible and could not be counted on.

Brivere crossed his arms over his chest, tapping one toeclaw in impatience. The afternoon was pleasant enough; the sun was warm and the sky was clear, but the air in the valley was cool and wet. It was the Zora ideal. That still didn’t alleviate Brivere’s souring mood, however.

Estuu wasn’t faring that much better. He’d been awake long before he usually stirred, too excited for sleep. It was just as well for the elder sibling because Brivere had to venture to the Basilica in order to procure some very official documentation. But for Estuu, it meant that his energy was winding down that much quicker, as was his patience.

The boy let out a little huff, adjusting the straps of his rucksack against his shoulders for the hundredth time. He didn’t need to be able to speak for his elder to tell that his previous excitement was starting to fade into even deeper disappointment than what he’d dragged himself out of previously.

Restless, Estuu turned from where he stood at Brivere’s side and wandered instead, over toward the rails of the Great Zora Bridge, leaning against it and watching the water flow past, far below. Brivere kept a careful eye on his sibling, like a nervous islander hawk. He was unsure that he’d be able to properly contain the seething insult he was sure to feel, should the Hylian dash Estuu’s hopes and leave him totally dismayed.

And Brivere didn’t know why, but even he had been attempting some small shred of optimism, wanting to believe that the Hylian would come through and that everything would work out. It
might’ve served his purposes better for his naive sibling to finally see what he had always suspected: that despite his brother’s strange fondness for Link, he wasn’t at all trustworthy.

In the end, though, that would only offer Brivere temporary validation, while serving to break Estuu’s already guarded heart, so instead, the golden Zora opted to hope that he was wrong about the so-called Champion. He set his jealousy aside for the sake of the greater good, his sibling’s happiness.

That very hope was waning, however, with every minute that went by without a sign of Link. Inwardly, the golden Zora couldn’t help but bitterly acknowledge the irony of the situation. That damn Hylian hardly ever left Zora’s Domain and yet now that somebody was expecting him, he’d gone missing. Brivere had almost resigned himself to giving up, when suddenly his sibling perked in alert.

At first, the golden Zora wrote it off as Estuu being overly eager, because even with electroreceptive senses outstretched in waiting, Brivere sensed nothing at all. Estuu, however, was tense and still, like a spooked animal awaiting confirmation of nearby danger. After a quiet moment, Estuu leapt away from the rail of the bridge, bolting across the grass to stand a bit ahead of where his older brother was waiting, bouncing on his toes once more in renewed excitement.

“I don’t sense him, Estuu,” Brivere purred in confusion, looking to the boy’s smaller form in astonishment. “Do you?”

The younger Zora glanced back at his brother, still springing about and flapping his tail in boundless glee, but he offered a simple answer to his sibling’s inquiry, even so. He reached his single hand upward, one finger resting against the fine fabric of the shawl he wore around his head, indicating the place where his earholes were hidden. Then, his hand fell to his side, and he patted the flesh of his leg in a soft, rhythmic pattern.

The rapping sound produced was that of three quick patters, followed by a short pause, again and again in repetition; it was a simplistic recreation of the sound made by a galloping horse.

Brivere was taken aback in his amazement; he always knew that his brother had senses which were keener than most, but even after brushing one of his long forefins aside and holding his breath for the sake of silence, Brivere heard nothing at all but the ever churning Zora River and the occasional bird song.

Within another minute, the golden Zora’s electroreceptive senses felt the static of two great, approaching beasts and one much smaller being who shined with radiant energy; it was the Hylian Champion, just as Estuu suspected.

“That’s rather impressive, Estuu,” the golden Zora uttered these words of praise in sincere admiration, leaving the boy to rather chirp in accomplishment.

It wasn’t long after Link’s presence was within sensing range that he came into sight, riding down one of the mountainous slopes toward the Zora city. He was very clearly astride that insane animal that made Brivere all the more nervous, as he still plainly recalled the way it viciously attacked the Zora Prince during a ‘spar.’ That hadn’t been a pleasant day for the golden Zora’s nerves, even if he had encouraged the cruelty.

In tow, the Champion had another equine, presumably for Estuu’s use. Brivere hadn’t been sure whether or not the Hylian would teach the boy while they rode together, or while Estuu rode a horse of his own, but he supposed now it was a bit more clear. He could only pray that the other animal was a bit more behaved.
Protective as ever, once the Hylian was nearly within range of the waiting Zoras enough for conversation, Brivere stepped forward, keeping his brother in the safety of his shadow, though Estuu groaned in complaint. He was unsure how Link’s wild mare would react to them, so he erred on the side of caution for as long as he could.

“We thought you weren’t coming,” he called out to the riding Hylian, keeping his annoyance tucked underneath his impassive appearance, for now. It was easily accomplished, and not just because it was his usual habit, but because there was something else budding alongside his irksome inconvenience; concern. “Did you run into any trouble on your way, then?”

“Nah, not really,” the Hylian shrugged, his answer coming out with the greatest ease. “I just had a hard time getting the new horse to jump that one ledge blocking the path to Zora’s Domain. Someone should really fix that.”

“I see,” Brivere murmured. He wasn’t entirely convinced by the Hylian’s blase reply, but he supposed that ‘convinced’ probably was an unlikely state for him to ever reach, where Link was concerned. With a sigh, he stepped aside, looking to the boy still lingering where he’d been hidden.

“Estuu, are you ready, then?” the golden Zora asked with what sounded like the smoothest ease, yet was actually the greatest of difficulty. He was sure that his apprehension was plain enough to see, for anyone who looked closely, but even the signs he gave did little to express the truth of his struggle.

Sure, he had asked the Hylian Champion to do this, but that didn’t mean he was entirely convinced that it had been a good idea. In fact, he’d yet to fully forgive his Prince for those reassurances that Estuu would be kept safe during that mission to take the fort, only for the boy to end up swallowed by the most dangerous beast imaginable.

“Mmm!” the boy hummed in vigorous joy, his pale scales tinged violet from how the blood had rushed to his cheeks. Brivere was so sure that his young sibling was totally oblivious to how much his brother worried, as any child might be. But Estuu was becoming old enough that he clearly desired his own freedoms, and much as Brivere wanted to allow it, he couldn’t bear to do so without at least some guarantee that the younger Zora would learn to be a bit more responsible with his own safety.

Estuu immediately took the golden Zora’s words as a sign that he was indeed free to go and shot over to where the unmounted horse was waiting. The animal sharply turned its gaze to face the quick-moving Zora, her ears tilting toward the boy while her head raised up and out of reach of his curious hand. When Estuu stilled before her, however, she calmed once more and took to sniffing at his prodding fingers, and his fingertips stroked the soft warmth of her nose. He couldn’t recall touching anything that had been more velvety and pleasing than the space directly between her puffing nostrils.

“Just be careful, kid, I don’t think she’s ever seen a Zora before, so you probably smell strange to her,” Link cautioned in an unconcerned way. He’d asked the people at the stable for a nice, calm horse that would be able to endure a kid’s rambunctious ways, so he wasn’t too worried. It just couldn’t have hurt to make sure that Estuu understood that horses could be jumpy.

After the young Zora gave Link a nod of acknowledgment, the Hylian climbed down from his own horse, in favor of approaching Brivere, as it was probably better to allow Crazy Girl to keep her distance. Things were awkward enough without her taking a chunk out of him, much as it would be amusing.

“Are you certain that this is safe?” The golden Zora wasted no time lashing the Hylian with his worries, though to Link’s ears it actually sounded less like an accusation of irresponsibility, and more
like Brivere was seriously just afraid. How quickly he forgot that Link, too, was adamant about Estuu’s protection.

“‘Safe’ probably isn’t the best description,” he stated in an attempt to be honest, though his words were a bit poorly considered, as was made apparent by Brivere’s sharp gaze and immediate ire. Even Estuu glanced back at the Hylian with a few confused blinks, which was the boy’s own way of silently saying, ‘Come on, man, don’t blow this for me.’

“What I mean by that is…” Link fumbled for an explanation. This was exactly why he hated talking to people. “You know, horses are big, powerful creatures that are totally capable of causing injury, so no, they aren’t exactly ‘safe.’ But if they are shown respect and the rider is attentive, accidents can be avoided.”

“Hm,” the nervous Zora uttered a sound of consideration, nodding soon after and replying, “..I suppose that is a fair assessment.”

It didn’t take the observant Knight long, though, to notice a visible sign that there was more danger to be mentioned, aside from the that which was presented by the irresponsible handling of large animals. Brivere’s crisp, yellow gaze wandered across the small Hylian, then he gestured to the muddy, reddish stains on the blue of his tunic.

“Is that blood on your…” he trailed off awkwardly for a moment. In his stress, he’d forgotten the word for the particular item Link was adorned in. The Hylian likely knew what he meant, anyway, because his pointing hand was a decent indication, and Link had tilted his head down to glance at the stain as it was mentioned. Even so, Brivere didn’t like to leave his sentences unfinished. “..garment.”

“Nah, it’s this weird fruit juice that the dye maker brews in Hateno Village,” Link responded with casual ease. “I was drinking some on horseback and spilled it down the front of my tunic. I tried to rinse it off at a stable once the sun came up but like I said, the dye maker is the one who brews the stuff, so it stains. Tastes good though.”

“Right..” Every one of Brivere’s reactions came with pronounced uncertainty. He felt all the more sure that the Hylian was being dishonest, if only because he seemed wordier than usual. “What about those enemies of yours?”

“They can only track me when I use my Sheikah Slate to warp,” he said, lowering his voice a bit, his tone turning much more serious. “They knew I was in Zora’s Domain before because I had recently warped here. I warped into Hateno Village last night, then rode here. They will have lost track of my whereabouts since then, so everyone is safer now, including the Prince.”

“Do you swear to that, Hylian?” Brivere’s voice both probed and warned at the very same time. His dark lids narrowed, sharpening his stare further, intensifying the weight of it while it bored into Link. “Do you swear that my brother will be safe from them in your care?”

“I swear to it,” Link breathed, nodding his head, then upturning his own fiery blue eyes to meet Brivere’s. “And even in the off chance that they locate us, rest assured, its only me that they’re after.”

“Yet I’ve seen that they’ll stop at nothing,” the Zora quickly snapped, not even nominally comforted by the knowledge that the Hylian was their one, true goal. These were the same people who had already held the Prince hostage, who had attacked all of Zora’s Domain and who this very same Hylian slept in fear of, and yet now he seemed so confident. Brivere maintained his own farce well enough to recognize it on another, so he was the last who would be fooled by a lying face.

“That may be true,” Link agreed, trying to maintain his own small reserves of patience, “but at the
same time, you know that I would do everything in my power to make sure that Estuu is kept safe from harm... even if it means surrendering.”

Brivere paused, breathing a deep sigh and weighing the options, like an accountant whose ledger consisted of pros and cons, cause and effect, danger and justifications for such. The golden Zora had seen Link risk rushing back into the fray, facing down his own worst enemies to get Estuu to safety more expediently. He’d witnessed the Hylian opting to hand himself over, rather than risking the life of the Prince. In all, he had observed that Link could, in fact, behave in a less careless way when it wasn’t his own life at stake.

“The distance between here and Kakariko Village is short. I know a route that is off of the main road and we should make it there before nightfall,” Link explained in Brivere’s silence. “Still, if you have doubts, it isn’t too late to go back on this.”

The golden Zora’s eyes went from the Hylian to where his brother was waiting, stroking the horse’s neck now that it was more accustomed to his presence. The boy’s movements were very idle and his eyes were a bit downcast. He was listening closely, his hopes at the edge of oblivion, ready to be cast off in bitter disappointment. Brivere just wished that his sibling’s happiness didn’t have to come at such a steep price.

Then again, life had proven that it had no care for Brivere’s attempts to shelter Estuu, as grievous things had occurred in their home, where the golden Zora would’ve believed that no bad could happen.

And then there was that strange voice in the back of the golden Zora’s mind, as well, to be consulted. It spoke with no words, no thoughts. It offered nothing rational, nothing concrete, only vague things like feelings, like suspicions. Those were not things Brivere was accustomed to trusting, not even in the slightest, and he gave his very best attempts to resist.

Still, his feeling now was that, despite his concerns, everything would be alright in the end.

He dearly wished that he had more to go on than that.

In defeat, the golden Zora shook his head, pushing his anxieties aside for better or worse. Half jokingly, he muttered the words, “..of course, if anything happens to you, my lord will believe I sent you intentionally to your doom.”

“I think he knows you better than that,” Link said offhand, smiling to himself over the strange fact that he actually recognized Brivere’s words as a joke, though the golden Zora always sounded completely serious. Between the Zora Prince and this asshole, Link was turning into a veritable lie detector.

At Link’s statement, even as casually spoken as it was, the golden Zora’s eyes widened a bit in surprise, then he turned his gaze aside, chuckling under his breath. The Hylian’s words had elicited an unknown, emotional response that Brivere did not recognize, and that somehow left him in a bit of a fluster. It wasn’t that he doubted the Zora Prince’s familiarity with the intricacies of his character, merely that he didn’t believe Sidon found him quite so trustworthy any longer. Yet Link seemed to believe it was so, and that served to reflect that the Hylian, himself, found Brivere worthy of trust.

Perhaps it was a strange leap of logic, but nevertheless, it was something meaningful to hold onto. Or return in kind.

“No. We don’t need to call it off. I trust you.” Brivere concluded the subject that brusquely, moving past it before the Hylian had room to comment any further. Instead, the golden Zora took a small,
leather-bound package that had been secured to the belt which encircled his hips and he handed it off
to the Champion. “As promised, I procured the paperwork you’ll require in order to pass through the
checkpoint with Estuu in your company. Take care that you do not lose it, as you may need it on the
way back, as well.”

“Got it,” Link confirmed, his tone softened. He reached to take the package from Brivere, flipping
open the soft leather of one flap in order to glance at the documents, then he turned back to Crazy
Girl, tucking the important item away in his saddlebag where nobody would ever be able to retrieve
it, save for himself. His horse impatiently rumbled and shook her head, growing tired of waiting
around.

“Are we clear on what time you need to be back by?” the golden Zora asked, crossing his arms over
his chest once again. Link hadn’t even turned to face the Knight again before a laugh bubbled from
him. It was funny how quickly this prick went from ‘I trust you,’ right back to grilling him like he
was a murder suspect.

“Yeah yeah, we talked about all of this already,” the Hylian groaned, turning around and flicking
one hand at the Zora, though his lips wore something of a smile as he did. “Cut the umbilical chord
already, will you?”

“Mammals,” Brivere muttered, shaking his head so that his long forefins swayed with his movement.
Looking to Estuu instead, Brivere decided to make certain that his reckless sibling also remembered
the instructions he’d been given beforehand. “What about you, little brother? You remember what I
said, right?”

“Mmhmm,” the boy nodded, not bothering to turn away from the horse, continuing to pat her and
fiddle with her mane, instead. Brivere attempted to be patient, thinking that Estuu likely hadn’t even
heard what he said, and would soon turn around to heed his words a bit more dutifully; that was a
very poor assumption for him to make.

The elder let out a sigh, shifting his tone back to something a bit more assertive, lest the boy would
continue to ignore him entirely. “Can you please look in my general direction, Estuu?”

With a squeak of annoyance, Estuu flung his hand down at his side, rotating on heel to face his
sibling, his head tilted back in frustration so that his golden eyes stared at the clear sky above. Brivere
gave a flick of his tail at the young boy’s attitude, but said nothing else of it. He couldn’t spare a
moment for anger, when he was still so tightly strung and genuinely afraid that me may never see his
brother again.

“Please, Estuu,” Brivere spoke gently, closing a bit of the distance between himself and his sibling.
This was one of those moments where he would’ve liked to be able to look the boy in the eye, or
touch him, but he refrained. It would’ve only been a comfort for himself, after all. However, at the
sound of Brivere’s tone, Estuu did straighten his previously exaggerated posture, glancing toward the
towering height of his sibling, his gaze resting near Brivere’s shoulder, which was at least close to his
face.

“The world is a dangerous place. Remember what I said, alright? No reckless behavior. Think before
you act. And listen to.. listen to Link.” Brivere hoped that last part was good advice, though he
supposed it remained to be seen.

On equal terms, though the young Zora nodded in solemn agreement to his brother’s instruction,
whether or not he would take Brivere’s warnings into consideration also remained to be seen.
Brivere doubted that he would ever be the one to see it, either, because no sooner than Estuu turned
back to the horse, he set right to being the careless, little devil the golden Zora knew him to be.
Rather than climbing up, onto the horse’s back as one was meant to do, Estuu bent his knees and sprung to the height of the horse like a hot-footed frog. He belly-flopped himself onto the saddle and the horse’s head shot up in surprise at the sudden weight.

“Woah, woah, it’s okay.” Link turned to take hold of the horse’s reins as she let out a nervous puff, worried that she might go bolting off at the little spook. “Easy, easy,” he purred, calming the mare with his gentle tone and reassurances. Once she no longer seemed so disturbed by the wiggling Zora on her back, Link looked to Estuu, speaking up in instruction.

“No, maybe don’t mount her like that,” the Hylian stated as though he didn’t regularly sneak up on his horse and throw himself onto her back, too. Maybe he should’ve taken his own advice and Crazy Girl wouldn’t always be plotting his death. “It kinda startles her.”

“You see, Estuu? That’s just what I mean,” Brivere snapped, his tone chastising but even, his disappointment reflected in the way his arms uncrossed and his hands went to his hips, instead.

“Don’t worry.” Link took to calming the golden Zora next, sure that he was more anxious and jumpy than any horse could ever be. “It was an honest mistake. We’ll just have to talk about what’s okay to do around horses on the way to Kakariko.”

“See that you do,” the golden Zora breathed, sure that his brother’s carelessness was going to be the death him one day. To Link’s credit, he seemed capable of handling Estuu’s shenanigans and that was somewhat relieving. Brivere took another deep breath, steadying his own nerves, if such was even possible, then he took a few backward paces. “Goodbye then, Estuu. Enjoy yourself.”

Finally free from Brivere’s worrisome hovering, Link clambered back into his saddle, waving his hand at the golden Zora in something of an awkward goodbye, yet the Knight remained where he stood, apparently intent on lingering until the two he was seeing off rode out of sight.

The Hylian gave his horse’s reins the smallest tug to one side and Crazy Girl spun around almost gladly. She was ready to get out of here and if she possessed the ability to tell Brivere to fuck off, she would’ve done it. Link got a fair chuckle out of that, but he’d had a little chat with his beloved mare on the way to Zora’s Domain, asking her to mind her manners, and for the most part, she’d complied. That was worthy of some gratitude, so Link gave the horse’s neck an affectionate rub.

With a whistle from the Hylian, the mare which Estuu was astride turned and followed, leaving the boy holding on with his one hand, unsure what to do, but excited to learn. Now that the path between the Domain and the Wetlands was clear of monsters and patrolled by the City Guard, it was actually the best place for such lessons.

“Got your feet in the stirrups?” Link asked the Zora boy, once the other horse was walking at Crazy Girl’s side. He’d asked the workers at the stable to make certain that the stirrups were adjusted high enough for a child to reach, sure that those short, Zora legs would make riding difficult, otherwise.

Estuu didn’t appear very sure of what ‘stirrups’ even were, so Link pulled his own feet free, saying, “Like this,” before he nestled his toes back in place for demonstration. The young Zora followed his example with ease, stretching his legs to reach then sliding his webbed toes into the footholds at his mount’s sides.

“Take the reins,” Link prompted the boy, again showing Estuu what he meant by holding his own reins up, indicating what they were, though this time the young Zora appeared to know what he was talking about.

He couldn’t help but be reminded of the time he attempted to tutor Estuu in how to use a bow, only
for the young Zora to humor him by pretending to be unskilled. “You’re not going to surprise me somewhere down the line by actually being incredibly skilled at riding and handling horses, right?” the Hylian teased.

At the joke, the Zora boy paused for a moment, then let out a little chuckle over it. Link scoffed, unsure how to read the boy’s laughter. It was actually hard to tell if it was amused or devious. This kid was such a damn enigma, even for a mysterious wild man such as Link. He glanced over, watching the boy fiddle with his reins, trying to get the best grip possible with his only available hand.

“Don’t worry. All truly skilled riders use one hand on the reins, anyway,” Link added, hoping it was reassuring, though he kept it casual. He could only assume that the boy was deeply wounded at the loss of a well-polished skill that he seemed to really enjoy, but at the same time, Link didn’t want to coddle the kid or patronize.

“Alright, kiddo, I know I told your brother that I’d talk you through the basics, and I will, but personally, I learn better by doing, so I’ll keep it short.” Link began, sure that Estuu was clever enough to pick most of the intricacies up along the way. Even so, he did his best to give physical cues while he spoke, in case his verbal instructions were insufficient. “Use the reins to indicate to the horse which way you want to go. You have to be firm about it, but don’t yank at them. Just enough to turn her head a little bit and she’ll know which way you want to go. Then, when you want to stop, pull them back. If you continue to hold them tight, the horse will back up.”

By the time Link finished his explanation of how to steer the horse, Estuu had a better hold on the reins and was taking great care to very precisely guide his mare around some of the twisting, turning caverns which their road meandered through. He had his eyes narrowed and the skin beneath his brow furrowed in focus, which gave him the false appearance of frustration.

He was similar to his brother, only instead of resting bitch face, he had concentrated bitch face. It was pretty endearing and Link let out a titter about it, though he shook his head over how intense the boy got when he was taking something seriously.

“For the most part, you won’t need to worry about it,” Link explained further, not wanting Estuu to stress over the assumption that horses were complete ignoramuses who couldn’t do anything without guidance. That was only true about half of the time. “They naturally like to stick to the path and stay together, so your horse should follow mine without much instruction. As for how to treat her, just try not to be too jumpy or nervous. You have to be confident with them, or they won’t be confident following your lead. Those are the most important things to keep in mind: calm and gentle but firm.”

Estuu’s horse had already been in the process of becoming confused and fussy over the fact that the kid was tugging at her reins so much, but after Link’s explanation, the young Zora let up, holding the reins and watching in wonder at how well his mount followed the lead of the horse which was walking slightly ahead.

But soon after, when the Hylian glanced over, he realized that now Estuu appeared rather bored with the fact that his task didn’t actually require his full concentration. Link couldn’t blame the kid because he personally wasn’t one to find relaxing tasks particularly stimulating.

“Try to enjoy the scenery,” Link suggested, sounding unsure of himself, or like he was actually questioning the validity of his own statement. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t really stopped to smell the proverbial flowers in some time. His mussed head fell back, his blonde hair falling back from his eyes so that his view was unobscurred. “The Zorana lands are really beautiful, huh?”

Estuu, too, tipped his head back, his golden eyes shining with a reflection of the clear sky above,
shadowed by thick pines and towering walls of gleaming, blue stone. He made a soft sound of agreement, because though his guide didn’t know it, he did, in fact, enjoy the scenery. He had always gleaned some deep fulfillment by being alone in the wilds, taking in the smells and sounds of nature.

The duo rode in comfortable silence, the only one who really interrupted it being Crazy Girl. She puffed and snorted a great deal more than Estuu’s own horse and he began to wonder if she was unhappy in some way. She was obviously much more of a handful than the comparably calm horse that he was astride and the idea of riding her, instead, excited the boy, tickling at his inner dare-devil.

But the part of him that was sympathetic felt that his own mare deserved as much affection as Link showed the more wild horse. Estuu idly fiddled with his mount’s mane, finding it very stimulating to weave his fingers in her course hair, letting it slip through the furrows between, against his finger webbings. He wondered if this was the horse which Link had promised to provide him some time ago. Was this horse his for good?

Furthermore, had it been out of some unspoken humor that Link decided on a horse whose pelt was a shining blonde, dappled with white? Her color very much resembled Brivere’s own, so he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe the Hylian had chosen her to take care of him in Brivere’s absence?

“Fuck, where did I put that paperwork, again?” Link’s troubled musings drew Estuu from his reverie, and the Zora boy looked ahead to notice what the Hylian had already seen. There was a guarded checkpoint on the path before them, where the trail crossed a bridge of elegant, Zora make. Estuu turned to look in Link’s direction, letting out something of a squawk to draw the attention of his guide, then he pointed to the saddlebag where Link had stashed the important documents. Brivere had made quite a fuss over them, so of course Estuu remembered all about it.

“Thanks,” the Hylian muttered, disappointed with himself for being so scatter-brained. You would think with the fact that he forgot more or less everything about himself, there would be plenty of excess space inside that head of his, but nope!

Oh well, he would just blame his own lack of concentration on the distraction of Brivere’s endless fretting and that would provide immediate relief to his questions of sufficiency and self-worth. Yes, indeed, nothing for what ails you like some good, old fashioned Brivere blaming!

Link actually snickered to himself over it, catching a quick, hesitant glance from Estuu. Dang, why did he always act like he was absolutely mad around this poor kid? If he could speak, he’d probably beg his brother not to send him off with such a lunatic.

He got the leather-bound package out just as the pair of horses began to clip clop on the stone of the bridge. Less than an hour ago, Link had ridden through the checkpoint with phenomenal ease, yet now that they saw that he was in the company of a young Zora, they stepped forward to block his path, the butts of their spears clicking against the ground beneath their webbed feet.

The Hylian had the forethought to bring his Crazy Girl to a halt before they approached the armored Zoras blocking their path. He was fairly certain that she distinctly recalled a gleaming, metal-plated Zora as an enemy, but probably not clearly enough to know that these weren’t the same one.

He clambered down from the saddle and Estuu stopped his horse shortly after where Crazy Girl stood. Link glanced in the young Zora’s direction, offering a word of praise for how quickly he’d caught on, then he strode over to where the guardsmen were waiting. All he could think was that he should have spoken to Bazz first, then he could’ve gotten waved through without all this bullshit.

“Where are you taking this young Zora in your care?” the guardsman in charge of the unit at the
checkpoint asked as soon as the Hylian was near enough for conversation, her voice shrill, but resounding and strong. She had scales that were a deep ruby tone, perhaps even more lush than the Prince’s, and she reached to accept the packet of papers when Link handed it off to her.

“We’re taking a short trip to Kakariko Village,” he replied, steady and neutral. As much as he loved the Zora people, the heightened security was so nerve-wracking, even if it was his fault, even if it served to protect the ones he cared most for. He supposed that he was no better than the Hateno Villagers that he had criticized for viewing the Zora presence as a threat, just the same. “I’m a friend of the kid’s family. I was asked to instruct him in horseback riding.”

“I see,” the guardsman hummed, leafing through the paperwork, her amber eyes skimming hurriedly across it. She didn’t sound too suspicious, or too concerned, and Link’s ears finally relaxed at that sound. Within a few moments, she wrapped his documents back up and handed them back. “Enjoy yourselves, then,” she stated, pleasantly enough.

“Thanks,” he responded in kind, casual and set at ease by the briskness of this encounter. He still heaved a little sigh of relief when he turned around and went back to his horse, however.

Once the paperwork was safely tucked away and he was back in the saddle, he softly clicked to spur his horse onward and one ear tilted backward to hear Estuu copy his example. He smiled to himself with pride; the boy was a good student.

They didn’t speak much immediately after the checkpoint, and if Link really considered it, Estuu was probably glad. Maybe? Either way, he hadn’t considered it, because he was busy mulling over the fact that there even was a checkpoint, now. It had been established a bit after the fight for the fort, but until now it had been for the sake of communication and making certain that the area was free of monsters. They certainly never stopped Sasan and Finley or required any paperwork from them, so why now?

Was this because of the Yiga attack? That was all Link could assume, but it didn’t make any sense to him that stricter laws would be enforced on the Zora people, thanks to an attack from outside forces. Maybe it was because of the Yiga ability to don disguises; that was the most reasonable conclusion that he could come to, with the information available to him.

“Alright, kid,” Link spoke up at last to address his young company. When he glanced over to see if he had the boy’s attention, he noticed that Estuu appeared much more comfortable and at ease with his mount. That was a good sign. “Think you can handle picking up the pace a bit? We’re gonna have to make good time if we want to make it to Kakariko by night.”

Estuu gave a slow but vigorous nod of his head, moving deeply into each little bow of his chin. He must have been excited at the suggestion, but was trying to obey the previous instruction of not being too sporadic around the horses.

If Link knew anything about the boy, it was that Estuu was likely as bored with going slow and taking in the sights as both his Hylian traveling companion and Link’s own testy steed. The boy must have been craving something more stimulating, something that offered more of a bloodrush; Link was inclined to agree with that wholeheartedly.

With a few quick clicks of the Hylian’s tongue, Crazy’s ears pricked and she fucking tore away from the pursuing mare with a bound and a puff. Link didn’t even have time to wonder at whether Estuu figured out to make that same noise at his horse to have her speed up, because he was too busy cursing his own wild steed for having absolutely no gears between dead stop and hell-bent gallop. She was an absolute nightmare.
And yet he adored her.

Link tugged at the reins to slow his horse, sure that Estuu wasn’t ready for that pace, especially while following paths that curved down steep mountainsides with no protection from the sheer drop that could follow a single misstep. At first, Crazy Girl shook her head, whinnying in complaint, stubbornly disobeying for a few more rebellious moments, before finally complying when her reins were pulled at again.

She might’ve bucked Link off the side of a damn cliff, if not for the fact that it just wouldn’t be as satisfying as watching him die beneath her own hooves.

When the wild mare slowed to a bouncing trot, Estuu began to catch up with ease. His horse had her head raised and a high-pitched cry vibrated from the animal’s throat. She was calling to the other horse, confused as to why she’d been left behind. Of course, Crazy Girl’s ears flicked, but she reacted as though the other horse were speaking a totally foreign language.

“You hanging on?” Link called to the young Zora boy once their horses were nearly neck and neck again. The youngster replied with a determined nod, and the Hylian didn’t even need that much to be reassured, because he could see that the kid had gotten the gist of where to place his weight while riding and how best to keep it balanced.

The twisting trails out of Zora’s Domain were an intricate ride and a strange, beautiful journey, even moreso at a pace quick enough to paint the surroundings in a vibrant blur, and to leave one’s heart racing in excitement. The steep cliffs gave way to forested canyons, where the river flow was trickling slowly, peacefully carrying a fleet of vessels in reds and oranges; the shed leaves of autumn. The trees shivered like naked bones, unveiled to the cool wind breathing in and out, every part of the Zora homeland alive but slipping into a state of winter rest. Even the air itself was perfumed with the sweet, pleasing decay of the forest’s discarded, leafy gown, which crunched beneath the pounding hooves of the two riders.

And then, the riding pair burst into the freedom of the wetlands, like Zora country had birthed them. Suddenly the world was bright and expansive, overwhelming. Estuu both dipped his head low from how much more harsh the sunlight was out from under the shroud of mountains which housed his peoples’ city, while at the same time his eyes were daring, heedless things, enduring the burning brightness for the sake of drinking in the sight of his surroundings.

The rocky shores of the Zora River turned to soft sand as they went, the river itself going from a narrow, winding rush, to a sprawling creep, gently caressing the land’s low points, making its meandering, lazy path toward Lake Hylia. Crazy Girl ran at the water’s edge and a bit into it, splashing through like a child stomping puddles in delight. Her head was swinging and her breath came in quick, rhythmic puffs, and at last Link gave the little click of his tongue that she’d been waiting for.

At his command, she tore free of the previously restraining pace, bounding into a wild gallop and racing across the land like she was one with it and it existed for the very sake of offering her something to run to her heart’s content.

Link didn’t warn Estuu about the increased pace this time. He was sure that he wouldn’t have to. That kid was smart and bold as anything. The young Zora took the new speed as a challenge or perhaps a newfound freedom that he’d never even known, and he indulged in it with as much reckless abandon as Crazy Girl.

The boy set his mare free to gallop, his posture upright to welcome the wind which whipped against him, his hand away from the reins and held out at his side like a single wing which kept him aloft.
Link watched the young Zora with a smile, thinking that maybe the boy could not speak, but his expression of pure joy at this, his first truly unrestrained ride, was one that required no words to be understood.

Link also shared in that uncanny delight, so it wasn’t a difficult thing for him to perceive.

The two riders got the rush of their hearts out of the way for as long as it pleased them. Crazy Girl was the first to slow back to a bouncing canter, puffing her breath. Normally that would seem uncharacteristic of her, but knowing that she’d been going through the night, Link was glad that she was starting to accept that she had limits, and he reached almost cautiously to pat her neck.

For a short while, Estuu actually pulled ahead of the Hylian and he chuckled over how bold the little shit was. He also liked the boy all the more for it. Crazy Girl’s ears perked forward, then folded back in indignance, in the utter abhorrence of letting some other horse lead her around. She almost adjusted her pace to match the golden mare, but Link tugged at her reins to dissuade his proud girl from making such a petty fuss.

And then, some little thorn of paranoia came along to abruptly stifle the Hylian’s pleasant mood. As he and his Zora companion rode along the river banks, they bypassed one lone Hylian, standing aside in a seemingly unpopulated area like he was waiting for something, expectant despite the low probability that anything would soon pass by, apart from Link, that is.

The mounted Hylian’s eyes shot to the figure as immediately as he came into sight from behind a jagged ledge, where the river would flow when the winter rains came and the water rose. He was tucked there, almost intentionally hidden so that he wouldn’t be seen until the last moment, then when Link peered over to behold him in surprise, the misplaced man’s stare slowly followed the Champion while he went by, not breaking eye contact in a manner which was more than a little unusual.

Link’s breath escaped him, his middle flaring with the painful reminder of the narrowly escaped ambush. For a few, fleeting seconds, everything felt as though it slowed, as it only did when the Hylian’s sense of danger dilated, filling him with wild, unrestrained energy and the blinding instinct to survive at all costs.

Fear bled into his veins, bitter, black and cold. It took away all rational thought, it took away sight and sound, blurring everything before him for an uncertain moment before everything sharpened once again, and he finally gulped in a breath, which had been frozen outside of his lungs.

“Hyah!” he blurted, tapping his heels at Crazy Girl’s side. She shot ahead at his command, flinging sand around herself from the intensity of her stride. He didn’t know if her eagerness came from the bond they shared, of being two belligerent yet terrified fools that could sense one another’s unease, or if his wild mare simply wanted to show that other horse that she was the superior force of speed and power.

Either way, it worked for Link. He really didn’t want to fall prey to another ambush, and though he had no clue if he was overthinking, he wasn’t willing to risk it. When they made it to the end of the beach, he changed course, taking himself and the pursuing Zora boy off the beaten path. That had been the plan all along, but it helped settled his nerves when at last they were thundering across the rolling fields, their path obscured by mossy embankments.

Estuu kept up with natural ease and once the Hylian calmed down from the flightiness brought on by something as seemingly harmless as an unfamiliar stranger, he began to wonder if his joke about the Zora boy secretly being skilled was coming true.
Again, they slowed their pace, letting the horses conserve a bit of their stamina. The young Zora rode near Link’s side, even though Crazy Girl kept giving the boy a dangerous side eye, and the Hylian was honestly worried that she might stretch her neck out to bite Estuu at any second. He pulled one of his feet from the stirrups and reached it toward his mare’s face, nudging her in the strong, round line of her cheek with the toe of his boot, hoping to discourage her nonsense.

It was successful, though it likely wouldn’t last.

Link looked to the youngster nearby, who had apparently caught onto his guide’s shift in mood with his sudden drive to get off the road and was sharing in the nervous energy which remained unexplained. He had certainly overheard Brivere and Link’s concerning discussion of the Yiga Clan, so it left Link to wonder at whether or not Estuu had become fearful. His golden eyes had that quiet, questioning shine and the line of his mouth was a bit tighter, so that his youthful cheeks seemed a bit fatter than when he was entirely neutral.

Either that or the kid was disappointed that he couldn’t ride ahead any longer, because without a marked path, he wasn’t sure where to go.

It also could’ve been that Estuu was starting to feel the lovely sensation of having his ass totally chapped from the pressure of being in the saddle and bouncing around for an extended period of time. If ever there were a reason for a Zora to don trousers, Link had discovered it.

“Is the saddle hurting your butt, yet?” Link asked bluntly, thinking the question could serve to amuse the kid and alleviate any worry he might’ve been feeling. Estuu didn’t really laugh, though, so that stood easily in the place of a general confirmation. He nodded his head, too, which Link hummed at in understanding.

“Yeah,” the Hylian sighed, “the saddle feels more like the Calamity’s lap at first, but you get used to it eventually and the pain wears off.”

That didn’t really serve to comfort the boy at all, but he also wasn’t discouraged, so Link took that as a good sign, then he began to consider other ways he might raise the boy’s spirits, if indeed they needed to be raised.

“Are you hungry?” the Hylian asked, thinking that his Crazy Girl would appreciate having the weight of the veritable bushel of apples removed from her saddle bags. When Link had awakened at sunrise, he encountered an oddly friendly bird man who kept shoving food at him like a doting parent. It was one of the more strange interactions he’d had, but not one that he could personally complain about. Food was good, after all.

Estuu perked in clear interest at the offer and his gaze waited as hungrily as his stomach for something to be presented; it was eager, expectant, but also critical. With a soft titter, Link dipped one hand beneath the leather of his bulging saddle bag’s flap, drawing out one of the apples given to him by the overly concerned Rito. It was round and red, with banded stripes of a paler tone marking the skin.

“I know that Zoras eat mostly meat, but for now this is what I’ve got.” Link presented his offer like it was something Estuu could decline without any judgement from the Hylian and with the underlying promise that they would eat much more richly once they made it to their destination. Link had his rupees ready to throw away for the sake of plentiful Sheikah cuisine.

“Does it sound good to you at all?” he asked once more, holding it out across the gulf between their horses, toward the Zora boy. “I ate one earlier this morning, they are nice and crisp.”
A squeak of interest came from the young Zora and he turned himself cautiously, in an attempt to reach for the item offered. It was difficult, because Link was riding on his right side, so he had to lean himself closer in order to outstretch his left arm and his open, waiting palm. Thankfully, Link was even braver when it came to tipping sideways in his saddle, and he did most of the work delivering the apple to the Zora’s hand. It sort of helped that the gold mare was a good bit more long-legged than Crazy Girl, though it rendered Estuu taller than Link while they were mounted.

Normally Link might resent that, but he could spare Estuu his pointless, little grievances.

Those sharp Zora teeth made quick work of the apple, gnashing the fruit to oblivion while the gold mare followed Crazy Girl’s lead. Estuu finished his snack off just before the two riders came to one of their only real obstacles; a steep, rocky, downward slope. Getting horses to navigate areas such as these could be challenging, but Link had spurred Crazy Girl up and over so much bullshit terrain, she hardly flinched any longer.

Crazy Girl began down the slope, weaving between the large stones, down toward the more marshy lands below. It was the far side of the Lanayru Wetlands, the opposite end from where Fort Boko stood. The pooled waters stretched so far across the landscape, the fort wasn’t even visible in the distance.

The mare’s hooves searched for flat surfaces with care, while the other horse stood at the top, puffing in distress over being left behind and clearly nervous about following. Her head was held low, her eyes watching as Crazy Girl accomplished the task with more care than one might’ve expected from such a testy steed. Link glanced back once he was at the bottom of the slope, gesturing for Estuu to follow, no other words apparently needed.

When Estuu’s horse didn’t follow of her own accord, he clicked at her, commanding her to continue. She shook her head, hesitating for a moment before she began down, taking it one hoof at a time, wary of her footing all the while.

And though the boy had taken the initiative to encourage his horse to go, the slope left him unsteady in the saddle. He let out a quiet hum of distress, then Link called out in a calm, instructing tone, “Just lean back as much as you can and hold your weight steady with the strength of your legs.”

Estuu nodded, his forefins bobbing softly. If his horse went any slower, his thighs were going to be sore for weeks from the extra strain.

It took an inane amount of time for the overly cautious golden mare to make her way down to where Link and Crazy Girl were impatiently waiting, but once she made it, she shook her head like it had been a real ordeal and let out a rumble of accomplishment. Estuu was entertaining the comparison between his horse and his brother all over again, because she even paralleled the way he approached difficult situations with so much caution it went beyond over-thinking.

With Estuu down the slope, the horses began running again at free and easy canters, their hooves pounding the thick grass below, their bodies bounding and seemingly weightless. The edge of the wetlands caressed the winding foot of the Lanayru Mountain range. Soon the sodden ground would shift into rolling hills, and the two travelers would trace the valleys through to their destination.

Estuu and Link were alone astride their mounts in the wilds of Hyrule, now far from the paths and out of reach of most. Together they admired the glassy pools of the wetlands, dotted with fleet lotus and spindly trees with pale gray bark. Estuu’s head snapped here and there with glee at the abundance of fauna, from the flocks of pink herons which paid them almost no heed, to mountain goats which fled with a startled bleat like they expected a hail of arrows to chase at their hooves. Maybe on the way back, Link would consider it, but for now the goats received his merciful
Their path eventually sprawled near an abandoned ruin, though it was in even worse shape than most others. It appeared as though it was little more than a strangely placed pile of stone, though the stones in question still held the precise shape and the pristine white tone of Hyrulean architecture. Estuu, in curiosity, steered his mount closer, so that he could get a better look. Zora’s Domain was bereft of such sights, despite how common they were otherwise, so he was greatly intrigued. Link, on the other hand, couldn’t bring himself to trust it.

“Estuu, steer clear of that,” he warned, urging the boy to stay close to him instead. “You never know what sort of things could be hiding inside, waiting to ambush any passerby.”

It was true, you never knew. You could generally expect bokoblins and moblins in this particular neck of the woods, but you also risked it potentially being something otherwise.

It was visible that the young Zora was a little disappointed. From what he’d seen of Link in all of their previous encounters, the Hylian was bold and fearless. The boy, despite having heard the talk of the Yiga Clan, had been lucky enough not to encounter such enemies, not even during the apparent attack on their city. In his ignorance, he was mostly unworried, though from how obviously shaken his guide was, he could only assume that the Yiga Clan must have been quite a nightmare to run across.

He decided that respecting Link’s caution was the best course of action.

Soon, though, he was given reason to forget all about the missed chance to take a closer look at a mysterious ruin, thanks to something much more exciting. At the final stretch of wetland before the travelers began the ascent up Sahasra Slope, Estuu caught sight of something that sent him to bouncing excitement in his saddle. He had to remind himself all over again about being calm around his steed, so he took a breath and stilled.

The young Zora’s excitement was still abundant and clear in the way he pointed into the distance, squeaking over how his heart was bursting with joy. In the calm of the shallow waters, a small herd of wild horses were grazing on thick grasses that grew there, even water logged.

“Good eye,” Link praised his young company, stopping his own horse in order to watch the wild ones in the distance.

There were around four or five horses standing together, then another which was wandering aside, presumably a curious youngster who’d grown large enough that it was no longer nudged along by the older members of the group. They were predominantly colored in tones of steel gray and white, like they had been painted by the endless sky above and the mirrored waters below. Realistically, it was probably just the most successful color pattern for their environment, as those who stuck out were very likely knocked off by hunting lizalfos who wouldn’t pass up a meal of horse meat.

“We should keep going, before our scent disturbs them,” Link concluded after a few peaceful minutes of watching the herd wander. Crazy Girl was all too happy to run again and Estuu’s mood had turned utterly bubbly at just the sight of wild horses. The boy really did have an adventurous heart. He must have been so stifled by the city life of his people.

Link decided to take it easy on his beloved mare while they began the trip up Sahasra Slope. He was certain that, for horses, this was as close as they got to climbing mountains and it took a toll on their endurance. It was wiser to preserve their energy if the need to gallop arose.

The Hylian’s ears had begun to perk at the groan of thunder in the distance and his face pinched with disinterest.
concern. Zora’s Domain was protected from the worst of Hyrule’s insane weather conditions by the mountains enclosing their home, but out here, nature could be relentless. The afternoon sun was steadily shrouded out by gathering gray, and the rolling rumble in the distance served to foretell a coming storm.

For a moment, Link actually stopped his horse to listen more closely. His pointed ears were up in alert, examining the sound of coming thunder: it was weak and half-hearted, resounding through the mountainous slopes like the sky maybe had a minor complaint.

He could hope that it would only bring with it a gush of rain. However, if this was not the case, he’d planned in advance.

With Estuu halted near his side, Link pulled his rucksack from his back in order to dig for the item he had in mind. The boy watched him inquisitively, as he’d clearly learned that if the Hylian was fussing around in any of his pouches, something interesting was sure to come of it.

“Here, Estuu,” Link called to the Zora, making him aware that the surprise for which the Hylian was searching was indeed intended for him. When Link pulled his bundled hand free from the shadow of his bag, though, he sent the item sailing across the short space between them, saying, “Catch!”

Not only did Estuu have no idea what was being thrown at him, but when his one hand shot out to catch it, it bounced out of his palm and down into the grasses below. Link chuckled at his failure, receiving a sideways, little glare in return that had him laughing all the more, but also speaking up to apologize.

“Sorry,” the Hylian said, trying to still his amusement. “It was a good try, though.”

Link clambered down from his saddle and began searching through the grass for the item he’d thrown. It got lost with incredible ease, but thankfully he had some idea where it fell or he surely would’ve never succeeded. It was foolish of him to be so reckless with objects of value, but hey, he wouldn’t be himself if he wasn’t always doing stupid shit and making poor choices.

Finally, he found the lost item, and returned it to its partner, which remained in the Hylian’s palm; a pair of topaz earrings which he’d traded for with a Gerudo traveler he met on the road some time ago. That particular bit of bargaining had cost him perhaps more than he’d been comfortable paying, so he very swiftly chased the thought from his mind.

“Maybe these will help,” he explained to Estuu, straightening and coming to stand at the side of the Zora’s horse. He extended his hand to the boy, his fingers unfurling to reveal the shining, yellow gems, which were set in a sturdy but elegant silver base, with clips meant to attach them to the wearer’s ears. Link had something different in mind for Estuu, however.

“I noticed that you always wear jewels at the ends of your forefins,” Link said, gesturing to Estuu’s fine adornments. He, like most of the noble class, tended to don intricately crafted silverscale which fastened at the tips of his fins. “Can they be swapped out for these topaz earrings?

The youngster didn’t appear to have much of a clue why Link was making such a request, but he nodded and complied regardless. His small fingers fussed with the blue gems that dangled near his shoulders, unfastening the tiny, metallic latches which looped into the smallest of eyelets. The pale, blue jewels were tucked away in Estuu’s own saddle pouch, then he replaced them with the topaz earrings as instructed, letting one rest in his palm for an extra moment, in admiration.

“I know that potions don’t work for your people, but maybe these earrings will offer some kind of electrical buffer, just in case. Also, if you see any sparkling lights fluttering about ahead as we ride,
slow down and wait for me to take care of it,” the Hylian instructed. Despite everything Brivere claimed, he was adamantly doing his best to keep Estuu safe, and trying to actually think ahead in regards to the boy’s protection. “Thunder keese like to come out when it rains around these parts. Normally, they’re not much to worry about, but they could be dangerous for you. Are we clear?”

Estuu’s grumbling, half-hearted agreement spoke his thoughts more plainly than words, and the Hylian laughed under his breath. The boy was certainly sassy, so he must have been a handful to raise. But, as it was, Link could tell why, now, Brivere could be so patient when it came to Sidon’s own prissy, princely nonsense.

“Yeah, I know I’m being preachy and overprotective.” Link replied, good natured despite Estuu’s apparent moodiness. “But for the sake of making sure your nervous brother continues to allow me to spend time with you, we have to be careful, okay?”

Brivere blaming- it never failed.

And the agreement that Link received from Estuu afterwards was much more sincere.

After Link returned to his saddle and the two traveling companions rode onward, it was scarcely five more minutes before the inevitable downpour wept upon what had been an otherwise peaceful ride. The Hylian could be sure that Estuu wasn’t troubled at all, given that he was built for the water. In fact, it likely soothed his scales after so much sun and dry air rushing past him. He’d been looking a bit peachy in color, until the rains drenched him to his core and brightened him back to a deep, rosy scarlet.

But for Link it was misery. The temperature dropped steadily with the cooling rain and with the sun dipping ever lower on the horizon. He was lucky that he had the scarf Kodah had given to him and he tucked the warming jewels crafted into the design closer to his skin, in the hopes of staving off some of the chill. The rest of his clothes were soon clinging to him like a mucky, second skin and his long fringe fell in dripping tendrils over his eyes. He flicked his wet hair aside every few seconds, but the streams dripping down his face continually inched it back where he didn’t want it.

The thick cloud cover soon stole away the hour of twilight, taking their day from waning to gone and shrouding the sky with thick, billowy darkness. Hylians had enough vision in the night for him to tell with ease where he was going, but he didn’t have the best knowledge of how well his amphibious friend could perceive the path ahead. That was probably something Link should’ve learned long ago, but even despite his affection for the Zora people, he was terribly unobservant.

Nevertheless, Link slowed his pace for the sake of caution, putting aside his own discomfort. He could’ve made greater haste to escape the rain, but he settled for hoping that it would slow or stop, instead.

When the steepening slope was painted in deep dark and hanging shadows, the expected danger at last approached, as predicted. It was Estuu who let out a little peep to grab Link’s attention long before anything of note was even visible ahead of them, and Link looked to the suddenly anxious Zora in questioning.

The boy’s adornments jingled softly with his movement when he pointed ahead to indicate that something was amiss. The Hylian’s head turned to follow Estuu’s gesture, then he moved one hand up to shelter his eyes from the rain splashing against his face and obscuring his sight. For a moment he searched the dim, dreary scenery before himself, his dully shining gaze reaching as far as it could into the distance, to little avail.

And then, as they rode, Link finally caught sight of that which Estuu had surely been trying to warn
him about. A few thunder keese were fluttering about up ahead, doing their happy, aerial dance to greet the rain. All it would take was shooting one of them down for the others to scatter, so the Champion pulled his bow from over his shoulder in preparation, motioning for Estuu not to follow.

“Those are thunder keese alright.” Link nodded as he confirmed it, mostly for the sake of praising Estuu’s observational skills. “Just wait here while I take care of them. I’ll let you know when it’s safe.”

Estuu did as he was told, but not without a show of his dejected response to being treated like a helpless kid while Link went ahead to hoard all the excitement. His horse shook her head, a deep blow puffing from her nose, and Estuu echoed that sound, sighing his frustration while leaning his elbow against his aching thigh.

If he were still capable of using his bow, this wouldn’t be a problem. He could’ve handled a few keese himself. He caught onto their bold electrical signature before his Hylian friend even saw them, and he could’ve hit them from that same great distance, he was sure.

It was so unfair, so dispiriting. This adventure served to fulfil some of his hopes and dreams, yes, but it reminded him all the more of what he’d lost, what he was no longer capable of. The bitterness of that had him chewing at his cheek while he mulled over it, his tongue retreating from the tang of blood as he broke the skin.

Estuu’s blonde mare shook her mane again, her hide twitching at how thoroughly soaked she was and she ducked her head down between her front legs to rub some of the wetness away from her face. The boy wondered if there was a way to relieve his new friend while they waited for Link to finish being a hero.

The young Zora turned his head here and there, glancing about for some sort of convenient shelter within the environment itself. The best thing available to him was a rocky outcropping that sort of looked more like a pile of rubble that had simply not been touched in a long while. Probably the result of a rockslide that had happened a hundred years ago, because now weeds and mosses had filled in the cracks between each jagged stone. It had something of a ledge to it, however, and though it certainly couldn’t provide a roof to fully cover an entire horse, it would serve to block a bit of the rain.

Clicking at his mare and pulling the reins, Estuu directed his horse toward the nook, though she walked hesitantly, shaking at her reins and glancing uphill, where Crazy Girl had gone. She was more concerned about staying together, clearly, but even so, Estuu was sure she would appreciate his decision.

She went obediently despite her reservations, shaking herself off once more when she was nestled into the protection of the rocky ledge which hung overhead. It worked better than Estuu initially thought, because the wind miraculously shifted, carrying the rain down in a diagonal that conveniently missed them where they stood. It was also still well within sight, so that Link wouldn’t panic over where his charge had gotten off to.

But despite the boy’s wish to avoid sending his Hylian friend into an unnecessary panic, when a subtle shine caught his eye a mere few paces ahead of where he was waiting, a new line of logic entered his mind. Firstly, it wasn’t wandering off, because the mysterious object which had caught his interest was just right there! Secondly, okay maybe it was a bit out of sight at first glance, but if his horse was still in plain view, it would be obvious that he was nearby, right?

Whatever the mysterious object was, it had a metallic gleam that had been brought to life by how the water streamed over it, polishing its otherwise dull, forgotten surface. Estuu thought maybe it was an
old, lost sword? Like something that belonged to the Hylian Knights who fought to their last during the Calamity, or even the Sheikah warriors who stood in defense of the Hyrulean monarchy and their own home village.

Considering their close proximity to Kakariko Village, Estuu believed the likelihood was high and the thought of riding into the Sheikah Village with a reclaimed relic was so exciting that the boy’s tail started flapping, making wet patters where his fins flicked against his shoulders.

Estuu dismounted with hasty, bouncing movements, forgetting momentarily about being calm for his horse’s sake. Thankfully she appeared to have gotten used to his occasional jitters, but she puffed at him curiously when he walked away from her.

The boy’s webbed toes welcomed the wet feeling of the ground beneath his feet. The pale scales at his soles were ashen and bent from the stirrups and for a pleasant instant, he paused to feel the silty puddles of the rocky, mountain soil and the velvet plush of the mossy overgrowth. A few paces took him to where his prize awaited, or so it was a prize that he expected.

Slowly, Estuu knelt near the patch of gleaming, silvery steel that had been partly unveiled by the weather. His fingerscales clicked against the mirror surface as he examined it, wondering how much effort it would take to unearth the thing. He pushed at the soil which had covered the item over time, digging it out with ease thanks to the rain. It didn’t take Estuu long to locate the sharp edge of the blade, which confirmed his suspicions of the item, exciting him all the more.

Oh- he could return home with this antique sword and show his older brother his discovery, too. Brivere really liked swords, even aside from the one which used to belong to their mother. He had a small collection which he kept mounted on the wall to admire. In fact, though he rarely splurged rupees on anything, if a trader from outside of the domain ever showed him a tempting, foreign sword, you’d catch him pausing to reconfigure his entire budget in order to obtain it.

He was gonna be impressed, amazed and so incredibly envious!

Well, maybe making him jealous wasn’t the nicest thing to do. He was already upset over the fact that he’d broken their mother’s Silver Longsword, so perhaps instead, Estuu could bring him a new sword to raise his spirits?

It sounded less entertaining, but ultimately more worthwhile.

And yet once Estuu had gotten enough leverage on the item to hopefully pull it free from its earthen sheath, he found himself tugging and tugging, all without any success. He let out a garbled noise of irritation. If he had two hands with which to pull, this wouldn’t be hard at all. Still, he was already too invested to give up, so he continued to dig at the edges, uncovering it a bit more before he attempted to pull it out again.

Finally, the object budged and came partly up from the gritty soil, though a tendril remained, snaking underground like a winding tree root. It was all covered in mud and Estuu squinted in the scarce light to get a better clue of what it was, because to his dismay, it wasn’t a sword at all.

The rain slowly washed the soil away, revealing more shining silver, more sharp edges, until the object began to resemble something more like a.. claw? A claw with a root that was still buried shallowly underground.

But now that it had been partially dug up, it wouldn’t be so much work to yank at the thing until its root came up as well, right? It wasn’t actually anything like a root, apart from its placement, however. The flexible column attached to the bladed claw was like a tightly coiled spring, but more
solid and strong than that. Soon, it became clear that Estuu wasn’t going to be able to fully dig this mysterious thing up, because already it was much to heavy and he was only getting himself muddy while he tried.

With a huff, he dropped it aside, shaking some of the wet, sandy mud from his fingers. His golden eyes traced the furrow he’d created, all the way to where the soil was unturned and the snaking root disappeared beneath. He followed its path, finding that it protruded from the ground a few feet from where he’d been digging. How far did this unusual object stretch?

The boy could see the vine of spiraling silver and linked plates of boney armor, sprawled across a pile of mossy stone, then further, into a narrow cavern where it turned a corner into the darkness and disappeared. When Estuu’s vision could follow the root no further, he slowly proceeded after it on foot.

His footsteps pattered against the wet stone, one cautious pace after another. The boy clambered up and over the scattered, broken mess of rubble. It looked as though the mountain itself had been struck and shattered like porcelain by a force with such utter power, it was doubtful, dubious, impossible to conceive of.

Estuu’s toeclaws found purchase in the deep furrows when he climbed. They were like slash wounds all around him, etched into the solid surface of the stone, warnings written in a foreboding language that the oblivious boy had never seen and couldn’t acknowledge. He pushed himself through the opening to the tiny cavern and into the darkness that had been created by the apparent rockslide, his single hand grabbing onto the metallic vine and using it for leverage while he pulled himself up.

The young Zora pushed through the entryway, sliding to the muddy floor of the empty pocket, which was both created and sheltered by the rubble. The cavern was wet and slick with algae growth, and the air inside was permeated with a powerful, earthy scent.

At the furthest end of the small hollow was a great bell of stone which appeared to be holding up the entire outcropping. It was from the base of this bell that the metallic vine was outstretched, and Estuu’s eyes wandered up and over its unusual shape in curiosity, quite sure that he’d never seen anything like it.

Small, baby steps carried the boy nearer, ever nearer. He wasn’t sure why, but his heart had decided that skipping several beats was necessary. Something inside the fibre of his being, something deep in his marrow was crying out in exhilaration and wariness that he deftly challenged. His eyes were narrowed, his head tilted to one side while he pondered the strange look of the thing.. Was is a sculpture? A statue?

It had the appearance of copper, but the texture of ceramic, though with all the weathering, it was impossible to tell what its original color had been. Just as with the rocks piled around it, scattered where they fell so long ago, the strange, towering object was overgrown with vines and moss, gathering wilted leaves from a hundred seasons past. It’s bulk was covered with intricate furrows, most of which had become the hollows where dirt resided, yet Estuu took another pace nearer, his fingers itching with the desire to trace those complex designs, to feel their twists and turns beneath his scales.

One last patter of the Zora boy’s feet carried him within range of the lost relic to produce an unexpected reaction. Its insides whirred as though alive, though the sound was harsh and gritty, and the furrows that looped and arced about it bled to life with vibrant, red light that glowed in ominous warning.
Estuu’s breath was in his chest, captured there and unmoving. The crimson shine reflected itself on the inky dark of his pupils, which tightened from broad circles to narrow slits in nervous reply. The tiny cavern was suddenly aflame, glistening and wet, every surface a mirror of deep, blood red, a reverberation of the unknown thing’s power.

The tip top of the bell forcefully twisted, so that the entire cavern trembled, the crumbling, stone ceiling above shifting dangerously but holding. A center focusing lens, like an enraged, glaring eye, now beared down upon the sight of Estuu standing foolishly near, wide-eyed as a startled animal. The dusty, cracked glass of the mechanism twisted, adjusting its focus before a beam of crimson pierced the shadow between the machine and the young Zora.

Estuu’s head bobbed downward while his eyes followed the flickering beam to where it had aimed. There was a circle of glowing red upon his chest, and while the boy didn’t know for certain what it meant, that feeling in his bones had turned overwhelming, like a screaming voice in the back of his mind that was so utterly frantic, his body and mind failed to comply.

Slowly, the boy began to back away, his webbed feet shuffling in the muddy water and clumsily bumping every uneven surface along the way. He teetered, toppled, landing on his tender backside with a squeak and a splash, then he fell to one side, unable to brace himself in the absence of his right hand. His lost breath came out in a rush, rapid, fearful gasps coming from him as he attempted to kick his way back to his feet. The muddy water was thick and running red between his one, grasping hand. The air around him was hot and vibrating with energy, the seconds running together, his movements thoughtless in panic.

There was a burst of brilliant blue, like firelight but colder, like starlight but nearer. The cavern shook. Sight and sound were stolen by the blast. Estuu curled into himself in the certainty of coming oblivion, only to be smothered suddenly, his body wrapped in a tight, protective hold, a frame thrown atop his own in a haphazard rush.

Estuu gasped, every inch of his skin crawling, yet the contact was lost to him in the adrenaline and danger. A Hylian body was suddenly draped over his. Link, yes, it was Link. He’d darted in at some point and had thrown himself in the way. Estuu could hardly see around the shroud and he blinked in discomfort at the light stinging his eyes, his dark lids clenched almost shut, cracked enough for him to witness the searing blue that had burst from the machine connecting with another bright surface that appeared as thin and fragile as still water in spring, cracking beneath the rising temperature.

A shield of magical light clenched around the Hylian, then shattered with force to rival the blast from the machine, bouncing its beam through the cavern ceiling and into the sky, lighting the gray of the clouds like a flicker of lightning that preceded thunder which would never come.

The ceiling shifted, groaning as though it wished to crumble and entomb the Hylian and Zora both. The machine, meanwhile, despite its hundred years of rest in this very tomb, did not cease with one shot. Its claws snapped to life, the spindly columns of its legs lifting free of the rubble and dirt. Its dusty lens focused anew on Link and Estuu, promising another shot within precious few seconds.

Link yanked Estuu to his feet and scrambled for the small hole which both had originally entered from. With hands that were rushed and none too gentle, he pushed Estuu through the tight cavern, but the frightened Zora didn’t utter a peep of complaint.

Estuu fell through the rocky entryway, scuffing the scales of his knees before he clambered back to his feet. Link leapt through the hole right after him, rolling across the mud and stone, then onto his feet in a desperate rush. His hand went to Estuu’s shoulder, pushing, guiding, keeping control of how and when the boy moved with as much ease as he would with any given horse.
The uncovered claw, the very thing which had drawn the young Zora over, snapped upward, lunging for the hapless duo, its blades singing, seeking soft flesh to grapple and leave in tatters. The Hylian yanked Estuu out of danger with a little yelp from the Zora, his other hand drawing forth the sword he’d taken off the slain Blademaster. As the claw shot toward the Champion, he gave a sharp kick to knock it aside, then he severed the Guardian’s leg with a single, precise flick of his weapon.

But the danger was far, far from over, and Link knew that all too well. The pile of shattered stone that had held the withered Guardian in place all this time had begun to teeter and shift. It was weakened by the blast and could collapse at any moment, setting the relentless machine free to slaughter the escaping Hylian and Zora with much greater ease.

“Get back on your horse,” Link sharply spoke, his voice rushed and serious. And though he had instructed Estuu, he hardly waited for the young Zora to handle the task himself, instead lingering in order to shove the boy upward once they made it back to his golden mare.

“Go, go, go, that way!” the Hylian blurted once Estuu was in the saddle, pointing up the slope like the Zora could’ve forgotten. Estuu clicked at his steed, the sounds fast and hard off the tip of his tongue. It didn’t take a forceful hand at all, however, because the horse was already nervous and flighty from the first explosive shot fired from the machine.

He went, just as he was told. Time was of the essence and this was serious, this was life or death. He knew that if he failed to comply, the danger would only chase that much closer at his heels. He couldn’t ask any questions, but even if he could’ve, he wouldn’t. His horse went galloping and Estuu made no attempts to slow her pace, until both the Guardian and Link had been left behind him.

The hurried Champion whistled for his Crazy Girl and she bolted to his side, not stopping at all when she passed. He leapt onto her back, clinging wherever he could get a good hold, his shoulders straining as he dragged himself up, slipping on the wet leather with the bounce of her gait.

Link rode faster than he was comfortable going in the dark and up the side of a mountain, but the thought of that mechanical terror breaking free and catching up was all the more disconcerting. His hands were trembling on his reins. The sound of beating hooves and pouring rain was echoing around him, distant and unreachable. His breath was flowing in and out in a quick rhythm that he couldn’t feel at all, in time with the pounding of his frantic pulse, thumping in his temples.

It wasn’t too far for Link to ride before he caught up with Estuu. The boy had allowed his own horse to slow, so the Hylian, too, gave a soft pull at his Crazy Girl’s reins, prompting her to lessen her own pace. The gold mare raised her head and whinnied in relieved greeting when Link’s own horse ran alongside her, and though Estuu could not produce words, his eyes shined gladly when his gaze was set upon his Hylian companion.

The silence that fell over them was probably not comfortable if Link had to judge. The young Zora wasn’t an expressive sort, but he was surely shaken up, and Link was incapable of being there for him in any measurable way. He only had the capacity to console himself for a good stretch of time. It would have to be a silence that they both endured, that they both carried. A necessary silence.

When the silence was no longer necessary and Link felt secure coming out from beneath the comforting veil of quiet, he let out a bitter chuckle to chorus the thunder of their horses. They had breached the first peak, the area where the trail plateaued, the top of the mountain at last. The rain had stopped suddenly, leaving the air thin, misty and cold, but quiet. Everything was vast and empty, save for the resounding noise of hooves against stone.

“I think I understand now why your brother is always so uptight,” Link called, his voice tired but good-humored. “You’re a danger magnet.”
Estuu took a shaky breath, a tiny laugh getting lost somewhere in between.

A gaping maw of towering, winding cliffs was the welcome sight that would guide them, at last, into Kakariko Village.

Chapter End Notes

How was it, friends? Was the road trip worth the wait? Let me know! :) Oh, also, I wanted to mention the fact that I have a twitch account now. I've recently been streaming Detroit: Become Human, haha, so check that out if you're interested, friendos. The link is in my profile!
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

While one brother dreamed, dreading what the future may bring, the other found a contented place in the present, happily enjoying his trip to Kakariko Village alongside the Hylian Champion.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. I present a chapter to you all, on time, which seems to be a surprise these days, haha. I do hope that the lot of you enjoy it~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He found himself here again, without explanation, without understanding. He didn’t know what to do and lately it felt as though he never did, truly. Try as he may to analyze, to consider each possibility, everything fell through and here he was again, at this dead end.

What was this place?

Brivere’s body ached and trembled as though a battle laid behind him. His webbed toes were nicked, his ankles a messy net of burning, crimson lines, the result of his retreat through thorny territory. His knees were scraped so that his scales were torn away and his flesh was raw, but even so, he turned to glance behind himself, considering the path which had led him here: it was lightless, shadowed and engulfed with a fog as thick as his uncertainty.

The golden Zora faced forward again, the turmoil in his heart tumbling uncomfortably, his hands shaking with indecision. Before him was an open field bathed in ominous, red light. The grasses swayed in an unusual, unrealistic slow motion with the faintest wind, the only thing which disturbed the otherwise silent purgatory of this place. In contrast, the clouds overhead sailed across the empty space with stormy haste, taking a jerking path from horizon to horizon as if a fire might come to burn the sky, ignited by the heavy, hovering Blood Moon.

Beyond the open space of this nightmarish field, there were two paths that the golden Zora might’ve opted to proceed down, were it not for the beasts which blocked each way ahead. In one direction, a trail into the deep, unforgiving wood was guarded by a fierce feline. Its immense, muscular body was banded with vibrant stripes, and its three, shining eyes gazed in knowing wonder, challenging any who dared to approach. The only other path was watched over by a massive, golden bird, with wings that could eclipse the sky, and a crown of shining, golden feathers which beamed more powerfully than the light of day.

Brivere knew better than to assume he could ever challenge either of these strange, spirit beasts. Just the sight of them filled him with greater fear than he’d ever known, something more terrifying than loss, more terrifying than death. It was all an indistinct message, written to him in sensory nonsense, but he suddenly was quite sure that if those creatures so much as set their sights upon him, they may very well rip his soul from his body, destroying not just the person he was, but every person he ever
had been and ever would be.

With a dry swallow, the golden Zora turned and fled back into the hazy darkness, down the shadowed path which had apparently brought him here, back into whatever struggle had left him so broken, so exhausted.

The wood itself was a spiral of fretting emotion and bad feelings, a million paths leading to a million destinies, and he was just another lost soul with no way to navigate it. It led him to a place where he was watching himself, outside of himself.

He was at his Prince’s side and together they were engaged in a fight which would be one to their final demise, or to that of their enemy. He could only watch, as though behind a clear but impenetrable pane and he could feel not just his own tension, but that of Prince Sidon, as well as that of their foe.

It was the lynel which had so long been a problem and it bared its fangs as the Zoras approached, a rumbling growl of warning trembling on the air, palpable against the Zoras’ scales. The beast’s face was smeared with oozing black, which leaked from between its sharp teeth and over its lips, until the fur of its chin and chest turned black.

The shining, armor-bound Prince raised his weapon, taking a challenging step nearer to his foe. Brivere’s body echoed with exhaustion which was not his own, but Sidon’s. The Prince was aching and tired, his hands tight on his weapon, his heart fluttering in fear that he would not show. Instead, Sidon replied with a snarl of his own, his shining teeth flashing as he charged the beast, only for the lynel to produce a shock arrow and nock it to its bowstring.

The air turned heavy with static charge, electricity dancing around the lynel’s arms and over its thick fur while it drew the string back, taking aim. Brivere called out in warning, rushing in with the hopes of disarming the beast while his Prince stole the final blow, but he was simply not fast enough.

When the arrow flew, it did not need to pierce the Prince’s chest to do the worst of its damage. The sharp arrowhead was buried in Sidon’s armored breastplate and from it erupted a blast of electricity to rival the rage of a storm. It was enough, alone, to kill a Zora, and that much was evident in the way the light left Sidon’s eyes in the quickest of instants.

With that one misstep, the Prince was gone.

His body clattered aside, a heap of goldenscale armor and flesh that turned to brittle blue and broke apart like a pile of ash and shattered glass. With it, so too went the golden Zora’s heart; it broke apart in his chest, a sharp, glaring pain that permeated his entire frame, reaching out to greet the gruesome sensation of Sidon’s own death.

Brivere felt every intense fraction of his Prince’s suffering, spilling across seconds which felt like hours. The fibre of his being was torn asunder, to shreds, white-hot and trembling, unbearable, then just as quickly, it was all gone. That was the most fearful and painful realization of all- when the pain was over and thought resumed, one knew it didn’t hurt anymore because life had ceased.

Not his, but one which he held all the more dear.

The Knight could only watch helplessly as the wind stole away the dusty remnants of his fallen Prince, leaving behind a hollow, armor shell where once Sidon’s loving heart had resided. His absence did not just represent a failure on Brivere’s part, but a loss, a loss too deep to process, to grasp, to accept.
It was that very inability to steep in his own grief, nor accept this cruel reality which ultimate drew him from it. He set himself free from these visions like a prisoner breaking loose of chains which held his body down.

Brivere snapped upright, awakened from sleep. He hardly perceived the darkness around him, the cool air of early morning. He failed to acknowledge the soft of the pillows which had become his makeshift bed, the crumbled walls and ceilings of his derelict dwelling. No, he was awake, but his mind was still in that awful place. The image of his beautiful Prince’s death was burned into his mind’s eye like it was inescapable, even once it had been proven a mere nightmare which the golden Zora fervently had rejected.

It took him a moment to digest it; the vision of Sidon, falling to the lynel’s arrow. He swore he could still feel the pain of it shuddering through his own chest, and he placed one hand there to quell it. The ghost of a death which had yet to occur mercifully left the golden Zora soon after but what lingered was a resounding pain in the calcified cartilage of his skull. His head was aching, thrumming, burning just behind his eyes, and for sorrowful moment, he even thought that his night terror had brought him to tears while he slept, as indicated by the wet warmth moving slowly down his face.

It was not so, however.

Brivere’s one hand moved from his chest, up to brush away what he thought were tears, finding, instead, that when he drew his pale palm back, it bore a dark smear of blood. His fingers furled, the backside of his hand pressing to his face to continue wiping away the bloodstain; a thin trickle had come from his nostrils and traced a path along his countenance.

He looked down on his open palm again to be sure of what he was seeing, to know that he was not still dreaming. The Zora’s pupils dilated to take in scarce light and the dark stain grew only clearer to his sight. It was not just reality, but one Brivere was left now to nervously question while he made off to clean himself up before getting back to bed.

Was it a sign that he had become Water Blighted again? Or something otherwise?

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Link and Estuu had perhaps been relieved to reach Kakariko Village after such a long and dangerous ride there, but even the comfort of checking into the inn that evening couldn’t exceed the pleasant experience that was waking up in it.

The two of them lazed about on the fine, cucco-feather bedding, the perilous situation that had damn near brought their fine adventure to a gruesome halt, now a forgotten nightmare, one to be openly mocked and laughed about.

It was just as well for Estuu that Link was so quick to overcome the stress caused by what Brivere would have described as ‘recklessness’ or ‘foolishness.’ True, the boy had no clue what kind of dangers a seemingly harmless looking clump of scrap metal posed, but in his elder sibling’s mind, treading into the unknown was not an acceptable mistake to make.

Estuu had been even quieter than usual, if such were possible, all thanks to his own grief over proving himself to be a thoughtless troublemaker. He couldn’t help that he was forged from the deadly mix of courage and curiosity, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t feel guilty over it. This was sure to be his last adventure ever, as soon as Brivere learned of how deeply Estuu threw himself unnecessarily into danger.

But that fear was extinguished with ease, with the most offhand words from the young Zora’s Hylian
“The world is dangerous,” Link said with a scoff and a shrug, as soon as he came to the conclusion that Estuu was sulking over awakening that Guardian. “But you’ll never truly understand how to deal with dangerous things without courting them once or twice.”

There was one other thing that the Hylian mentioned, of course.

“We won’t tell Brivere.” He stated that with a nervous laugh, though Estuu had expected him to be a bit more blunt and abrasive about it. It was less of a, ‘I don’t care what he thinks,’ and more of a, ‘I do care, and that’s why we’re gonna lie.’

When and why had Link’s tone and opinion changed, Estuu wondered. It was a short train of thought because it wasn’t terribly interesting to the young Zora, anyway. He was content enough to have his worries alleviated, that way he was able to enjoy a relaxing soak and a delectable breakfast. Best of all, they got up so late, it wasn’t until midday that they had their first meal.

That would’ve been unthinkable at home. Brivere was as golden as the morning and rightly so, because he was ever so scheduled and such an early riser. Sometimes the rigidity was comforting and familiar for Estuu, but other times it drove the boy insane with its sheer predictability. Maybe that was contradictory, but Estuu was funny like that.

After the duo were finished with the relaxation of their morning and gorging themselves silly, they went out for a bit more exploration. Link had been to Kakariko Village before, but his visits were uncommon. Estuu had never seen another races’ cities and so he was beyond amazed by the sights.

The first thing that stuck out to the boy about Kakariko Village were the surrounding cliffs, the tight corridor through the mountains which sheltered and cradled the Sheikah town. The stone was so vastly different from the sleek, shining blue of the mountains back home, it was bizarre. Estuu spent a rather long while just drinking in the visual, finding the expanses of matte gray strangely stimulating to the eye.

Everything else came in a rush after the young Zora had gotten past that one seemingly insignificant detail. The foliage, the buildings, the people and all of their funny garments, everything was so different and exciting. The boy’s tail was growing cramped from flapping, his chest so full it felt like bursting. He was sure to be pleasantly exhausted, happily overstimulated.

The boy took a hike a bit up the path from the village with his Hylian friend, while Link ventured to visit something called ‘The Fairy Fountain.’ For one reason or another, he wouldn’t allow Estuu to follow him all the way there and instead asked the boy to wait, promising to be quick.

As far as the young, scarlet Zora was concerned, it sounded like one of those places adults went to get drunk. Kind of like ‘Zambezi’s Cantina,’ but a bit more clever and magical. Zambezi must not have been a very imaginative fellow, so it was all the more difficult for Estuu to accept that they were connected by blood. He let out a little scoff, crossing his arms and flopping into a thick patch of grass where Link had asked him to wait.

Estuu didn’t want to think about that man. He didn’t want to think about how that man had never wanted him, about how he ruined the life of Estuu’s mother, about how he dared to act as though he was owed some kind of mercy from Estuu, after all he’d done.

The Zora rolled over onto his belly, pressing his face into the cool grass and letting out a loud squeal while he kicked his feet. His anger was an inescapable poison, surely, with how his thoughts and feelings had no outlet for expression, no way to be communicated. He was the very definition of companion.
suffering in silence. All he could do was ride the buck of his rage until it abated again, or in this case, until it was interrupted.

A scamper in the foliage drew Estuu’s head upright with a quick flick of movement. He had little bits of grass stuck to the pale of his cheeks, but he dared not move to brush them away. Instead, he dipped lower again, resting his chin against the ground so that his golden eyes peered over the jagged greenery, gazing back at a strange creature which was watching the Zora boy with equal curiosity.

Ducked under the low-hanging branch of a particularly thick cluster of bramble was some kind of tiny animal, which luminesced in the same pale tone of blue as Estuu’s home city; that didn’t seem normal. Its cottony soft, blue body lit the leafy branches which partly concealed it and its tiny paws dipped low in the grasses while it dropped its head downward to study the Zora from safety. It had eyes like shining embers and two golden, feathered protrusions from the top of its head, which had folded backward so not to bump the scrub and make any noise. Were those ears or antenna? They certainly weren’t fins, anyway.

If ever Estuu had wanted to utter words of greeting, he did at this very moment more than anything, much as he doubted it would gain the creature’s interest. No, this little, magical thing was probably more likened to him in that way; watching, feeling, sensing, but not speaking.

After a few still moments passed, Estuu’s fear of startling the creature waned, and instead he unfurled his one hand, slowly sliding it forward in the grass so that his palm was exposed and his fingers were loosely splayed. The little animal blinked, its head tilting to one side, then to the other at a more severe angle, like its neck was elastic and had no bones at all. It had an intrigued appearance, perhaps as though it was shy but expecting to be fed and unable to resist the temptation.

The glowing creature took one, tiny hop out of its shelter, then paused to reassess. It stood up on its back legs, observing the lurking Zora better, its funny ears flicking nervously and dusting the animal’s fur with glittering gold. The little beast was rather unassuming in appearance, but even so, Estuu had to wonder if he was, yet again, putting himself in some kind of unknown danger.

He supposed he wouldn’t know without courting it.

Eventually, the strange creature took a few more bold hops in Estuu’s direction, stopping just out of the boy’s reach in order to stretch its body, extending its neck so that its head was a hairs breadth away from the points of the Zora boy’s fingerscales. Estuu’s slitted pupils were tight in brimming excitement and he fought to keep his flappy tail from startling the animal, when at last it closed the gap, bumping the soft of its head against Estuu’s palm like an affectionate pup.

And if this wasn’t already wild enough, the very moment it touched Estuu, its own luminosity seemingly bled into him, lighting the backside of the boy’s hand in vivid gold which slowly dimmed, solidifying until the shape had crisp, curving lines, written into the boy’s scales.

“Estuu?” came a surprised and mildly concerned voice, along with quick footsteps upon a softly beaten path of dense earth and shed leaves. In a single blink of the Zora boy’s eyes, the glowing animal spun around and ran for shelter, its body turning transparent and disappearing even faster than it could run. It left behind only a thin cloud of golden dust, which fluttered softly downward and settled over the grass.

The glowing shape at the back of the boy’s hand dimmed like a dying ember when the contact was lost and he let out a huff of frustration. He’d finally met a magical animal like in the stories he always read, and the moment was spoiled by some dumb side character, also just like in the stories he always read.
“Hey kiddo, are you alright?” Link asked upon his first sight of Estuu, once he turned the corner to find the Zora boy, at least, where he left him. He didn’t hasten his gait or anything, but he was a bit worried if there was a reason that the boy looked like he got knocked over the head and robbed.

“Why are you laying in the grass?” He asked like he didn’t regularly lay in the grass himself.

The boy bounced back to his feet, not even slowed down by his missing limb in his excitement, then he turned to Link, pointing in the direction of the bushes. The Hylian’s ears tilted forward in reply, listening for whatever critter the young Zora must’ve caught sight of but he didn’t hear.. anything. He was assuming it was an animal, though, because honestly, what else could it have been? Also, apart from his apparent interest in shooting them, Estuu also seemed to like animals, too.

Weird kid.

“I’m finished with my errand for now,” the Hylian explained, taking a few steps down the path and gesturing for Estuu to follow. “If you want, I can try to figure out what you saw in the bushes on our way back to town. Then we can do some shopping, or something, maybe.”

He didn’t have anything in mind to purchase, but it didn’t hurt to look, just in case. Estuu was satisfied enough to follow and waited expectantly for Link to commence in trying to figure out what the boy’s mysterious animal friend had been. It was gonna be a game of twenty questions, but that was fine.

While the two strolled the winding, forested path downhill to Kakariko, Link posed one question after another, trying to keep in mind what sorts of creatures he already knew inhabited the area. Every inquiry sent the young Zora into a bout of extreme contemplation, despite that Link believed his questions were simple enough. The boy wasn’t sure if the animal was a bird or not. He wasn’t sure if it had fur, if it was a kind of insect, and it apparently wasn’t brown or rusty red or spotted, or any other color that Link tended to associate with the local fauna.

They both resigned themselves to uncertainty by the time they made it to the tailor’s shop. Link slid the front door to the establishment aside with an easy movement and Estuu followed like a quiet shadow with big, golden eyes that were shining with curiosity all the while.

Link immediately had to fend off the two young women who ran the shop. The lady who typically stood out front followed them inside as they passed by, while the woman from behind the counter hurried over with bundled hands which were shaking in adoration like somebody had just presented an adorable, baby animal before her. Unfortunately, Estuu was the adorable, baby animal in question.

“Is that a little Zora?” one of them squeaked, while the other bent down closer to Estuu, leaving him to back himself behind Link in bewilderment.

“Nah, he’s a Rito. You can’t tell?” Link answered, holding a serious tone for a few good seconds before he allowed a little grin to give him away.

“Oh, very funny,” the shopkeeper replied, crossing her arms over her chest, while the other lady, presumably her sister, made some weird, obscure noises and gestures at the young Zora.

“This is Estuu,” the Hylian explained, trying his best to be polite, hoping that the right mix of mannerliness and his companion’s apparent charm might earn him some kind of discount, if he decided to make a purchase. “He likes his space, so you have to resist the urge to pinch his cheeks. Also, he doesn’t talk much but he understands, as long as you use.. You know, actual words.”
Okay, Link’s manners could probably use some work. Even so, Estuu’s adorable appearance made up for it. The women continued to fawn over him and Link mercilessly left the kid to fend for himself while he shopped. The Sheikah ladies thankfully gave him at least an arm’s length worth of space, but they didn’t leave him be for a single second. They were too busy telling him how he reminded them of depictions of the Zora Champion, then they got into a disagreement about whether he was more orangy-red than Mipha, which turned into a discussion about his ‘beautiful scale color.’

They settled on referring to him as ‘blood orange.’ Link couldn’t help but feel it was kinda pretentious. As far as he was concerned, the kid was just fucking red. Well maybe he was a little orangey. Wasn’t there a word for that? Scarlet? That sounded right.

The Hylian wandered to one of the other rows, letting his eyes drift over the clothes displayed upon the mannequins. He’d never been tempted by the Sheikah armor before, because it didn’t strike him as being particularly practical and it also didn’t offer nearly enough protection, given that he was an absolute mess who never failed to take plenty of damage during every tussle. Ever since he’d donned that Yiga gear, though, he’d been reconsidering. That particular outfit had offered him mobility that was less restricted, so he was speedier and more precise than usual, plus he was sure that his hunting trips would benefit from it.

There was also the fact that his ass looked nice in the Yiga gear, so maybe he’d feel himself at an equally high level in the Sheikah armor. It was highly doubtful that he’d be allowed to join the Yiga Clan for the sake of having a killer butt, so this would have to suffice.

With a sigh of indecision, Link glanced over his shoulder to check up on his Zora friend. Estuu was no longer being assailed by the shopkeepers over his cuteness and now that he’d been left to his own devices, he was doing some shopping of his own. The boy had meandered through the rows, coming to stand before a display that Link had never seen before. It must have been a new item.

Directly next to the dress form which bore a hood identical to the one Link already owned, there was something similar in function and form, though it was probably meant to be more effective in cold weather, given that winter was fast approaching. It was a cloak made of the same material, in the exact shade of navy. This item, however, sported a long, flowing drape that went over the shoulders, with another layer underneath which would’ve fell just above Link’s knees, though it had probably been measured with a mid-thigh length in mind. Honestly, it gave him some mad Wizzrobe vibes.

“Are you looking at this with actual interest or are you just waiting for me to be finished?” the Hylian asked. The young Zora’s flicking fins were giving him away all too easily, so the answer was clear to see; Link was merely acknowledging it.

With a careful hand, Estuu reached out, capturing the material at the hem between his fingertips, tracing the stitch of it, feeling the soft texture of the fabric and the weight of it in his grasp. The flesh of his lower lip was pinched between his sharp teeth in quiet longing, and Link’s eyes slowly went from the Zora, back to the item.

Link’s first guess was that there was something exotic about the concept of donning clothes in the mind of a Zora. Or, garments that they wouldn’t normally see fit to wear, anyway. With a bit of deeper consideration, however, Link came to a conclusion that was more likely, and for Estuu, more personal.

The way the garment draped over the shoulders made it so that, on the young Zora, it would have effectively hidden away his injury.

Link didn’t really have enough rupees for both the Sheikah armor and this fancy cloak, though. His chest expanded as he took a deep breath, considering it for all of three seconds before he decided that
showing off his killer butt would simply need to wait.

“If you want this, I’ll get it for you,” Link stated, grinning to himself when Estuu’s head snapped in his direction. It was charming, yet kind of sad how surprised he always was whenever somebody offered him something. Link was going to have to have a serious talk with Brivere about buying this boy more gifts.

“Yeah, it’ll be a souvenir,” the Hylian nodded in confirmation, making his way over to the counter to purchase the thing, with Estuu bouncing on his toes right behind him. He was just glad that the boy was happy, as that was the main point of this trip.

While Link confirmed which item he wished to take with the shopkeeper and counted out his rupees, the other Sheikah woman went to bag the garment up, but was instead met with a very excited Estuu, who took the cloak out of her hands before she could get any further. He slithered himself into it the moment it was off the dress form and started fiddling with the silky material of the lining in fascination. He even tried to pull the hood over his head, but it couldn’t occupy his tail and fell right back down. That left the ladies cooing and giggling over him all over again.

Before Link and Estuu left the shop, the Sheikah women offered the boy some sweet dumplings as a little gift, probably because he was downright irresistible. There were three, colorful sweets impaled upon a bamboo skewer and despite the boy’s fussy palate, after a test nibble at the first dumpling, he chewed into the item rather heartily.

“Don’t get sugar on your new clothes,” Link warned, a bit dejected over the fact that women didn’t offer him free food for being cute, too. His blue eyes didn’t leave the sweets, instead gazing at them with longing while the sharp-toothed boy made quick work of the second, tender morsel.

“Hey, since I was kind enough to buy you that fancy garb, maybe you could share that last dumpling with me?” Link asked. Sure, he could buy his own if he wanted, but free food always tasted all the more sweet.

Estuu turned a sideways glance in Link’s direction, raising the skewer as if in questioning, as though to ask the Hylian at his side if the food he had in hand was the food he was referring to. Then, with a wicked, little chuckle, Estuu licked the last dumpling and extended it to Link in what was clearly a, ‘Still want it now?’ kind of gag.

“What a little shit,” Link choked out in surprise. Great, he’d apparently gotten close enough with Estuu for the kid to start acting openly cheeky. Even so, he snagged the offered skewer from the Zora’s hand before the boy had a chance to take it back, and against the kid’s expectations, Link shoved the dumpling into his mouth anyway, leaving the boy in total, wide-eyed disbelief.

“It’s your mistake for thinking a little Zora spit would scare me,” Link said with a titter while the dumpling was still bulging inside one of his cheeks. Once he finished chewing his sweet prize, the Hylian gestured to the tranquil surroundings, wiping his mouth on his sleeve before speaking up again.

“I’ve got one more errand to run,” he explained, sure that Kakariko Village was safe enough for him to allow Estuu to wander unsupervised for a little while. There were Sheikah children all over the place, so that left Link with a pretty good feeling, and he trusted stupid nonsense like that. “If you don’t leave the village, you can go explore for a bit while I do boring shit. How does that sound?”

Estuu was absolutely thrilled by the suggestion, as was made clear by how readily he nodded in reply. Link offered a nod of his own, but paused long enough to add, “Alright then. Go back to the inn if you get tired. You remember where it is, right?”
Again, the boy nodded, then Link set him free to roam with a gesture, lingering until the young Zora was out of sight before he turned and headed toward the grand castle of Lady Impa’s residence.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, friends. I hope that you all enjoyed this chapter and will continue to look forward to the story for as long as it makes you all happy to do so. I see fewer and fewer people in the comments these days, and it's bittersweet. This has been quite a journey, and it is still far from over. But I do feel like, appropriately, there have been people we've lost along the way, which is sad, but it makes me all the more happy to keep seeing those of you who are still buckled in for the ride.

Thank you all for being here, for allowing this story to give you any kind of joy. I'm happy to have provided it, even if our time was short, even if our time is ongoing. Thank you all so much~
In both Hateno and Kakariko Village, there was plenty of work to be done. For Betaal, there was certainly a mission to accomplish, even if she was sure that something unpleasant was conveniently hidden underneath. Link knew that there were secrets to be unearthed in Kakariko Village, but try as he might, they escaped him. However, his silent companion might’ve had better luck, without even realizing it.

Despite the fact that she hadn’t been able to sleep at all during the night, and that she’d stirred much sooner than she wanted to in the early hours, Betaal had to admit, morning in Hateno Village was lovely.

Her people had found rest and relief in the cool depths of Firly Pond, where the refugees from Zora’s Domain had already settled in over the last few days. The sun turned the sky to dull pastels and Betaal was wide awake for it, folding herself comfortably at the banks of the water where she’d been trying so hard to rest. Her nerves had both exhausted her and rendered her unable to obtain any reprieve.

There was exactly one bird that had already begun to sing. The land was cold and dewy, a shade of gray up next to the colors of the waking sky, and a tranquil mist carpeted the hollows between the trees around the pond.

It was so beautiful, so calm. Betaal breathed a deep sigh, an obscure thought drifting through her overly tired head- why couldn’t people be so simple, so still, so peaceful? Why couldn’t life be as serene as the land at dawn?

She was still fretting over the hidden purpose behind being banished from her fort, but it was difficult to resent that she’d been landed here. She’d never seen the world outside of Zora’s Domain, though she’d dreamed it every day. It was a slow process, turning her head here and there to allow her single-eyed gaze to properly absorb the beauty all around her, but she took it all in, in awe. Her imagination hadn’t done it justice, it seemed.

At true daybreak, Betaal heaved herself from the place she’d been content to rest, sleepless though she was, and set off to begin her duties. They provided a hopeful distraction, maybe more than that. Maybe answers would come of them.

The Zora woman climbed the hill to the cabin at the top, pausing in wonder to observe the structure: its numerous, painstakingly stacked bricks, the timbers of its frame, the hard edges and angles. Hylian-made buildings were so different and fascinating.

The door was propped open, welcoming Zoras who came and went, on duty and off. It was simpler for them to leave the doorway unblocked. It felt more natural for them, anyway. Betaal slowly showed herself inside, remembering with ease that she’d been shown to where weapons and armor were being stored the night previous. Her band had arrived to soft, warm, candlelight and the faded
smells of evening meals that were hours gone. Now the scent of a hot woodstove and an early breakfast filled the space, yet even though she was famished, she ignored the intrigue of unfamiliar food for the sake of getting herself back into her armor.

She simply wasn’t herself until she was impervious to damage.

Once she was ready to meet the day, the Undercity woman showed herself into the livingspace, where a rather large table was set for breakfast. She folded her hands in a manner that was both professional and entirely awkward. Everyone else present had fallen into a rhythm that suited them, whereas this was all alien to her.

A young, Hylian man was busy at the stove, feeding the flame to keep it burning hot, while a Zora who Betaal was unfamiliar with came in to quietly bolster the supply of chopped wood. A handful of Zoras who were not yet on duty were dining on a breakfast of water greens with thinly sliced, smoked porgy, roast shrooms and poached eggs. It looked like Undercity food, presented in a way that would please the Uppercity eye.

A small, Hylian family sat among the Zoras like there were no differences between them, eating a totally different meal, heavy with dairy and starches that were far outside of the Zora diet: rice porridge with butter-grilled shrimp and eggs, sliced bread and soft, goat cheese. A Hylian woman from the family of three was perched at the side of a much smaller Zora, and they were engaged in an apparently very exciting conversation. The man from the kitchen turned and approached the table to pour everyone a fresh cup of tea from a steaming pot that he held with a folded cloth.

“Should I grab a cup for you, too?” the young man addressed Betaal, who was still standing off to the side like she didn’t quite belong.

“Oh, yes please,” she replied with a quiet laugh and a grin that was hopefully not totally horrifying, then she cleared her throat and decided to take a seat across from Guardsman Torfeau, who was also already donned in her armor and happily catching up with her twin brother, who’d been sent back to the fort in wake of the fighting.

“It was wild, Tottika,” one black-scaled Zora recounted the battle for Hateno Village to the other. “There were all of these blood-thirsty, wild-eyed Hylians everywhere and they were storming the lab up on the hill. The place was on fire, like a tower of inferno and there was a Guardian on top, firing at everyone down below, regardless of what side they were on.”

“It sounds like something the Red Herring would write,” Tottika breathed, leaning into one hand. He had a very sleepy appearance, but his jealousy was still palpable.

“Not the Red Herring,” the tiny, pink Zora nearby interrupted her own discussion with her Hylian friend to butt in. Betaal quietly listened in intrigue, her one, yellow eye looking between the faces present at the table. “Those stories are just so preachy. The narrative doesn’t have a drop of flounce, despite the serious tones, and the romance between the main characters is so contrived and dry.”

The girl leaned her small body into the table, the sly expression on her face pointed in Tottika’s direction. “I wrote out my own account of the battle for Hateno Village. It promises to be more dramatic and real than anything the Red Herring could scratch out, if you’re interested.”

“I wouldn’t mind taking a look,” Betaal’s rough voice chimed in, effectively turning all eyes present in her direction. “I’m sure it’s quite an exciting read.”

“Sure,” the tiny Zora agreed with ease, nodding her head, though she quickly added, “It might be a bit above your reading level, though.”
Torfeau’s gaze shot nervously in Finley’s direction, her pupils tightening to such slits that the yellow of
her eyes was suddenly as bright as the morning, itself. Her voice was remarkably steady, though, as she piped up, “Finley, this is Sergeant Betaal, by the way. She is the superior officer who has been
sent to report back to the Guard Captain.” The black Zora hurriedly turned her attention to the
woman across the table from her, saying, “Don’t worry. Finley is that condescending to everybody.”

“What is Bazz gonna do?” the short, pink Zora scoffed, upturning the round crest of her brow in a
little huff. “I can’t be disciplined, I’m not on the payroll.”

Betaal highly doubted that any Uppercity Zora would have been challenged on their reading level,
but she let it slide, choosing instead to graciously thank the Hylian man who’d so kindly brought her
tea and a breakfast serving which she hadn’t even asked for.

The food looked delightful and beyond appealing and she set right to enjoying her meal. It left a
nicer flavor on her tongue than the bitter tang of baseless discrimination, anyway. She supposed, too,
that maybe the other Zora was still too young to know better.

The Hylian family finished their meal promptly, each of them apparently ready to set to work,
focused on the tasks their workday required of them, though one lingered long enough to remove
their dishes, leaving the half-eaten loaf of bread and a small dish of butter for the next person. Betaal
curiously reached for it once they were gone, cutting a slice. The crust was thin and crisp, while the
inside was still warm and steaming. A small dab of butter melted on its surface with ease. With even
greater ease, the tender item flattened and sliced beneath the razor sharp of Betaal’s teeth and her
webbed toes curled at the delightful richness of the flavor.

Guardsman Torfeau caught the look of delight overwhelming her newly arrived superior and a smile
returned to her own face. “When you’ve finished, I can run you through the workings of our
settlement, so that you have a better idea of what to report back to the Guard Captain.”

“You can go ahead, if you like,” Betaal replied, reaching for her cup of tea and bringing it to her lips.
It was still very hot, but not too hot, so she took a careful sip, then set it aside once again. “It’s no
interruption to me.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Torfeau nodded, straightening in her seat so that she gave the appearance of
seriousness and authority. “Our work force has expanded Firly Pond to suit our needs. All of the
guardsmen stationed here, as well as the refugees, use it for communal sleeping. There is a simple
guard rotation, so that somebody watches over it at all times.”

Betaal quietly nodded along while the other Zora woman spoke, subdued about the matter despite
that she was rather interested. She couldn’t help but be reminded of the fort, or even the settlement on
Mercay Island, and so was stricken with charmed fondness that she couldn’t fight off.

“We’ve been using the house here as an armory and to store food and supplies, as well as a mess
area, as you can see.” A couple of other Zoras, civilians, showed themselves into the kitchen, as
though to prove Torfeau’s point. It wasn’t much to question; breakfast was a high traffic time. “The
only ones who actively live here are the trio of Hylians who just left, then Sasan and Finley.”

The tall, black Zora tilted her head in Finley’s direction, the armor that adorned her brow gleaming
with even her most subtle movements. “Finley was here before all of us. She was the Hylian
Champion’s official guest, so we respect her seniority and her authority as house manager.”

“Am I late?” the hiss of a sweet, but overly serious voice interrupted the exchange, and Betaal turned
her head aside to catch sight of Dunma’s familiar silhouette in the doorway. She was still wet from
the pond and her violet scales shined like glass in the light from outside. The Sergeant snapped her
gaze away as immediately as she processed the visual, fighting the awkward flare of her fins and the way their color flushed whenever Dunma was around.

“I’m sorry,” she stated, approaching the table with a few easy strides, her webbed toes making wet patters on the wood of the floor. “I overslept. There’s no excuse for it, but I am terribly sorry.”

Betaal paused, unsure if the other woman was addressing her or not, all because of how she’d turned away. It was kind of silly for her to imagine that perhaps Dunma wasn’t speaking to her, because she outranked everyone else present and was under Betaal’s own command. There was really nobody else for her to be speaking to.

The Sergeant’s head turned fractionally back to regard the other, so that Dunma was little more than a blur of violet in her peripheral, then she cleared her throat, evening her tone as best she could.

“It’s fine, Corporal,” she dismissed the apology, only to wonder right after if she was being too light on the other guardsman in front of the others. Dunma held a place of responsibility, so if she went easy on her, that would make their relationship, no, their former relationship, a bit too obvious. She decidedly added, “We’ll discuss it later. Eat first, then ready yourself for duty.”

“Yes, sir,” Dunma uttered plainly. It was always so difficult to know whether or not she was disappointed or hurt, because she hid everything so well beneath a strict dedication to her work. Actually, oversleeping was unheard of from her, so already there was plenty to question. Then again, maybe Betaal was overthinking it and the young woman was just being her own naturally serious self.

Dunma took a seat next to Betaal, at which the Sergeant swallowed uncomfortably, but she didn’t move away. She was so tense that she hardly moved at all, not relaxing until she recalled the younger guardsman’s advice from a little while back; actively trying to seem distant from one another would appear all the more suspicious.

Dunma wasn’t sitting next to her for the sake of it. She had simply chosen the most appropriate seat to integrate herself into the current conversation.

“It’s been a while,” Finley said, smiling and setting an impish gaze upon Dunma, who sat across from her.

“It has,” the violet Zora nodded, maintaining her steadiness, though a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Shall I go on, then, Sergeant?” Torfeau asked, not inconvenienced at all by these interruptions, but still doing her best to stay on task, given that she also held a place of responsibility now. Honestly, she didn’t care to climb the ranks, but she also didn’t want to be seen as somebody who didn’t give their best effort.

“Please,” Betaal stated pleasantly, nodding and taking another sip of her tea.

“Right, thank you. So as I was saying before, Finley is the house manager,” Torfeau explained, while Dunma nodded right along, as if to say, ‘That makes sense.’ “She keeps track of all supplies in a written record. She’s also handy with a bow, so nobody crosses her unless they want trouble. I recommended that she try out for the City Guard when she finally returns to Zora’s Domain.”

“You’re very accomplished for your age,” Betaal commented, with the belief that she was being polite. That assumption was forcefully shattered by the awkward silence that followed her statement.

“...oh, um,” Torfeau attempted to continue, going quiet all over again while she searched for the
appropriate words.

Dunma cleared her throat in the black Zora’s pause, leaning a bit in Betaal’s direction to say, “Finley is actually very close to my own age, sir.”

“Uhh, I see,” the blue Zora mumbled, sure that her nervous mucous glands would start turning her into a walking slime factory at any moment. “I beg your pardon, then. Your work is still rather impressive, nonetheless.”

Finley accepted the apology with a half-hearted nod, leaving Betaal to quietly sigh over her own verbal gracelessness. Torfeau helpfully moved passed the little blunder, continuing the breakdown of how the refugee post was being run. Betaal’s single eye returned to the sight of the woman across from her in attention, flicking for a single moment to Torfeau’s rather quiet twin. Tottika’s own golden stare had been trained on Betaal the entire time, but it darted away the moment she glanced over; that was odd.

“There isn’t any shortage of supply here, but as we move into the winter months, we do closely monitor our use of resources and carefully ration the supply in order to make absolute certain that our presence doesn’t cause any inconvenience or trouble to the Hateno Villagers,” Torfeau was saying. “I’m not sure if you were informed, but our plan to travel here was a matter of contention. The situation is peaceful now but the tensions are still there.”

“In what aspects, if you don’t mind me asking?” Betaal queried, with a certain amount of concern in her tone.

“Little things,” Torfeau sighed. “Some of the vendors won’t deal with us. Some of the farmers have stopped selling to vendors who do openly deal with us and that has caused a divide among Hylians who weren’t previously at odds with one another. The fishers who work down at Hateno Bay held an entire meeting with Reede and our guard force for the sake of restricting us to certain areas of the bay. It’s clear that some see our presence as an invasion and an inconvenience.”

“Hmm,” Betaal nodded, a wrinkle of seriousness shadowing her features. Dunma had her hands folded by the Sergeant’s side.

“There is also a training area, now,” Torfeau moved past the previous subject, clearly not wanting to dwell. “It is just an empty field that’s been cleared for winter where we erected some practice dummies. We share it with the residents of Hateno Village, as they’ve taken an interest in learning some combat skills after the incident with the raiders. It’s peaceful, though, thankfully. That’s mostly because our guardsmen have been the ones providing instruction to the Hylians. A lot of them apparently had family who were stationed at Fort Hateno and fought when the Calamity struck. Anyway, I can show you to it, if you’d like.”

“I’m interested, of course,” Betaal replied once the other woman finished speaking, “but if you don’t mind, I should like to see what kinds of reports you’ve been keeping. The Guard Captain was specific in his instructions that I should be thorough in obtaining all information about the situation here.”

“You know Bazz,” Dunma added, “worried about every little thing. If our reports don’t make every detail blatantly clear, he’ll find a way to come down here and put things into an order that he likes better.”

Betaal couldn’t help it- a tiny smile curved her lips at the younger woman’s assertion. Dunma personally knew the Guard Captain well enough to be exasperated with having him as a boss, yet if she were in his position, she’d be doing the exact same thing. She probably would make Guard
Captain some day, Betaal was sure of it.

“Well, to be honest...” Torfeau began again, her tone turning much more nervous than before, “Finley’s instincts when it comes to record keeping have been a blessing. Making these kinds of reports about the management of our post is a bit beyond what my rank should entail, so I admit, I might be a little lost.”

“That’s not surprising,” Betaal nodded sympathetically. She hadn’t known much about that aspect of her own job at first, and it took a great deal of back and forth between herself and her superior to get a handle on how Bazz wanted things to be done. Luckily, she was a natural. “With how overextended the City Guard is right now, this was a lot to ask of you. But it’s not a problem. Dunna and I are both very familiar with the ins and outs of that side of the job. We’re happy to go through it with you, Torfeau. So, after we tour the training area, then?”

“Right,” the black Zora smiled her gratitude, dipping her head low to her superior, before standing from her seat in preparation. “Thank you, Sergeant.”

The silence was tense.

Link honestly hated that, but he also wasn’t one to break it. He would milk the uncomfortable silence. He would own it. This was his homeland and he would fight to defend it, waging war with a tongue which was utterly still, weaponized in its relentless lack of use.

He’d been welcomed to the Sheikah elder’s table, and though the invitation was for tea, it felt very much like they were opposing generals at a war table, sussing out the details to some sort of treaty.

Impa’s granddaughter, Paya, was pouring the tea, her delicate hands seeming to shake on the handle of the steaming pot. Link’s eyes lingered there, on the young Sheikah’s fingers; they were marred from what he could only assume was an endless series of accidents brought on by her clumsiness and exacerbated by numerous other tasks which were none too kind to her skin. It was a feature they certainly shared in common, and it was all too evident that she noticed as much. Her own deep, crimson gaze fell upon the Champion’s hand when he reached for the cup she offered to him.

The girl’s mouth was set in a hard line, her expression terribly forced. She, alone, failed to hide that something deeply troubling was weighty on her mind, whereas the Sheikah elder was steely and still, and Dorian, who stood nearby, was trained and serious.

“We thank you for you assistance in Hateno Village, Champion,” Impa began stiffly, her voice graveled and stern, something about it echoing with uncertainty. It had Link’s pointed ears twitching, because the trust which she’d openly imparted the very first time he’d shown up on her doorstep, like a lost child, had vanished. “If not for your intervention, we would’ve lost all of the warriors we sent into that conflict and Hateno Village would’ve fallen into the hands of the Guardians of Hyrule.”

“The Guardians of Hyrule,” he repeated with a little scoff, cupping the tea between his palms. It was comforting, with how cold the weather had turned. “What more do you know about them?”

“We only recently received any intel on them,” the Sheikah leader replied in a bleak manner, the deep wrinkles of her face hardening in worry. Paya’s gaze flickered in her grandmother’s direction while the woman spoke and Link carefully watched the much younger Sheikah’s expressions, feeling that they were quite indicative of Impa’s own blatantly secretive ways.

There was something more to this, something that the old woman wasn’t saying.
“It is their aim to unify the lands of Hyrule through the use of violence. Their existence is a natural response to the anarchy which resulted from the Calamity. It was only a matter of time before a group of their nature came along.” The woman let out a troubled sigh before she brought her cup of tea to her lips.

“We’ve heard that they’ve taken control of the Hylian Village to the south,” Dorian breathed from where he stood, calm and solemn, save for the way his fingers tightened. “Lurelin Village. It’s a bad sign. There will be no wringing it from their hold in the foreseeable future, not without some major changes.”

“It’s another reason why, more than ever, the Calamity must be destroyed and the Royal Family of Hyrule must be returned to power,” Impa stated, like her own beliefs needed any reiteration. When Link refocused on her face, she had her stare trained on him as though to issue this declaration as an order.

“Hm..” Link idly fiddled with the cup between his hands, his blue eyes turning dull despite how he was considering his words, still troubled and confused over the topic. He peered downward at his own reflection in the steaming cup. “Maybe it is time to let things progress naturally, then. Maybe it’s good that these people have finally decided to stand up and resist the dangers of the world around them. As far as I can see, the Royal Family fell and the Champions failed.”

A shrug punctuated the Champion’s pause, then he took a deep breath and continued, “Maybe that failure was necessary and so is this change.”

The Sheikah elder’s normally steeled gaze widened in surprise at such an assertion, one of her patchy, gray brows raising, offsetting the frown on her lips.

Despite himself, Dorian was the one to speak up first, his own personal feelings suddenly displayed with much greater ease than what they otherwise might be. Link was all too glad of it, drinking in the sight of Sheikah honesty, because it was such a fucking rarity.

“How can you say that, Champion?” the man implored. It was so obvious that he still believed in Link, that he still believed in what Link stood for, as opposed to the dwindling faith displayed by his leader. “After seeing everything that happened in Hateno Village, how can you say that?”

He was just gonna have to be disappointed.

“I didn’t say that I agreed with their methods,” Link growled. It wasn’t a complete lie, but it was definitely a partial one. “..If I did, I wouldn’t have fought so hard to resist their invasion. But, knowing how impossible it can be to get people to stand up for themselves, maybe it was at least somewhat needed.”

“In any case,” the Hylian blurted, flicking one hand to brush off the topic, since he wasn’t getting anywhere, “I didn’t come to discuss my opinions on the Guardians of Hyrule. I came to make it clear that I didn’t want to carry the credit for the victory in Hateno Village, nor the responsibility for saving Sheikah lives that night. I just happened to be there. My Zora allies are the ones who ultimately decided to march on Hateno Village, to defend it. The victory was hard fought and hard won by them, not by me.”

“Then they have our gratitude as well, certainly,” Impa stated, her calm tone like the voice of reason which helped abate both Dorian’s insult and Paya’s apprehension. “It is odd that you should come all this way for the sake of asking us to acknowledge the Zora people, though. Is there some other motivation behind this, then, Champion?”
“That’s right,” he nodded, taking a sip from his cup and pausing to feel the warmth of the liquid settling in his middle. “If the Sheikah have anything they’d like to offer in thanks for the assistance, the Zora people would appreciate it, much as they’re too proud to ask. They have a food shortage that they’re contending with right now and the people of Kakariko appear to be comfortably well-supplied from what I’ve seen.”

“Relief in exchange for their timely assistance in our own moment of crisis?” the woman hummed, closing her eyes and softly nodding her head. “That sounds fair, Champion. Consider it an agreement.”

Exploration didn’t take long to become exhausting, regardless of how much fun the boy was having and how excited he was. Resting his senses, however, came as something of a treat, given that he’d been prevented from submerging himself for so long, back home.

Bodies of fresh water were plentiful in Kakariko Village and Estuu easily found one where he could situate himself. He shed his new clothes, placing them in the care of the nearby Hylia statue, sure that nobody would think to steal while the Goddess was watching. The boy tucked them in behind her, just in case.

When his scales were bared, the young Zora dove into the deep, cold blue of the mountain spring, zipping freely about at first, setting free the static energy that had built up inside him.

An underwater existence was so much more pleasing for Estuu’s senses. Light traveled pleasantly slow and sound so was distant, even the nearby waterfall only produced a deep, even hum that was somehow more soothing than disruptive. Underwater scents were much less overwhelming; they took a certain attention to detail to even acknowledge. Zoras possessed a muscular cavity in their sinuses that could close off their nostrils from their airways, diverting water in a different manner altogether, while allowing them to retain the ability to smell.

Overall, water just wasn’t so full of information and interruption. Estuu finally settled in a shadowy gulf, enjoying the feeling of wetting his gills and cooling his scales. His frantic heartbeat answered the chill and began to slow, calming him.

After enough time had passed that the boy was satisfied, he bobbed back to the surface to reclaim his cast off clothes. As expected, upon his return to land, his senses were assaulted by a myriad of smells. It was getting close to dinner time, so there was reason, of course. It wasn’t quite as problematic as he’d expected, though, because he found something pleasant, something tempting, carried on the wind through the canyon.

When he was dressed, Estuu followed the intriguing, unfamiliar smell of dishes he’d never consumed, soon catching sight of a young girl who was seated nearby, fussing over a cook pot which was hovered above hot, glowing embers.

It didn’t take very long for her to notice him, either. Plenty of Sheikah people had experienced these double-take moments upon first sight of him, a Zora. This girl set her gaze upon him and didn’t waver, taking a few extra seconds to process the fact that he was something different, then a smile slowly crawled across her lips.

“Hello there,” she called out to him. His golden eyes darted elsewhere while she looked on him, not wanting to meet her gaze, though he did take a few steps closer. Her fire wasn’t smoking any longer, so he decided that he could handle it.
“Koko never imagined that Koko would actually lure in a Zora by cooking fish,” she commented, softening her voice, evidently not wanting to speak any louder than strictly necessary. The young Zora appreciated that, and so inched yet nearer.

“Don’t be shy,” she said, batting her hand at him in beckoning. “It’s almost done.”

He was curious about this fish that she was busily preparing. He hadn’t known that the Sheikah people consumed fish with vigor that nearly equaled the Zoras, but he wasn’t unpleasantly surprised, and he’d decided that it was best to absolutely glut himself on whatever satisfied his palate while he had the chance. Once he returned home, it’d be back to dealing with scarcity and hunger.

Estuu came to stand at the girl’s side, finding that to be the most comfortable. This way he could listen, without the pressure for eye contact. Also, he was able to snag a glimpse of the food she was poking at, taking care to test whether or not it was done every few seconds with enormous care.

There were a couple of fillets simmering in a deep, red sauce that had an incredibly sweet scent, and the meat appeared pink and tender, cooked slowly and lightly. He pursed his lips in a curious way as he observed.

“Koko thinks this is a Rito recipe,” she explained, filling the silence and probably questioning it a bit, as well. She was probably trying to prompt a reply, in fact. “These berries aren’t common around here, except for a few weeks right before winter. They grow all year round out west, where the weather stays cooler in the summer months. Koko has never been, but Koko read it in a recipe book. Wouldn’t it be nice to travel that far and to taste all of the different kinds of food prepared by different people?”

Estuu had some mixed thoughts on the matter, but he was strictly bound to ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ He nodded his head in agreement, because yes, trying new things was definitely exciting. He had experimented during his supper feast with the Hylian Champion, perhaps testing the limits of his sensory experience. In the end, there were plenty of things which he thoroughly enjoyed. It was a blessing that the Sheikah people preferred subtle nuance when it came to their flavorings.

If the boy had the option of speaking a reply, he’d probably dare her to try Goron cuisine, if she was so darn brave.

“What kinds of things do you eat where you’re from?” she asked, while scooping the fillets from the pot and onto a plate which had been placed neatly at her side. Estuu blinked in inconvenience while he watched. She wanted him to speak up because this wasn’t a question that he could answer with a gesture.

He wondered what she would think, hearing that his people didn’t use heat to prepare their food very often. Their own recipes often revolved around different ways to cut and prepare meat. They used marinades, sauces and seasonings. They smoked certain quarry. They even dedicated an entire festival to a particular dangerous, seasonal delicacy each year.

The boy both hated and adored that particular festival because it involved barbequing meat, which left the Domain hazy with smoke and hot from various flames. The meat was sweet and tender, however, and didn’t retain much of the smoky flavor, so Estuu could surprisingly stomach it with ease. It was also quite exciting, because Zora warriors made a huge show of capturing their prey, the lightning striker eel. It was apparently a long standing tradition going back thousands of years and it was considered a great honor for a Zora warrior to slay one of the beasts.

Warriors often took on the eels in pairs for safety, using misdirection to conquer the eels’ use of powerful, electrical energy. Year after year, Prince Sidon was always the first warrior to slay one of
the eels, and each year, he chose Brivere to be his partner in the endeavor. It was quite exciting for Estuu to watch. He hoped that he got a chance to take on one of those fearsome beasts some day.

“Do you not talk, then?” the Sheikah girl asked, sampling her dish in a thoughtful way. Estuu shook his head at her and she returned a nod of understanding. “That’s okay. You still understand. It’s kind of like the monks who worship Hylia. They take care of the Spring of Wisdom and they travel back and forth between there and the village, but they never talk. They’re good listeners, though.”

The young girl held the plate before her new, Zora friend, turning to face him so that he was forced to cast his eyes downward to avoid her gaze.

“Do you wanna try this?” she asked, strangely open about sharing her food. Perhaps his perception was simply the unexpected effect of the shortage back home, though. Link had shared plenty with Estuu as well, despite the Hylian’s gluttonous ways. That girl and her sister, the ones from the Undercity— even they had shared with Estuu.

Maybe sharing food was just meant to be a gesture of kindness and friendship. That made sense. It had certainly cemented Link’s approval of Estuu’s presence, on their first mission together.

The boy nodded his head, taking the utensils from the Sheikah girl’s hand and using them to peel one of the flaky layers from the fillet, doing so with a very careful hand. It sort of simulated the way they cut fish back home, if he did it this way.

Estuu paused the bite before his face, taking in the sweet, saucy scent. It seemed appealing enough. However, when he plopped the soft meat into his mouth, his tongue was assaulted by a strong, tart flavor that the smell hadn’t betrayed at all. The pink skin beneath the crest of his brow wrinkled in response and he couldn’t even will himself to react politely, bending down and spitting the bite he’d taken into the embers of the flame, so that it sizzled and steamed.

Even so, the girl just laughed at the young Zora’s blatant honesty. “Yeah,” she said, still giggling, “it’s missing something.”

The boy’s tail began swishing in distress, and he spat again, hoping to erase the remaining flavor from lingering about in his saliva. “Mmhm,” he hummed, his offense somehow clear in the soft vibrations of his vocalization. His fiddling fingers joined in alongside his flicking tail, moving so that he had somewhere else to focus his concentration. He had this bizarre, tingling sensation in his jaw that had extended all the way to the space beneath his forefins and he ducked his fidgeting fingers there, rubbing the feeling away.

“Maybe Koko’s father and sister will still appreciate the attempt, anyway,” the Sheikah girl said with a little sigh. Estuu bravely glimpsed her face, avoiding her eyes and instead finding that she was wearing a hopeful smile upon her lips.

“Koko’s gotta go to archery practice now,” the girl stated in a soft, dejected way. Her disappointment was swiftly chased away by how the Zora boy perked in response to her words, leaving her laughing over the intensity of his physically expressed interest.

“Well, do you want to come with Koko?” she asked, though it rang quite clearly like an offer, one that Estuu accepted with an energetic nod. His forefins flapped about with his gesture, the jewels he wore producing quiet dingles that chorused further laughter from his new companion.

She beckoned for him to follow her and he did so without question, without hesitation. Her pace was hurried and he went right at her heels, trying not to stumble over his own toes.
They ran to the young Sheikah’s house first. It was a small, humble abode, not that Estuu perceived it as such, given that it roughly matched the space which he shared with his brother. It was quiet and still, the earthy tones of the wooden construction a bit suffocating for the Zora, who was used to being surrounded by crisp, pale blues, and shining stone with light that never dimmed. Here, there wasn’t a single lantern lit, yet the girl navigated her space with ease in the dim lighting. Estuu stood in wait, his pupils turning to wide, black circles while he watched the Sheikah set the meal she’d prepared out on a table, leaving behind a handwritten note to go with it.

With her previous task completed, she hurried on her feet, grabbing up her bow and quiver from a solitary corner of her house. She threw the items over one shoulder, then gathered up her arm guards, running for the front door with all she needed in hand.

Estuu was still standing in the column of light from the open door, and she gleefully muttered a, “Come on!” as she rushed past him. He spun to pursue her, chasing like a shadow, inescapable and silent.

It was a short distance to the practice area. The young Sheikah pulled on her arm guards as they ran and they made it to their destination just as she got the last strap fastened into place.

The area was flat and tree-lined, with targets set up amidst the shroud of old growth. Estuu tilted his head back to stare into the boney canopy above. The branches outstretched like black veins which would’ve provided thick shade, if not for the fact that they’d shed their foliage. Only a few leaves remained attached, and they loosely dangled, dancing in the gentle breeze that blew overhead yet was blocked down below.

It was a good spot for practice, since there was minimal interference from the wind. A few other Sheikah people of varying ages were about in the practice area, but Estuu followed the young girl to a place where they were safely out of the way of any others.

Estuu’s gaze remained trained on the performance being offered by some of the other Sheikah people present, in particular one elderly woman, whose movements were fast and precise. Her weathered hands were so smooth on each transition and she hardly aimed with more than a quick glance, yet she hit her mark each and every time without fail. It had the young Zora’s heart bouncing in excitement, his breath caught in his throat in admiration and longing, while his heart sank into his stomach, swollen with despair.

“All Sheikah people train in warrior skills but not every Sheikah lives as strictly a warrior,” the girl explained, catching onto Estuu’s interest, though she was ignorant as to his reasons. Dismally, he turned to watch her instead, his golden eyes shining, his innermost desire burning hot enough to immolate his already broken spirit. He supposed it was his own fault for agreeing to come here, knowing it would only remind him of his terrible loss.

“Sheikah people become farmers, or artists, or writers. Some own businesses, and some become parents and spend their whole lives loving and caring for their family. Koko is still trying to figure out what Koko wants to do, but Koko enjoys cooking for her family, even if Koko is not that good at it, yet. Koko thinks the enjoyment is what really counts. As long as Koko enjoys it, Koko will improve as she goes, right?”

The girl had a smile on her lips, but it didn’t meet her eyes. Estuu was bold enough to steal a glimpse, because she was already focused on a target several feet ahead of where she stood. He recognized the emptiness in her expression and in her dismal tone, watching carefully as she took her bow from over her shoulder and nocked an arrow to the string.

It was that same sorrow the Zora boy would’ve latched onto, to steady his shot. When she let her
arrow fly, however, it sailed wildly off target and he actually cringed at how poorly she’d missed.

“Yeah, Koko’s really not that good at this either,” she commented bitterly, reading the Zora’s silence with a disconcerting amount of ease. He had a feeling that she didn’t enjoy this, because her lighthearted mood from before had vacated her.

Using his own bow had always helped him to leave behind his woes. Clearly, it brought hers to the surface, yet she persisted, nocking another arrow and drawing the bowstring, trying harder to aim this time. Estuu studied her motions, her positioning, thinking that he could nearly feel her own tension melting into him the longer he stared.

Again, when she released, her shot was beyond pathetic.

“Some of Koko’s people decide to be warriors, too. Just warriors. Like Koko’s father. He works as a guard for Lady Impa.” She breathed and took another shot. She missed again. “Koko thinks she didn’t really inherit his abilities, though.”

“Koko’s heard that the best of our warriors, when they’re old enough, are approached by another group of Sheikah people who live outside of the village.” There was a heaviness to her voice, a grimness which turned her tone quiet and painful. She took out another arrow and readied herself once more. “They fight to protect the Sheikah way of life and the interests of Koko’s people, but they do it very secretly. Koko is told that it’s for our protection.”

Suddenly, like the young girl had only just become cognizant of the words she was speaking, her bow drooped in her grasp and she cast a grayish stare back in the Zora’s direction. His own eyes flitted aside, though it was only fractionally, because he was genuinely curious about the expression on her face. He wished she hadn’t looked at him.

“Actually, Koko is not supposed to talk about it..” she muttered in a troubled way, like avoiding the subject and living in secrecy had driven her to a kind of desperation and turmoil that she couldn’t bear to keep inside any longer. Estuu understood. He wished spilling his own heart out was an option, sometimes.

“You can keep a secret, right?” she asked, a sad grin upturning the corners of her lips. Estuu kept his gaze set there, going no higher. He returned the impish expression, though it felt foreign to the muscles of his face, a poor imitation. Instead, he pointed to his lips with a quiet chuckle, and she understood with ease what his silent reply had meant.

Nobody could keep a secret like a boy who couldn’t speak.

“Right,” she agreed with a hollow laugh and a gentle nod of her head. She turned back to her practice after that, and Estuu let out a little breath, sure that he could feel his own sense of comfort returning when the pressure of her stare was removed.

The girl began to aim her bow again, drawing the string back, and Estuu narrowed his eyes, tilting his head in observation. Her form was alright, though her stance seemed a bit too narrow, which probably left her body teetering in minute, unnoticeable ways.

“So..” she began again, hesitantly speaking while she got ready to make her shot. It was a blatantly poor choice, but Estuu supposed he was as interested in this secret of hers as he was invested in seeing her actually succeed at a task he personally took very seriously. Well, he had, anyway. He’d been good at this and she wasn’t taking it seriously at all. That was slightly irksome.

“Koko’s heard that this other group of warriors extends a welcome to Koko’s people. They ask
young Sheikah to join them, offering a significant prize in exchange for service. That prize is the promise of eternal life.” She paused long enough to set her arrow free, missing her target again, which was no great surprise. Estuu sighed, becoming steadily more exasperated.

“Offering immortality in exchange for service—sounds like magic, right?” The Zora would’ve expected her to sound a great deal more intrigued, but she didn’t. She flicked another arrow from her quiver and nocked it to the string, drawing and letting it fly without aiming at all. “It’s like an agreement, Koko guesses. They have to serve for a certain amount of time and they can’t leave before their time is over. When they finally can leave, they have to recruit somebody from our village to take their place, then they come back to live here, or wherever they want.”

The white-haired girl drew another arrow, doing it a bit less hasty this time because now her quiver was running low. She got it into place with a quick movement, then drew back her string, taking aim. Her eyes were narrowed and her body was tense—too tense. The hand which drew the bowstring back wasn’t held nearly close enough to herself for her to get a proper aim, and her grip on the bow itself was too tight, causing her shot to fly lopsided.

“The leader, Lady Impa—she presides over all of it with the head of the warrior group, to make sure it’s fair,” she continued. “But sometimes there are problems. Actually, because Koko’s father left the group of warriors before his time was up, the group came and took Koko’s mother away to take his place.”

“Mmm,” Estuu hummed and nodded, wilting in woeful understanding. He missed his mother, too. If he could have reassured the young Sheikah, he might’ve attempted to do so. Perhaps it was best that he couldn’t, though. It sounded like his new friend expected her mother to come back some day, a distant hope that he didn’t possess.

Reassurances were poor responses to grief, anyway. An Apostle tutor had once tried to explain that his mother would reincarnate into another person, and that she wasn’t really gone, but living a new life, instead.

All he took from it was that people were tired of having to see his sadness.

The Sheikah girl took out and shot another badly aimed arrow and finally the Zora couldn’t take it anymore. He let out a squeak of impatience, frustrated that she couldn’t get this right and that he lacked the voice to tell her what she was doing incorrectly.

If he wanted to help her, it was going to involve touching her. His tail flapped at such a thought, but he weathered it, taking a breath before he inched determinedly into her personal space.

Estuu outstretched his hand, placing his fingers over hers and squishing at her grip on the bow in order to loosen her hold. He pushed the bow upward, aiming it for her, then he shoved one foot against hers, nudging her legs apart to widen her stance. Then, turning and standing at her side, he used his single hand to show her where she needed to be drawing the string to. His fingers curled as though he was holding a bowstring. It was so familiar. He bent his arm and brought it back so that his hand was against his cheek. That was the best way for one to look down the arrow before shifting one’s gaze to the target, then releasing.

With luck and skill, the arrow would fly right to where you set your gaze. Estuu always peered directly at his target’s eyes before he shot, feeling the rush of discomfort in his blood and the satisfaction of destroying it completely and utterly.

Carefully, so to not ruin the changes her Zora friend had made, the girl smoothly drew her final arrow, pulling the bowstring precisely as he’d indicated, her grayish eyes flicking down the shaft of
the arrow, to the center bull’s-eye of the target.

When she fired, it wasn’t a perfect shot, but it struck the target just outside of the center, which still represented a vast improvement. She gaped in amazement at the small triumph, while the boy at her side started bouncing on his toes, brimming with joy at the success even more than she. Once her own disbelief faded away, she joined Estuu in a squeal of celebration, jumping up and down alongside him.

This could’ve been considered the grandest of mistakes or the most unlikely of discoveries.

Link was seated at the dinner table of the inn in Kakariko, a grand feast lining his space, lit by the soft flames of nearby lanterns. He had his mouth stuffed full of food and his next bite was hovering near his lips in wait. For this rare instant, however, all of his attention had become caught up in the incredible thing unfolding before him.

With one seemingly simple question, Link had spurred this miraculous event. It was offhand and nonchalant, and yet the moment he posed it, it was like he’d transformed the quiet, reserved boy he knew Estuu to be into a new, excitable, bouncing bundle of frothing energy that was unconstrained and unhinged.

“What’s up with that book you always carry around? What’s it all about?” he’d said, watching the Zora boy sit across from him at the table, reading that same book for the umpteenth time.

Estuu couldn’t speak, but he sure as shit had an answer ready and waiting.

So, as it turned out, it wasn’t always the same book. In fact, there were four books, all of which Estuu actually had on hand, as unbelievable and ridiculous as that was. Link thought for a second that he’d entered an alternate universe where the scarlet boy didn’t have an older brother who was criminally practical, because how in the hell did this kid manage to stuff his bag with four books, none of which were necessary supplies, without Brivere telling him that it was utterly ridiculous?

Link almost, almost felt the desire to say that it was utterly ridiculous, but Hylia have mercy on him if he did. As usual, he decided that silence was the best option, here.

In any case, at the gentlest prompting, Estuu produced all four of these books and had each of them spread out on the dinner table before himself. He’d shown Link the title of each one and shoved the summaries rather forcefully into his face, though he didn’t give the Hylian enough time to properly read them, either. He must have assumed that Link could read fast.

The boy then set to flipping randomly about the pages, opening the first book to the middle, opening another somewhere near the end, and yet another to the beginning. The Zora’s fingers flew between select paragraphs, and Link ascertained that the kid was trying to explain the characters to him; their motivations, backgrounds, important things that had happened to them over the course of this strangely drawn-out narrative.

Seriously, it must have been five hundred thousand words worth. What story needed to be that fucking long?

So, now Link was stuck trying to verbally recite everything he’d come to grasp about the series of novels, if only to satisfy his friend’s excitement. Doing anything otherwise might have caused Estuu’s poor little heart to explode, killing him instantly.

“So this takes place in an alternate universe, where the Calamity is free and basically everybody has
been wiped from existence, except for the Zora people?” the Hylian both asked and stated, finally delivering that one bite to his mouth. His brain needed a moment to catch up, so the food was merciful. Estuu was nodding in glee, like the world from these stories was just fantastic, no doubt about it.

There was also some kind of bizarre subtext about certain Zoras being granted extra powers thanks to the Calamity being released. Those particular characters didn’t ask for the powers, nor did they pledge any loyalties in order to receive them, yet regardless they were automatically distrusted.

“And the main character, Lorelei,” Link continued, “was cursed by the Calamity with special, magical powers?”

Again, Estuu nodded.

“But she, Lorelei, decided to use her powers against the Calamity, even though it is what empowered her in the first place? And even though her own people hate her and treat her like a monster? Even though using these powers against the Calamity is slowly killing her?”

Vigorously, Estuu nodded.

“Then, there are also these Sage characters, who’ve had their own magical powers bolstered by the Goddess, Hylia. And despite that they are majorly judgmental pricks, Lorelei joins them in their quest to find the third and final sage?”

With energy growing tenfold, reaching fever pitch, Estuu nodded.

“And in this big plot twist, an enemy turns out to be the third sage.” Link’s voice was steady, sure now that, somehow, he had absorbed this complex explanation which had been delivered to him without the use of words. “Then for three, whole books, Lorelei develops an important relationship with the enemy character, General Kita, experiencing various trials and tribulations, grappling with the short-comings and all of the damage they’ve both wracked up, as well as the knowledge that in order to restore peace to the world, Lorelei will ultimately have to sacrifice herself?”

It was an awfully big build up for inevitable disappointment.

Also, Estuu was still nodding. He hadn’t stopped. His poor brain must have been so shaken up.

“So..” Link began, taking another bite, unsure if he was actually intrigued now or if he was still humoring his Zora friend, “how does it end, then? Does Lorelei die or not? And what happens to Kita?”

At that question, the Zora finally snapped. Estuu’s head fell back and he let out a rather dramatic scream, kicking his feet like he was in physical pain. Link quietly chewed his food while he watched the kid have his mini breakdown.

When Estuu was done screaming, and instead was panting for breath, his hands scrambled to grab at one of the books, then he shoved it across the table, flicking the cover shut and stabbing one fingerscale into a small bit of text that read, ‘Book four of five.’

“Oh shit,” Link muttered, his face furrowing in sympathy or perhaps the growing sense of perplexity from seeing this new side of the young Zora. “The story is unfinished. That’s rough, pal.”

A soft, fake sob came out of the Zora and his head fell to the table’s surface. Evidently, there was no longer any meaning to life and all hope was lost. For all of three seconds, anyway, because within a few, quick moments, his head drew upward again, and he reached across the table to fling the novel
open to the last page. Link squinted and leaned himself closer to the neat print on the old page, his gaze flitting over the words and taking them in.

‘The General’s grievous injury left her suspended over the yawning maw of the canyon, grappling at the edge with her only good hand. The bandages around her palm danced free in the wind as it attempted to draw her downward and her sharp claws left furrows in the stone while she slipped nearer, nearer, ever nearer to her demise.

With a shuddering gasp, Lorelei recovered from the spell of faintness brought on by the unexpected attack. The Calamity itself had come at last to punish her for all she’d dared to make of herself, and though the tusk’d beast hovered at the other side of the split stone, trembling the earth with its enraged bellow, she lunged fearlessly to grab onto Kita.

“Kita,” the pale Zora hissed, both hands tightening around her beloved companion’s wrist. “Please, I can’t pull you up.”

Lorelei hadn’t felt so helpless in all her life, knowing that she was the hope of her world, and that her powers were the key to her undeserving peoples’ salvation. It was impossible, given that she, alone, could save everyone.

Yet now, here she was, unable to save the one person she cared for most, the one person she actually wanted to protect. And it was all the fault of her wretched curse that she lacked the physical strength to pull the other woman to safety.

Her face scrunched, tears following the wrinkles of her desperate features and she muttered another plea. Kita, though, for all of her seriousness, peered up at Lorelei and let out a soft chuckle.

“Maybe this is best.” The woman sighed the words like they were to be carried on her very last breath. Her eyes closed for a moment, in preparation for her eternal rest but she opened them again soon after- she couldn’t bear not to look up, not when her most beautiful one hovered so near. She’d imprint the image of Lorelei’s countenance onto her soul, so that they’d never be parted, even by what was inevitably to come.

“I’ve been in your way all this time,” Kita tearfully mumbled, her reserve shattering, her steeled heart newly bared. “If not for me, you’d have long accomplished your destiny. With me gone, your power will finally be complete.”

“Kita, no,” Lorelei grunted through her efforts to pull the other Zora up. “You don’t understand. If I’d never met you, then there would’ve been nothing in this world worth saving.”

The General’s eyes widened at the other woman’s admission, her scarred lips opening to speak or to catch the breath which had left her. But before a single sound could come from her, she slipped free of Lorelei’s grasp and her frame was swallowed up by the hungry abyss which waited far below.

To Be Continued.’

“Huh..” Link mumbled, strangely intrigued yet deeply discomforted. “It’s a literal cliffhanger.”

Of his own accord, the Hylian flicked the book shut, rereading the front cover again with new interest, his gaze going to the embossed letters of the author’s pen name. “The Red Herring?” he spoke it aloud. “I’m guessing this is a Zora author. Is there any reason in particular that they left the series unfinished?”

Estuu shrugged in a very distressed, exaggerated way and Link slid the book back across the table to him, returning it to his possession. The Zora gathered each of them up neatly, stacking the novels in
their serial order.

“If I ever meet The Red Herring, I'll ask them to speed it up, okay?” the Hylian stated with a chuckle. It was a joke, of course, but from the way the Zora’s head shot up in interest, he clearly took him at his word.

Maybe this kid actually had trust issues because of his failure to acknowledge when something said in passing wasn’t a promise or even feasible. Well, sure, if Link ever met The Red Herring, he’d gladly tell them to get their ass in gear, but he doubted that would ever come to pass.

“Estuu,” Link spoke up, a bit interested in the series now, despite having the ending spoiled, “maybe you wouldn’t mind letting me borrow the first book?”

The boy’s golden eyes drew very close to Link’s face, suddenly even more full of silent contemplation than ever before and something about that neutral face managed to impart both his excitement and his hesitation. His fingers drew the pile of books closer to himself and he wrapped them in his one-armed embrace like they were the most precious items in all the world.

Yet before the boy could give any reply, a young, Sheikah woman slid open the door to the inn and stepped inside. She walked on hurried feet over to where Link and Estuu were seated, jittering like she could lose her nerve at any moment.

The Champion recognized her immediately.

“Paya?” he muttered in uncertainty.

Her big, red eyes made quiet contact with Link’s own. Her lips parted, trembling with the deep breath she took to steel herself, then very quietly, she declared, “Hylian Champion. I need to speak with you, please.”

Link said nothing. He nodded his head and got to his feet at her summon.

;

Chapter End Notes

Yo. Hello my friends.

I've been thinking about this all week, I'm afraid. I want you all to know that my last closing note was absolutely not meant as a way to manipulate people into commenting. I wasn't me trying to grab a bunch of pity. That really was not my intention at all.

The fact of the matter is that as the fandom ages, there will naturally be people who vacate it. It would be naive to think otherwise. I have personally gotten to know SO many people through this story. Some of them I still regularly speak with. Some I'm distant with, but I still chat with every now and again. And some don't speak with me or read this story any longer at all. But that's fine, I'm happy to have met them all, even if it's bittersweet.

Just because somebody has expressed a negative emotion, it doesn't mean that you have to try to quell it. Sometimes negative emotions, like sadness, are just necessary. Sometimes, they need to be validated, because it is certainly valid to feel sadness over
watching something you love slowly lose strength. It's inevitable, and I've come to terms with that. It has been a delightful ride to this point. I don't regret a moment of it. Not even the ending that will come, one day.

With that said, hey, I'm also pleasantly surprised that so many of you are, in fact, still out there, watching quietly. I'm glad to know that you're all here and as always, I hope you enjoyed the story.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Some people had secrets that they would've liked to spoil, if not for the fear and uncertainty that followed them. Others fought to shelter their secrets, hiding their shame and protecting it at the very same time. Yet others wanted desperately to hide endangering secrets, but unbridled passion had rendered them unable to do so. Then, lastly, there was one person among them all who had a plan to root out those who'd been nursing their secrets in the dark.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my friends. This chapter is a day late, but it is also quite long and heavy. Also, my birthday was this past week, and though I did still keep working that day, I took a bit of time to myself as well. Enjoy the chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The chill of the night wasn’t half as cold as the shiver going down the Hylian’s spine. His breath came out in misty puffs and he held Kodah’s scarf all the more close while he followed the sight of Paya, walking ahead of him.

She was pale moonlight in the dark dressed in white, her alabaster tresses untied and flowing down her back. She cast a worried glance over her shoulder, the deep red of her eyes more of abyssal black in the shadow.

When at last they’d stepped aside enough for the promise of secrecy, Paya paused to look here and there, making certain that nobody was out and about where they stood, that nobody was around to hear what she was about to tell the Hylian. Her hand reached for Link’s own and she gently pulled him in close, unwilling to risk that he might miss the difficult things which she’d readied herself to utter.

Her gaze was shyly averted, but the Hylian could still see the shining blue of his own eyes reflected in hers.

“Champion,” she began, her lips trembling in trepidation. One hand had been placed against her middle, where surely her stomach was turning horrid flips. “I’m so sorry that I.. that I didn’t have the nerve to say something sooner, to warn you.”

Link’s pointed ears twitched forward at the soft, breathy sound of her voice. The tip of her tongue touched her lips to wet them, her throat moving with a dry swallow. She inhaled, filling her chest with breath for the sake of emptying her head of awful secrets.

“I think that it’s best if you leave Kakariko Village and don’t come back.” Her eyes flickered up to meet his. One hand had yet to let go of his and it tightened ever so slightly. “There are things happening here, acts which transpire in the shadows which we are all forbidden to speak of. Because
of what goes on here, I’m afraid that it may be very dangerous for you and I couldn’t go on in good conscience without warning you.”

“What are you talking about?” Link whispered, his voice a hiss through his teeth. His hand snapped from her grasp, taking hold of her wrist, instead. His fingers were tight in his seriousness and desperation, but not clenched enough to threaten. “Paya, what is going on here?”

“I…” she hesitated, considering, reconsidering, her steeled will crumbling beneath the weight of two heavy options, both of which were too burdensome for her to carry, nor act upon on her own. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t say any more.”

“No, Paya, please,” the Hylian pleaded in his softest, gentlest tone, one hand moving to flick his fringe back from his eyes. “Tell me the truth, if you know it.”

No words were issued in reply to his plea. Instead, the young, Sheikah woman’s head turned aside. The furrow of her brow was nearly indistinguishable beneath the banner she wore upon her skin, the crimson ink of the Eye of Truth, an emblem which haunted not just Link’s nightmares, but the uncontrollable visions in his mind.

Link’s own gaze faltered, his head stooping lower as his hope dimmed away and he let his hand fall from where he’d taken hold of the Sheikah’s wrist.

“In all the time I’ve been awake since my hundred year sleep, I’ve had the sense that something was wrong, that there was much more to the happenings of the world around me- something bigger, something deeper than the Calamity, but nobody would ever tell me the truth, not even people who were supposed to be my allies.”

From the first time the ghost of a King dangled a reward before him, disallowing questions and accepting only blind obedience, Link knew. From being forced to pledge his life in exchange for his own belongings and being denied the truth about his immortality, being punished and condescended to just for asking, being sent on this awful death quest to save the world like it was his obligation, he knew.

Nothing good came from being an obedient tool for people who only strove to maintain his ignorance and who had very apparent agendas attached to tightening the shroud over his eyes.

They’d damn themselves with their secrets, because he’d rather let them all burn than trust them.

The Hylian breathed a sigh of disappointment, his head tipping downward so that his imploring gaze was at last downcast. “All I’ve felt was that I was crazy, that I was lost,” he bitterly spat. “People keep telling me that it’s my job to save this world, but they refuse to show me any reason to do so. Instead, all I’ve seen are reasons not to.”

“I’m sure that in keeping secrets as we do, we’re only trying to avoid dimming your faith that much more, Champion,” Paya muttered her hesitant reply, trying her best to reassure, though she must have heard how hollow her words sounded because she let out an exasperated breath immediately after.

“.I don’t want to be the one who destroys your belief in this world, in the people who inhabit it,” the Sheikah woman stated, a declaration, her voice raising in volume, strengthening. “But I also can’t allow this cruelty to continue. You’re in danger here, because-”

“Paya!”
The Sheikah girl’s words fell into silence at the sound of her name. Both she and the Hylian in her company turned their heads in unison at the surprise approach of another. Dorian had rounded the corner as though there had been an emergency which required him to lend his aid.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the man growled, his deep voice a rumble of disappointment and betrayal. “Are you trying to endanger us all?”

Then, like a chastised child, Paya’s strength and will faded away. Her breath left her and she bundled her shaking hands, casting her deep gaze at the ground beneath her feet as she muttered the words, “...I’m sorry, Champion.”

“Wh-” Link mumbled in disbelief, in loss, watching the young Sheikah turn away from him and scurry off. He was watching his answers come so close as the tip of her tongue, only for her to swallow them again and take them with her when she departed.

“Why?” he mumbled, his voice weak in the emptiness and confusion left behind, in hopelessness. But that was only the tinder for the inferno that raged inside of him at constantly being left in the dark, at always being dissuaded from asking his own questions.

“Why?” Link said again, though this time it was a growl, an accusation, a demand. “What in the void is so damn important that it has to be kept secret? I’m so tired of this. I’m so tired of all the fucking deception!”

The Hylian’s words produced clouds of steamy breath in the bleak cold of the air, so it looked as though he was his own Calamity, burning on the inside, soon to set fire to the world in his hatred. His pointed ears were pinned back, his shining, blue eyes a sharp glare pointed in Dorian’s direction.

“Dorian,” Link hissed, somehow still sounding as though he was imploring, even through his offense. He was trying to keep it under control, as losing his temper had yet to gain him any ground in the past when it came to reasoning with others. “Come on. I saved your ass in Hateno Village. You owe me a little clarity.”

“Ah,” the Sheikah man breathed, his voice as placid and controlled as his appearance. “But it wasn’t your own decision to save me, was it?”

Link might’ve believed the man was completely serious, because he certainly had no indication as to anything otherwise. He was just about to go on to say, ‘Regardless,’ but the faintest smile at the corners of Dorian’s mouth made it at last apparent that it wouldn’t be necessary. It quickly faded away, however, leaving the man to sigh over something great and troublesome, but unspoken.

“Our people have been the keepers of many secrets for thousands of years,” he spoke solemnly. “We’ve done it for safety, for survival. It isn’t personal, Champion. It is simply that we cannot place our trust in the Hylian people, not even you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Link spat, shaking his head and thrusting his gnarled hands before himself in his confoundment. It wasn’t that he didn’t grasp the lack of faith in Hylian people, because that made perfect sense by Link’s personal experience. Still, the numbers weren’t adding up. “The Sheikah are Hyrulean people, loyal to the Hyrulean monarchy. If you couldn’t trust the Hylians, then why would your people be so adamant about the restoration of the crown?”

“That’s just it,” Dorian asserted, “Lady Impa remains loyal to the Monarchy of Hyrule. But that doesn’t mean that all Sheikah are so inclined to share that viewpoint.”
Link’s mouth fell open as though to produce a reply, but snapped shut again when none came to mind. Was it possible for him to be all the more confused, while also getting the distinct impression that he was on the precipice of epiphany?

“And what about you, Dorian? Where do your loyalties lie?” He was thinking back to earlier in the afternoon, to his meeting with the Sheikah leader. Dorian had been there, he’d spoken ill of the Guardians of Hyrule, but.. Link couldn’t recall if he ever directly mentioned wanting the Hyrulean Monarchy returned to power.

Despite the fact that Dorian was an incredibly reserved man, a torn expression was clear to see on his features. One hand reached up to stroke the scruff of his beard, and he let out an indecisive hum.

“Dorian,” he breathed at last. “I was once loyal only to my own people and those very loyalties let me down. As far as I can see, of all who’ve sought to rule, each have shown themselves to be ruthless, whether it be the Guardians of Hyrule, the Hyrulean Monarchy of old, or.. others.”

“Others..” Link repeated warily, his face going blank in the worst of realizations. It was only a hint, a suspicion, but it was enough to strike him full of fear. “Do you mean-”

“All I want now is to live my life in peace.” Dorian blurted his words to interrupt the Hylian’s own. He needed to make no request for Link not to speak what had been on his tongue. He didn’t need to hear the question, nor confirm or deny. Both the inquiry and the answer were clear enough. The Sheikah man averted his gaze, speaking up again in a lackluster way, “I am loyal only to the happiness and safety of my family. I have too little faith left for anyone else.”

Snapping his gaze back to Link, he decidedly added, “As far as what was said to you by Paya, my advice is this- trust that you never know the true loyalties and intentions of those who you believe to be your allies. And that your enemies know more about you than you may think. Apart from that, yes, the safest course of action would be to flee Kakariko Village.. because not everyone here is your ally. That is all I can say.”

The Hylian swallowed, then spoke, his voice a whisper on the still air, “Understood,” he said.

The walk back to the inn was short and hurried. The roughened paths through the village clicked beneath Link’s boots, resonating between the numerous buildings and the towering cliffs which stretched upward, into the dark of the night sky. The front door to the inn was gritty on its track as the Hylian slid it open and walked inside the warmly lamplit common area.

He found Estuu right where he left him, at the dinner table. The boy was perched contentedly there, his face buried in one of those Cursed Girl books that he loved so much. Link approached, but stopped short when he realized that their dinner dishes had been cleared away and replaced almost innocently with a bowl full of mighty bananas.

The Hylian didn’t know shit about subtlety, but for tonight, he was gonna pretend that he did. He froze for only a second, then carried on, closing the small space between himself and his Zora friend.

“Estuu,” Link began in a soft tone, not quite whispering, but speaking as though his intention was to make calm, casual conversation. He lowered himself back into his previous seat and leaned into the table, his posture relaxed. “I’m sure you’re enjoying yourself, Estuu, and I know we only arrived just last night, but.. hey, something just came up and it turns out that we’re gonna need to head back to Zora’s Domain tonight.”

The boy snapped the book shut, letting out a squawk of disappointment, pouting as kids did. Link
pretended that nothing was wrong, though the chuckle that was his reply came out somewhat nervously. “I know, I know,” he said.

Estuu’s tail swished behind himself in a sudden panic; Link was clueless as to why, because he’d been trying very hard to keep the boy from being unnecessarily fearful. Yet he was sure that if he told the kid that they were going to have to flee from Yiga Clansmen, Estuu would’ve been cooler than a chillfin trout about it, so that clearly wasn’t the issue.

“Okay, look,” the Hylian breathed, trying to emulate a chillfin trout, himself, “if you’ve got something you need to take care of before we go, you’ve got time. Do whatever you need and meet me in front of the stable. It’ll take me a little minute to get the horses saddled up anyway.”

Taking a breath, the Zora boy furiously nodded, then set to work digging through his nearby rucksack. Link only lingered long enough to see the boy pull out some scrap paper, upon which he began scrawling out a message of some sort.

With Estuu aware of the plan, Link eased away from the table, sauntering over to where the inn keeper typically lingered. They were busy with something, and so the Hylian waited, glancing over his shoulder to see Estuu gathering his items and rushing out the door.

Once the inn keeper turned their attention to the Hylian, Link smiled and placed a small handful of rupees on the counter, sliding them in the Sheikah’s direction. “I know I already paid for tonight,” he said, trying to be calm despite how tight his throat was around his voice, “but I think we’ll stay for another night. You know, we’re just enjoying the sights so much, checking out tomorrow would be much too soon.”

“Oh,” the inn keeper answered with an uncomfortably fake smile, accepting the payment. “That’s excellent. You’re certainly welcome for as long as you’d like to stay, Hylian Champion.”

It was pure luck that Estuu had followed the Sheikah girl to her house earlier that day. He’d been hoping to see her around the village sometime tomorrow, but of course, plans which he was counting on just loved to shift unexpectedly.

He hated that so much. If the Calamity had been born from carefully drawn out plans which were changed at the last moment, he’d gladly slay it himself.

Frantically, the boy rapped his knuckles against the front door of his Sheikah acquaintance’s home. She must have been there because not only was it dark outside, but it was dinner time and from what Estuu knew about her, she enjoyed providing food for her family. Also, the glow of lamplight was readily visible from the windows.

He shook his hand while he waited, trying to dislodge the sensation of hitting a wood surface from the bones of his fingers. This was why Zoras didn’t bother with doors. Doors were stupid.

When the unnecessary wooden blockade was slid open with a flick, Estuu was met with a very tall, stern-looking figure; a Sheikah man of a strong, wide build, whose face was very, very hairy.

“Can I help you, young Zora?” he asked, clearly confused as to why a Zora was at his door. And though he was outwardly calm, his seriousness thinly veiled a certain sense of... alarm. “You’re the Champion’s young charge, aren’t you? Did he send you here?”

The sound of hurried footsteps brought Estuu’s acquaintance into view. She squished around, assumably, her father’s legs, her gray eyes flashing with joyful recognition at the sight of Estuu. “Oh!
This is Koko’s friend.”

“Ah,” the man hummed, nodding his head in seeming understanding and stepping aside from the doorway. “I think he may have come to say goodbye, Koko. Well, come in, then.”

Estuu did as he was told, stepping into the Sheikah home with a few patters of his webbed feet, not catching the way the man looked around outside before he shut the door again.

The boy didn’t have time to linger, so despite that his hospitable acquaintance offered him tea, he could only decline with a shake of his head, hovering near the front door while thrusting his hastily prepared note into the young girl’s hands.

“What’s this?” Koko asked, unfolding the paper in order to answer her own question and decidedly reading it aloud. “Thank you for talking to me before. I had a lot of fun. I have to go back to Zora’s Domain now. I’m sorry that I couldn’t stay longer. I was hoping to make a friend. PS- my name is Estuu.”

The Zora cringed at the way his message sounded. He hated the brevity and directness of his statements. If he were capable of writing things out more quickly, he’d add a bit of flourish. Nowhere near the eloquence of The Red Herring, but reading their stories and using their statements to form his own voice all this time must have counted for something.

“Estuu,” Koko said with a smile, as though to address the Zora boy before her. He quickly interrupted in his own way by shaking his head at her, causing his forefins to flap from side to side.

“Oh,” she uttered, “I’m sorry, was that wrong?”

Luckily, he’d brought his writing instrument along, just in case he needed to amend anything or produce further replies. His new cloak had pockets- those were useful.

Taking back the sheet of paper, Estuu carefully scrawled out the proper pronunciation of his name, using the nearby door as a writing surface. Maybe they weren’t completely useless, after all. When he was finished, he handed the note back to the girl.

“I see,” she nodded her head while her eyes scanned over his annotation, then she turned a warm smile back to him, “Es-chu. We are friends, of course! Is it okay if Koko writes to you, like a pen-pal? There are always couriers who come and go; Koko is sure they would carry letters to Zora’s Domain. Maybe Koko can visit Zora’s Domain some day, too!”

She was certainly excited and that alone was.. a bit flattering. Estuu had never had friends before, even among other Zoras, who wouldn’t even have to make the effort to write to him in order to be his friend. But, apart from his surprise, he hesitated with the consideration that he was just awful at writing; he always made a hundred mistakes because his thoughts traveled at a speed that his hand could never match.

Brivere had mentioned that his left-handed penmanship was decent, though, so maybe there was room for improvement? He supposed that this was an opportunity for such. In agreement, he gave Koko an affirmative nod of his head and she grinned over it like she was even more excited than he.

Springing on her toes, Koko bolted over to where her bow and quiver had been tucked away and her hands fiddled about with something that Estuu couldn’t quite see from where he stood. It became clear once she turned and came back to him; she’d pulled a bright, red feather free from the shaft of one of her arrows and she held it out to the Zora boy.

“Here,” she gleefully insisted, “it’s a souvenir. It’s not much, but please keep it.”
Again, Estuu nodded his head, holding out his pale palm to receive the token. It was very different from what they adorned their arrows with in Zora’s Domain. Back home they used a feathered, white fin that was sheared off of a rather tasty, seasonal fish. The boy smoothed the feather between his fingers, feeling the soft fibers in an appreciative way, then he tucked it into the safety of his pocket, doing his best not to lose focus, lest he forget that Link had asked him to be quick.

Reaching up, the young Zora tugged free the beaded scarf he so often wore around his head, then he held it out to Koko, in return for the token she had offered. It didn’t really match with his new garment anyway.

“Wh- what?” the girl bleated, her gray eyes wide and shining in disbelief. “But this is so much nicer than what Koko gave you. Do you really have to outdo Koko like this?”

She accepted the gift nonetheless, though her grip was unsure on the fabric. Her arms extended away from her so to allow her friend to second-guess this exchange and though he did reach out to her, it was only to push her hands away, shoving the scarf closer to her so there was no question over his decision.

“Thank you, Es-chu,” she stated humbly, trying hard to be sincere and mature about it, though she was still standing on her toes in her excitement. He nodded one, final time, bidding her a silent farewell before he departed to find his Hylian traveling companion.

There was no reason for this to be a secret. Betaal had made the assertion much earlier, and in front of everyone, that she and Dunma would need to discuss a matter or two. So, in light of this being her duty, the violet Zora remained adorned in the shining silverscale of her armor, making no effort to sneak off to speak with her superior.

Things were perfectly normal.

At least, she’d believed so.

Betaal had decided upon renting a bed at the Ton Pu Inn, which Dunma couldn’t quite comprehend. In her mind, Firly Pond was satisfactory. It didn’t compare to the spacious abode she had back home in Zora’s Domain, which had been shared between herself and her father, but she could hardly bear to think of it as her home, let alone return, knowing that her father would be absent.

In any case, her sleeping standards had adjusted in all the time she spent in the communal cistern of the fort. Paying for board was an unnecessary expense and an indulgence.

How could Betaal even be enjoying her little excursion, knowing that she was only here because her superiors were conspiring against her?

When Dunma walked into the Ton Pu Inn, she found the place occupied by a few Hylian guests, but the mood wasn’t overly rowdy. It was just a handful of travelers nursing their drinks, turning their heads in intrigue at the sight of a Zora, despite that another Zora woman was already seated among them.

Dunma only spared the other a curious glance on her way to the inn keeper’s desk; she recognized the short, pale-scaled woman as one of the Undercity Zoras who’d traveled here with their group. She was sitting comfortably near a Hylian man of considerable stature and bulk, whose face was heavily furred with thick, black scruff.

“Is that one a girl?” he asked his apparent companion, his tone idly curious and not meaning any
harm, though Dunma always soured at those kinds of questions.

“Hm?” the pale woman turned to glance at Dunma, then back to her Hylian companion, coyly taking his mug of ale right out of his hand to steal a sip. “Oh, yeah, she’s a woman.”

“She’s tall. Pretty,” he commented.

“Hello,” Dunma spoke to address the inn keeper, hoping her own conversation could drown out the audible one going on behind her back.

“Did you need a bed? Or were you here to see.. Betaal, was it?” the woman asked, smiling plainly.

It was a curt interaction, professional enough for Dunma’s comfort and she confirmed with a single, sure nod of her head, saying, “Yes, Sergeant Betaal is my superior. I’ve come to report to her before my shift ends.”

“I see,” the woman answered. She didn’t actually care about the details, but reacted politely, regardless. Dunma could’ve said something incredibly lewd and this poor woman would likely respond the same. “She’s in the upstairs area that’s enclosed by the folding screens. If you could, please tell her that her bath water is ready, whenever she finishes with her meal.”

“Right, I’ll tell her,” the Zora woman muttered, acknowledging that the Sergeant was racking up even further expense than Dunma had previously thought. She was sure that Betaal’s stipend was generous, but could she really afford to be so frivolous, while her job was on the line?

Proceeding to where she’d been directed, Dunma climbed the stairs and walked around the unfolded, decorative screens; they looked like they were of Sheikah craftsmanship, artistically depicting the battle against the Calamity of ten thousand years prior.

Knowing Betaal, she probably adored those details.

Dunma found her wayward superior just behind the screens, as indicated. There was a very comfortable-looking bed with thick blankets and fluffed pillows, as well as a desk where a lantern was brightly burning. That was where Betaal was seated, going over a pile of records which Finley had kept until this point. She had her head leaned comfortably into one hand, in concentration, tilted just enough that her single eye could properly focus on the written documents.

“The inn keeper told me to tell you that your bath is ready,” Dunma quietly intoned, her smooth voice still eliciting a surprised jolt from the other woman, “when you finish your meal, sir.”

“Right,” Betaal chuckled nervously, glancing to where a bowl of stew and a slice of buttered bread remained uneaten. “I forgot all about the bath. I forgot all about my food.”

“Are these necessary expenditures, sir?” Dunma asked, the skin beneath her armored crest furrowing in disdain.

“I’m here,” the older Zora muttered with a half-hearted shrug, “I might as well enjoy it.”

Turning around in her chair, Betaal peered in the direction of where Dunma hovered. She had scarcely placed one toeclaw over the threshold which marked the beginning of her Sergeant’s space; all business, as usual.

“I’ve always wanted to see the world,” the blue Zora quietly muttered, her words bittersweet. “Here I am, far from home, and it’s lovely. The food, the drinks, the sights. My heart has always been adventurous, but this is this first time I’ve ever had the means.” A small smile painted her lips for a
quick instant, but it faded away like starlight at daybreak, leaving only the sad ember of her one-eyed gaze. “Did you need something, Dunma?”

“You mentioned wanting to speak with me earlier, sir,” the violet woman stated curtly, belying how desperately she needed to set her emotions and her anxieties free. “I thought it best to make certain that you hadn’t forgotten, as it seemed to be of importance.”

“Oh, right.. I did forget,” Betaal sighed at her own hopelessness. “Guess I’m getting used to having you do all the thinking for me.”

“Are you.. um..” Dunma’s yellow eyes averted from the other woman’s, going instead back to the colorfully painted screen. She took her first step into Betaal’s room, unprompted. “Are you going to tell me, ‘At ease,’ as usual, or.. are we bound to these professional pretenses now?”

“At this point, I just assume that you’re happier to keep them up,” the blue-scaled Zora commented with a scoff and a chuckle. Silly her for not acknowledging that her sweet Dunma simply liked being given the order to relax. “What’s on your mind, Dunma?”

“The same thing which must be on yours. And I can’t keep it all in my head any longer. I don’t know how you’ve been keeping it all to yourself, either,” the younger woman hissed, doing her best to keep her voice steady and lowered. “There must be some reason that we’ve both been banished from the fort and that Gaddison was put in control. Maybe they know about us and just needed us gone so that they could get ready to take disciplinary measures.”

“Hmm..” the Sergeant hummed, gesturing for Dunma to come in already, so that she could settle comfortably into her chair again rather than having to remain turned at an awkward angle. She watched the younger woman stride into the walled-off space and sit atop the plush blankets of the bed- real cucco feathers, Betaal had been told. Dunma folded her hands on her lap like she didn’t know what to do with them.

It struck Betaal quite odd that Dunma had been so confident and composed in the beginning and now she was coming apart at the seams.

“I considered the same thing.” Betaal spoke up at last, her tone calm and serious, “but I don’t think they would need to put us aside in order to take disciplinary measures. That would be investing more work than necessary. If they knew what went on between us and wanted to take action, they would dismiss me as quickly and easily as that, like it was no major loss. Then they’d boost you or Gaddison into my position.”

The chair creaked while Betaal leaned back and crossed her legs at the knee, idly kicking one foot while she considered her situation. “No,” she purred, her one eye narrowed in thought. “If this was about us, it’d be easy enough for them to handle it without sending us out here. It must be something else.. or at least I suspect as much. That’s all I really have, though. Suspicion.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Dunma breathed, nodding her head like she was glad to have heard Betaal’s thoughts. They were not just comforting, but reasonable as well. They soothed the younger Zora enough for Dunma to make eye contact between herself and the other, though not enough to smooth the worried furrow in her expression. “Still, I’m worried. I’m worried about our fort. I’m worried about you.”

“I have no doubt that if it comes down to it, you’d step up to shield me, for better or worse, and regardless of whether I wanted you to or not,” Betaal mused, still sounding much too bittersweet for Dunma’s liking, like she was already resigned to the worst.
“Why do you sound like it makes no difference to you?” Dunma snapped, unable to maintain her professional edge any longer, not that she needed to. She supposed it had been comfortable for her to be serious and reserved, and now she was falling short of her own rigid expectations. “How are you not more effected?”

Betaal’s set of sharp teeth were exposed as she let out a laugh in response to Dunma’s accusations, the edges glinting in the lamp light. “You’ve got it all wrong,” she uttered, her rough voice low in shame, “I’m so goddamn afraid, the only choice I have any longer is to be brave about it and to find ways to rationalize the fear away in order to keep being brave.”

“Betaal,” Dunma muttered, watching her Sergeant’s face fall into one palm while the strong width of her shoulders suddenly shook like she was crumbling. The younger Zora made a faint sound of displeasure, extending her hand toward the other woman, her reach falling short. Betaal drew her shining eye up, to look on the violet Zora, then she hesitantly slid her chair closer, so that she sat very near, facing the other.

Dunma took hold of her superior’s hand, glancing at the differences between them. Betaal’s hands were wide, large for her body size and marred by a web of fine scars upon the surface of her scales. Dunma’s were narrow and elegant, large enough for fine control of her weapon and nicked up here and there, so that her knuckles were paler than the rest of her.

The younger woman took a deep breath to steady herself, then she spoke the words, “You can’t just overpower fear, sir.”

“Of course I can,” Betaal replied with strange confidence. “I overpowered my fears the first time I kissed you. And every time after that..”

She hesitated, her words losing their certainty suddenly as her one-eyed gaze flickered up to meet Dunma’s. The Sergeant was fighting her own inner war, a desperate battle between her head and her heart, a blood feud between her fears and her foolishness..

A temptation that she couldn’t resist.

A sin that she was sure to be punished for, regardless..

“..and now, too,” she whispered, pushing past her innermost trepidation, leaning in and pressing her lips to Dunma’s own. The violet Zora acquiesced like she had been waiting in longing that she’d only barely kept bound, her arms twining around the Sergeant’s chest, pulling her from the chair and onto the bed.

“Am I indirectly hurting you?” Betaal muttered against Dunma’s lips as they flopped together onto their sides, sinking into the plush of the blankets. Her one eye was squeezed shut, her head tilted, and the violet woman whined while their lips were parted, pulling Betaal back into the kiss.

“Am I doing you harm?” the blue Zora asked once her mouth was free again, pulling away the bothersome armor from the other woman’s head, her hands moving toward the straps that kept her chestplate in place immediately after, in a rush. “That’s all I can think. And I care too much to ignore the possibility..”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” Dunma hissed to stifle Betaal’s needless worries. She hated that; the sound of Gaddison’s words on her lover’s mouth. That and, by Hylia, why was Betaal worried about her? She should’ve been worried about herself.

Dunma wriggled out of the armor, her own hands fussing over other pieces, but she was an expert by
now and stripped them off quickly and easily, unveiling that much more for the Sergeant’s big, battle-scarred hands to touch.

To further that very point, Dunma shoved the older woman down onto her back, then the violet Zora rolled herself on top, astride the other, grabbing at Betaal’s hands and pressing them forcefully to her violet scales.

“I’m not a delicate, fragile thing,” Dunma purred, both fiery in her own insult, yet desperate to reassure the other. “Have I been wounded? Am I healing? Yes. But that doesn’t mean I want to be treated softly. That doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t be taken seriously. Of all people, you should understand that.”

She didn’t give the other woman a chance to respond, choosing instead to bend herself over Betaal, lowering her lips back to those of her lover, and the blue Zora pushed up into the kiss in unfettered longing. She very apparently had nothing more to say, anyway.

Their kiss was a dulled flame reigniting, dry kindling that had been begging for rain, only to go up in an uncontrollable blaze, instead. Dunna’s palms lovingly cupped the other woman’s cheeks, while Betaal tugged at the violet Zora’s hips. Their tongues met shyly, mingling in a tender, needful way.

Dunma’s head bent lower, her position adjusting so that the heat of her mouth could follow the pale path of Betaal’s scales, down to the heart-shaped marking that adorned her chest. The violet Zora affectionately kissed the charming mark, belying her true intentions for a single second before she left a mark of her own alongside it, digging the sharp of her teeth in where Betaal could hide away the otherwise unabashed mark of love.

The blue Zora squirmed, one hand hurrying to press over her own mouth, lest a yelp of pleasure would be set free for the whole inn to hear. Her head fell back, and there in the opening between the divider walls, Betaal caught sight of a most still and silent shadow.

The woman’s eye widened in alarm, a gasp coming from her while she processed what she was seeing, and her hand went hastily, instead, to Dunma’s arm, tightly clutching at it to grab the other woman’s attention. Dunma’s head snapped up at her lover’s alert, and she, too, immediately saw what had set the other woman to panicked tension.

“T- Totikka,” Dunma hissed, her yellow eyes both pleading and glaring as quickly as she realized who was standing there. The black Zora was tense in his own state of confused shock, his golden gaze shining in uncertainty, in embarrassment that had stained his features in a dull flush.

He didn’t speak a reply, he turned and fled.

Dunma clambered from the bed, teetering and stumbling as she hurried to her feet in order to give chase. She rounded the corner, descending the stairs while Tottika was already at the foot and rushing for the door. The violet Zora practically leapt down three stairs at a time to catch up, slipping through the cracked door right behind the other, chasing at his tail until at last she reached him.

They were right outside the inn, at the bottom of the stone stairs, when Dunma grabbed Tottika by the arm, forcing him to turn around and look at her.

“Tottika,” she snapped, her voice sharp and demanding, “what are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” he echoed her own words back at her, effectively striking a blow to her chest with little more than that; the accusation in his tone, the offense. His eyes couldn’t meet hers, but his mouth snapped open to say more, though he only uttered the words, “Dunma, how could you? With
“That doesn’t matter,” the woman hissed. She hardly cared what he was about to say, because regardless, it didn’t matter at all. Still, she made an educated guess. “The fact that she is my superior changes nothing.”

“Yeah, but she’s also...” Tottika muttered, his features furrowed in confusion and disappointment. “Dunma, why would you do this? Why would you lower yourself to this? For the sake of gaining rank?”

“What?” she spat, her golden eyes narrowed, her pupils tightened into thin slits. “No. It’s because I want to.”

Dunma took a deep breath and let it out, trying to calm herself. “Tottika,” she breathed, patient and pleading, “please, don’t mention this to anyone.”

His own yellow eyes averted, then he pulled his arm free from Dunma’s grasp, turning on heel and striding off. She stood, watching him go, panicking and unsure of what she could do. Her arms folded around herself, her palms feeling the strange, soft sensation of being bare without her armor.

Dunma breathed a hopeless sigh and proceeded back into the inn, only now conscious of how vulnerable she felt walking past all who were present, who’d seen her unadorned by her glistening silverscale.

The ride back in the direction Zora’s Domain had been a long, arduous one indeed, but thankfully, the Champion and his Zora companion had made it through unscathed. It wasn’t because they’d been cut any slack at all, however.

Down the Sahasra slope, they had the misfortune to bypass a band of mounted bokoblins, which gave relentless chase, as mounted bokoblins did. Link pushed Estuu to ride ahead while he did what he could to hold the savage, little bastards off, only for the situation to turn from chaotic frustration into a complete and total clusterfuck.

The Guardian that Estuu had loosened up on their way to Kakariko at last burst free when no less than six people on horseback came galloping down the slope like keese out of the fissure which spilled monsters and darkness into their world.

With its lasers blazing with vivid light, slicing through the darkness around them, the Guardian brought the horseback chase to a fiery halt, which ended less fortunately for the bokoblins than it did for Link and Estuu out of sheer luck.

After that stress, the rest of the ride had been uneventful, but tiring, nonetheless.

“So we’re clear on which part of that we’re gonna tell Brivere?” Link asked while he secured their horses. There was a sheltered hitching area on Mercay Island now, not that Crazy Girl appreciated it in the slightest.

When the Hylian turned back to Estuu, the boy raised his one hand, forming a distinctive ‘O’ with his fingers. Link nodded his head with pride, his lips curving into a grin. “That’s right, none of it. Not shit.”

“Hmm,” the boy murmured in confirmation, reaching to rub at his tired eyes while he followed after the Hylian.
It was into the early morning hours, and though Link wasn’t exactly used to considering his own needs and what was best for him, with Estuu along, it gave his brain a nice workout in planning ahead in regards to resting, eating, and safety.

“You’re tired and it would be foolish to ask you to ride through twisted caverns and along narrow ledges in the dark for the sake of making it back to Zora’s Domain tonight.” Link explained his final decision to stay until morning at the fort, instead. Estuu might’ve been a kid, but hey, he deserved to know the reasoning behind things, rather than being expected to blindly obey figures of authority.

Link might have been imprinting a bit, but that wasn’t important.

“And, this way we can grab something to eat before going home, too,” the Hylian added. He, personally, enjoyed eating regularly and though Estuu was a tad bit more selective than him, until the Sheikah people arrived with the relief offerings, finding a meal wherever they could was important.

Estuu yawned, probably not listening that intently. He was right on the edge of passing out completely and if they didn’t make haste to the fort, Link might’ve ended up having to carry him.

“It’s not much further,” the Hylian reassured, picking up his pace and taking care to make certain that the tired boy could still keep up. Fort Boko was a tower of pale stone in the not-so-distant distance, luminous with the glow of firelight from inside.

A sentry at one of the scout towers greeted the Hylian and his companion before they even made it to the fort, significantly more calm than that edgy kid that Link remembered from the last time he visited.

“You there, Hylian,” he called out, “the fort is closed to Mercay Islanders at this time. The gates will be reopened in the morning.”

Actually, this might’ve been the same damn guy. Link’s ears were twitching in familiarity at the sound of his youthful voice, at the way he was trying hard to take himself seriously. That was even better, provided the guardsman wasn’t holding a grudge against Link for getting him in shit the last time.

“Hello again,” Link called in reply, faking a bit of friendliness. Even the sleepy, young boy perked up at how audibly fake it was, glancing up at Link as though to say, ‘What the fuck?’ Well, probably not, ‘what the fuck,’ exactly, but something of that nature. ‘I’m glad to see that you didn’t get fired for tying me up the last time. You seem a lot more calm about your duties, like you’ve seriously grown as a person since then. I’m proud of you, honestly.”

If he went on for much longer, he’d start speaking in Sidon’s accent.

“You’re.. the Hylian Champion, aren’t you?” the sentry warily responded, his eyes narrowing in distrust.

“Oh good, you remember me, too,” Link said with a smile. One corner of his mouth was twitching awkwardly, but he hoped it wasn’t that visible in the dull glow of the sentry lanterns. “She’s probably asleep, so you’ll have to give her my sincere apologies for the hour, but if you could just let Sergeant Betaal know that I’ve come seeking shelter, along with my young Zora friend, that would be most helpful.”

The guard paused in thought, maybe in hesitation, so for better or worse, Link added, “Or you could tie me up again, if that’s what you’re into. It still worked out last time, so I don’t have any compl-”

“That won’t be necessary,” the guard interrupted, his tone easily betraying his growing
embarrassment. “Come with me.”

The armored Zora climbed down from his lookout tower and Link fell in line with him as he was escorted to the front gates of the fort. He vaguely wondered if he was the one who got this guy bumped from the day shift to the night shift, instead. He kind of hoped that wasn’t the case; if there was anybody who’d gladly leak his whereabouts to the Yiga Clan, it’d be the guy who got a demotion because of him.

Estuu, meanwhile, was suddenly much less groggy. Instead, he was wide awake, walking unusually close to Link and ducking behind the Hylian in a way that wasn’t even close to subtle. Something clearly had him a bit shaken, which was rather odd, considering how calm he’d been after riding away from a fucking Guardian for the second time.

What was getting under this kid’s iron clad scales, exactly? Whatever it was, it must have been some serious shit.

The guard from out front led the tired duo inside the fort, then he left them in the care of another guardsman while he went to fetch the Sergeant. The wait was surprisingly short and also came with a surprise guest who Link hadn’t been expecting.

Instead of Sergeant Betaal, the sentry returned in the company of a lithe, pastel Zora who was still shining with wetness from having been asleep, but she greeted her guest as though he’d come at a reasonable hour.

“Master Link?” she purred, her voice a slow, sensuous purr that likely left all present breaking out in chills. Estuu certainly calmed right down, but Link didn’t know if the smooth, pleasing sound of the woman’s voice was the cause. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Uh…” he hummed in embarrassment that was unfortunately quite familiar. It was the same confusion which had struck him when he came face to face with Rivan for the first time. Being recognized, fondly even, yet not quite knowing by whom.

Thankfully, this time, he did have some minor inclination, despite his blanked out memory.

“No doubt about it,” he breathed, gesturing at the lavender Zora who’d come to welcome him to the fort. “You couldn’t possibly be anybody but Guardsman Gaddison. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember much about the past. Bazz has mentioned you on several occasions, though.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” she stated with a soft laugh. “I’ve heard that you had returned as well. Regretful that it’s taken us this long to run into one another. So you’re seeking shelter, then?”

“I was hoping to stay here for the night, yes,” he muttered, his embarrassment from before not abating as it should have. For some reason, under the intensity of Gaddison’s gaze, it felt as though he was asking permission to stay in her own home, in her own bed. Link had made himself at home in the bed of Zora royalty, yet this woman somehow radiated with a confusing mixture of battle-worn intimidation and sex appeal that made her terrifying. “Uhh, with your permission, I’m assuming.”

“Our home is your home, Master Link,” Gaddison stated, pleasantly enough, hardly even acknowledging the apparent effect she was having. But, maybe she had a similar effect on everyone, so it wasn’t anything new to her. Link was sure that she could walk into the throne room and have even the King kissing her feet.

“It’s good to see you, finally,” her sweet voice came out with a smile, then she gestured for the
Hylian to follow. “Come with me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Link replied, walking at her side while she escorted him into the much changed fort. It was quite different from what he remembered. The Zoras had obviously been working hard to make the previously run down relic of Hylian Architecture into a livable, powerful stronghold. He was impressed and surprisingly proud, proud as though they were his own people and their triumphs gave him reason to cherish his place among them.

It had initially been a whim, his decision to join in Sidon’s quest to clear the path to Zora’s Domain and take the fort, but Link was glad he’d done it.

“I see you’re still a big hit with young Zoras,” Gaddison idly commented, her honey gaze set upon the boy tagging along at Link’s heel. Her eyes turned back to the short Hylian walking near her, looking on him with fondness and nostalgia. “Are you still giving those swordsmanship lessons?”

“I don’t think Estuu is much of a sword fan,” the Champion answered with a shrug.

They quickly arrived at a row of tents and Gaddison paused in front of one where an unlit lantern was hung on a short, wooden post outside. She took the item in hand and easily lit the flame, adjusting it to a soft burn that provided dim but adequate light, then she pushed the flap open and gestured for Link to make himself at home with a soft tilt of her head.

“Your friend can stay here with you, or he can make use of the communal pool, if that suits him better,” she explained, following her Hylian guest into the tent and hanging the lantern inside to light the area. It was much more nicely put together than even the tent he shared with Sidon on the night they took the fort.

Gaddison turned her attention to Estuu, addressing him despite his silence. “It isn’t exactly luxurious, but considering submerged sleeping is still off-limits back home, it’s a blessing.” She pushed the tent flap back once more, gesturing in the direction of the sleeping pool. “It’s quite nearby, just that way a bit more. Up to you, of course, young one.”

“Mm,” Estuu nodded his head in confirmation. Clearly, the notion of underwater sleeping struck him with a great deal of excitement. Link hadn’t even thought to let him spend the night underwater while they were in Kakariko, so he felt a bit foolish, being so blind to the boy’s very obvious Zora needs.

Estuu wriggled out of his new clothes and handed the garment and his rucksack off to Link for safekeeping. His one hand sort of cupped the stump of his other arm, like the appearance of it was embarrassing for him now that he’d found a way to effectively hide it.

“You good?” Link asked, trying to fold Estuu’s cloak in a way that at least resembled neatness. The boy answered by pressing the tip of his tongue between his lips and blowing at the Hylian at the perceived overprotectiveness, and Link threw up one hand at the kid, and muttered, “Well, fine then.”

He darted off, seeming a bit intrigued at the notion of finding the sleeping area himself, and doing a bit of his own exploration. He was probably as excited as the Hylian over coming back to the fort, given that he was there for the battle to take it.

Watching the entire interaction, Gaddison placed one hand over her mouth and laughed softly, waiting for Estuu to leave before she let down the tent flap and turned her attention directly to Link. “That boy seems to be quite a handful,” she commented, taking a small pace closer to the Champion, folding her arms over her chest. “And you appear a bit worn down, Master Link. Still taking on too
“Hmm,” Link breathed an exasperated sigh, taking advantage of the single table within the tent, placing Estuu’s belongings down first, before he started disarming himself of his bow and sword. “It’s more like.. outside of Zora’s Domain and the Zora people, I don’t know who I can trust.”

His words came with bitter difficulty, like a shameful confession, yet also with a strange amount of ease, as though he couldn’t stand to keep them inside any longer. “Everyone else is keeping secrets or lying,” he grumbled, unfastening one strap after another, then he kicked off his boots with only a bit of stumbling. “Everyone else has their own motivations behind the burdens they put on me. It’s suffocating.. It’s exhausting.”

Link sighed, his shoulders slumping. He’d felt much lighter while he was ignoring all of these worries and now that he’d spoken them aloud, they were heavy once more. Gaddison listened patiently until the Hylian finished, then when he stopped speaking, she tilted her head in a thoughtful manner.

“Do you mind?” she asked, gesturing to the bed, and Link offered a welcoming gesture in turn. She seated herself at the edge of the cot, crossing one short leg over the other and focusing her warm, honey gaze on her troubled friend. “I understand, Master Link. Do you want my advice on the matter? I’ll refrain if you’d rather not hear it..”

“It can’t hurt anything at this point,” Link said with a scoff, tugging at his gloves with some difficulty. They fit pretty snugly, which he appreciated, but they weren’t easy to get off. He glanced over at Gaddison as he did this, grinning in a cheeky way that was hopefully permissible. “How would a heroine save the day, in my position?”

The Zora woman’s eyes widened in an unexpected fluster over the fact that Link actually remembered about that, and she let out a quiet laugh, the pale part of her face flushing to match the rest of her pastel scales. When she quieted, she cleared her throat and took a breath for the sake of steadiness, then she peered across the empty space between herself and the Hylian, patting the mattress surface at her side in welcoming.

Link obeyed her summon, coming to perch at her side. The smooth, warm timbre of her voice practically engulfed him from their proximity as she began to speak, her tone soft and calm. “When you’re unsure who you can trust, all you need to do is give the people who you suspect are your enemies a bit of information that they might want, then wait to see if they jump on it,” she stated.

“I’m not sure I follow,” the Hylian answered, after a short pause. “Could you be.. more specific?”

“Oh course,” the Zora woman nodded easily, like it was but a small favor for her to offer this advice. “Take.. the people of Mercay Island, for example. They’re a rather varied assortment, all different races and cultures. I’m sure it has beneficial aspects, but it also makes it all the more easy for the snakes to hide in their ranks. They are all so different from one another, so much so that nobody truly sticks out.”

Link’s pointed ears perked and the skin between his brows knitted softly in his continued confusion. Slowly, daringly, he turned his shining, blue gaze to actually look upon Gaddison, hoping his expression spoke his uncertainty. He had yet to follow what she was trying to express, but suddenly he was much more nervous over the fact that he left his Crazy Girl on Mercay Island.

“So, how do you know who among them is an enemy and who is a friend?” Gaddison questioned, rhetorically, of course. “You do it with the use of false information. Give them something that an enemy would just be waiting to hear, let’s say.. a place you might be headed off to or a time when many burdens, as usual?”
you might be vulnerable. The information is false, of course, and you’ve taken care to distribute it to only one source. Then, you wait to see if somebody acts on the false information that you fed them. If they do, suddenly you know where your leak is and exactly who you can’t trust.”

As Gaddison explained, Link began to clue in. It was a deception technique, something that he’d been nowhere near crafty enough to figure out on his own. He opened his mouth and breathed a quiet, “Ohh,” while he processed this advice, his previous confusion melting away and leaving nervousness in its wake.

“That’s underhanded as shit,” he concluded, nodding decisively while his mouth formed a tight line. “You’re terrifying.”

The pastel Zora responded, herself, with a rather proud chuckle. “Well, I hope it helps,” she said through the bubble of her laughter, her utter sweetness contradicting the fact that she was truly crafty and conniving.

“For tonight, don’t worry,” she confidently declared, placing a gentle hand upon Link’s shoulder. “I will personally guard you until morning. I won’t allow any harm to come to you, Master Link.”

“I believe you,” he breathed with a nod, his tone remarkably sincere in his gratitude. “Thanks, Gaddison.”

“My pleasure,” she purred, getting up from the Hylian’s cot, allowing him to rest. She remained long enough to dim the lantern flame until it died with a tiny stream of smoke, then she pushed back the tent flap and exited, going off to don her armor and ready her weapon.

Despite the heroine’s protective reassurances, however, Link got up to retrieve his sword, decidedly taking it to bed with him. He’d sleep that much easier knowing that the ability to kill a person was just within arm’s reach.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

It was a day of numerous meetings, indeed. Two siblings came together to discuss a matter of import, yet it ended in disagreement. An awkward discussion meant to be held professionally turned personal, instead. One who rarely ventured to the surface from the Basilica came, not with the intention of catching up with Uppercity friends, yet that became the result, nonetheless. And, most importantly, the Hylian Champion ascended his lover's tower with the hope that his Prince would awaken, but in the meantime, a new alliance was forged between himself and Sidon's Knight.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this turned into a two-week chapter, but just like last year around this same time, I was attending a convention. Thank you all for your patience. Please enjoy~

“...You know what I heard?” one silver-scaled Zora muttered under her breath, a tremor of excitement to be heard despite her hushed tone. She leaned nearer to the other Undercity Zora at her side, the spear in her hand relaxing for an idle moment. “Some Uppercity was complaining about how badly she was treated by one of the Hylians who live here.”

She chuckled, her fins puffing in amusement. Her voice was carried on a breeze, drifting through the willow vines, around the rustle of naked branches. “Honestly,” she spat, “she wasn’t even treated badly, just mildly inconvenienced.”

“That’s rich,” purred the other Undercity Zora, a smile curving their lips while their silvery eyes remained focused on their task. Their own spear was raised in waiting for the hope and promise of their next meal. “Good, let them see how it feels to be a second class citizen for a change. Nice dose of perspective for them.”

From somewhere beyond where the pair of Undercity Zoras stood fishing and quietly conversing, a lone guardsman paced passed like a shadow in silverscale, overhearing their conversation, even despite the whispered enunciations. It seemed that he was becoming privy to plenty of discussions and acts meant to be secret as of late, and his sharp teeth chewed at the inside of his cheek in resentment.

Tottika had always gone unnoticed, so that much was nothing new. He often drifted here and there without drawing anyone’s eye. He was constantly underestimated, never taken seriously, and that was precisely why people said and did whatever they wanted around him.

People even mistook him for Torfeau’s younger sibling, despite that they were clutch mates. He hated correcting people, however, because of the inevitable jokes about Torfeau being kind not to eat him when she hatched. He also hated having to inform people that he actually hatched first, because it sounded incredibly insecure, not that he wasn’t.
The young man soon left the scenery of Firly Pond behind in favor of the cabin which apparently belonged to the Hylian Champion, where he would find Torfeau. She was moving between tasks as usual and failed to notice when he stalked inside. He had to clear his throat two different times to finally turn her yellow gaze in his direction.

“Hey, sis, can we talk?” he asked, trying hard to reflect seriousness, though the boyishness of his voice often rendered his attempts fruitless. Bitterly, he crossed his arms before his chest, flicking his tail before he added, “You know, if you’re not too busy with your important responsibilities and all.”

“Tottika, don’t be like that,” the other black Zora said with a little sigh, too patient for her own good. “I don’t get a choice what duties I’m assigned.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the young man unfurled his arms, batting one hand at his sister, “this isn’t about you, I just need some.. advice.”

Torfeau, though she was deep in her attempts to properly retain the Sergeant’s tutelage when it came to making reports, she placed her paperwork neatly aside, and welcomed her sibling to the table with a gesture. He was still glancing over his shoulder in suspicion, unaware that the house was always empty at this time of day, then finally he settled in a seat across from the other guardsman.

Tottika placed his hands upon the table surface, folding them for a moment, then moving them apart again when he leaned closer, keeping his voice down low. “While I was at the fort, Guardsman Gaddison approached me and asked me to keep an eye on Sergeant Betaal and Dunma. She said it was important.”

“Why?” A confused furrow was hidden beneath the shine of Torfeau’s armor. She, too, bent herself nearer, her yellow eyes searching the troubled expression on her brother’s face.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Tottika whispered, shrugging. “Something happened back home- some kind of attack.”

“An attack?” the woman repeated, her nerves tightening, her sense of duty coiling in a guilty way. To her, Tottika didn’t sound worried or upset and that was probably the most troubling part of all.

“Yeah,” he confirmed with a nod, “..and I think that they’re suspected of having something to do with it.”

“I can’t believe that,” Torfeau shook her head, her forefins moving against her cheeks. “Dunma? That girl is as straight-laced as they come.” Torfeau couldn’t say that she knew the Sergeant quite as well, but her impression of Betaal was that she was simple, focused on her work and too busy for mischief.

“Well, you might think that because you don’t know what I know,” the young man hissed, speaking his words like they’d been physically painful for him to keep on the inside. “Torfeau, listen, last night I caught Dunma in bed with the Sergeant.”

“...what?” the woman uttered, perplexed.

“Yeah. Can you believe that?” One of Tottika’s palms patted the table while he spoke. “She must be doing it to gain rank or something because, I mean.. the Sergeant is.. well she’s a..” he paused, choosing to mouth the words, ‘Undercity Zora.’

“I don’t think so, Tottika,” Torfeau said with a flustered, disappointed sigh. “Not everybody is out to gain rank. Plus, Dunma’s grandfather is part of the King’s Council. She’s a noble by blood. She wouldn’t need to do anything like that for those reasons. That and her father was so close to the
Guard Captain, Bazz might as well be her godfather. Did you even stop to think about this at all?"

“All I know is that Guardsman Gaddison is suspicious of them and that must mean something.” As far as he was concerned, his sister just didn’t want to see what was right in front of her. “Guardsman Gaddison wants me to return to the fort after my mission here in Hateno Village is done, in order to report my findings to her. Maybe if I let her know what’s going on between those two.. I’ll finally earn that promotion that I’ve been working toward.”

“I think if you really want to earn a promotion, you should try doing it honorably, not by snooping into peoples’ personal affairs,” the Zora woman stated without any hesitation. “If something of that nature is going on between Dunma and the Sergeant, it’s their business. Nobody else’s.”

“Well, it’s easy for you to talk about doing things honorably, isn’t it?” Tottika snapped, his eyes avertin in his mounting frustration. He impatiently tapped his fingerscales. “You got to fight in the battle for Hateno. You got to be hailed as the one who led the glorious charge.”

“Tottika?”

“You’re the one who was given the chance to show the Guard Captain what you’re capable of, but you forced me to turn around and go back to the Fort, so that I missed out on all of it.” The young man stabbed an accusing finger in his sister’s direction, his throat tight in his attempt to keep his voice lowered. “All of that and you didn’t even want to be in the guard. I did. I’m the one who wanted this, not you.”

“Tottika, I don’t know what to tell you,” Torfeau mumbled in defeat, shaking her head and putting her hands up in response to her brother’s nonsense. “You asked for my advice and I gave it to you.”

With a huff of defeat, Tottika stood from the table and walked away.

; 

“We’ve located the Undercity Zoras who defected during the attack, not that they made it a point to hide themselves,” Gaddison explained, her voice low and smooth. “They seem to have settled on Mercay Island and from what we’ve observed, they don’t appear to have any intention of leaving any time soon, which I suppose is in our favor. It shouldn’t be a difficult matter to march a small force out in order to make arrests.”

“Right,” the Guard Captain breathed, seated across from the pastel-scaled Zora. He’d taken the day to come down to the fort, in order to have this meeting with Gaddison in person. Back home, they had yet to get much information out of the captured defectors and at this point Bazz had lost hope that their efforts were making any difference.

“We already have the numbers necessary to keep the whole matter contained, but we could benefit from having the ranks bolstered by some of the more senior guardsmen from the Domain. Maybe we could even requisition a few extra hands from the Knight Orders?” the lavender Zora continued, her honey eyes peering across the table at Bazz. He didn’t meet her gaze and instead, his own stare was drifting, his chin pressed into his palm while his features were furrowed in discontentment.

It wasn’t unusual behavior for him, but it was out of character for his typical gloom and doom to bleed over into his work hours. Gaddison paused, the tip of her tongue brushing along the edges of her fangs in consideration while she decided whether or not she wanted to breach whatever had the black Zora so distracted.

“Bazz, are you listening?” she queried in a serious tone, much like an instructor would address a
distracted student.

“Of course,” the man answered, straightening as he did. His voice was a bitter rumble and the yellow of his eyes was dull and tired. Gaddison pressed one elbow to the table, leaning nearer, offering a look of suspicion and disbelief. Finally, Bazz replied with his full attention, raising a questioning stare to the face of the Zora woman.

He almost couldn’t bear it. The tension of professional behavior between them was a burden and she was an unreachable light, dancing at the surface of some deep, dark trench that he could never escape. The world was descending with him and he couldn’t prevent it. Every day he saw more of his strength wither and it was out of sheer pride that he’d failed to admit to it, yet.

Disasters to be managed were piling up, while meaningful connections in his life were now countable on his fingers. Kodah’s friendship had been rescinded, Kayden was dead, Dunma had left the Domain. All that was left of Rivan were black, ashen stones where his pyre had burned, and having to come back to this place, having to see that again had Bazz ever so weak. He didn’t have tears enough to resolve that pain, no matter how often he wept over it.

And then there was Gaddison, out of his reach by choice. She was still focused and composed despite everything. She didn’t seem to despise Bazz, regardless of how furiously he’d pushed her, but she wasn’t the kind of person who needed to hate you for it to sting. Her apathy was a deep enough cut that it pierced the Guard Captain to his very soul and unveiled everything vulnerable in him.

She was the one person he had left to cling to, but he’d been forced to acknowledge that he had a way of creating distance instead of lessening it.

Bazz breathed a relenting sigh, casting off his own pretenses, or else dropping aside what he lacked the strength to maintain any longer. “Gaddison, can I ask you something?”

Her pretty lips curved into a small smile, to keep her teasing intentions from being concealed. “Since you can’t seem to focus on the task at hand, you might as well.”

“Do you think that I’m...” Bazz began, pausing only long enough to consider the best word for self-description, “cruel? Or irredeemable?”

A breathy chuckle came from the pastel Zora. She narrowed her eyes, the soft skin beneath the crest of her brow furrowing with confusion. “Bazz, where is this coming from?”

“Just tell me,” he pressed her, beyond serious about his need for this answer. He allowed his gaze to remain locked with hers, imploring, delving, reaching for whatever mercy she had to offer. “..yes or no?”

“Yes,” she stated, the answer rolling easily off her tongue. “You’re controlling and vengeful. You have a major superiority complex and on top of all that, you’re gloomy as the void.”

Bazz’s lips parted just enough that the shine of his fangs was visible. A long, slow breath was released from that tiny opening, then his lips tightened together and he nodded his head in understanding, his tail swaying gently where it hung.

“..I should’ve known that this would be the one time you’d choose to be brutally honest,” he replied, after considering his words. It was fine. He hadn’t wanted Gaddison to lie or stroke his ego. He knew that she wouldn’t bother, and that was precisely why he’d asked her. He’d simply thought better of himself, evidently.
A fond laugh broke through Bazz’s dreariness and he peered across the table to see that Gaddison’s amusement hadn’t waned. He might’ve mentioned that it was equally cruel of her to laugh at him while he was down, but maybe he deserved the mockery.

“Who left you feeling so ashamed of yourself?” the Zora woman cooed. “..was it Kodah?”

Bazz likely gave himself away with how his gaze drifted and the way his head turned aside; he doubted that Gaddison would ever let that childhood crush go, despite that it no longer held any relevance. He was only lucky that she had no awareness of certain things which occurred between Rivan and himself.

He was unlucky that he’d taken care never to bring it up a second time to Rivan. Now he’d never know if his friend had even recalled.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bazz answered at last. “It looks like she was right and as such, I have no business calling myself her friend.”

All Gaddison could do was roll her eyes over it; if ever there was a man who couldn’t be reassured, it was Bazz. An impatient kind of sound was breathed from the Zora woman, then she stood from her seat, striding around the table in order to perch at Bazz’s side, instead. His eyes warily followed her, questioning her motives with visible caution, only for him to feel foolish when she outstretched her hand to touch him rather gently.

The tips of Gaddison’s fingerscales traced the edge of one, black forefin, then her palm fell upon his shoulder, anchoring her as she leaned in to kiss the other. “Maybe you’re cruel, maybe you’re damaged, but if we’re being honest,” she whispered against his lips, parting herself from him only enough to watch the way his eyes closed under her touch, “..I always appreciated those aspects of your personality.”

Bazz drew away sharply at the woman’s last words, mistrust plain to see in the tight lines of his slitted pupils and the doubtful curl on his scarred lip. “When we were kids, you made it your mission to follow me wherever I went, criticizing me for all of the awful things I did,” he snapped, confounded, “and more often than not, you beat the living daylights out of me, in order to teach me a lesson. I think that’s the opposite of appreciation.”

“But you liked it, didn’t you?” Gaddison cut off her lover’s dubious rambling with her own sly assertion, a clever grin curling at the corners of her mouth. Curious, careful fingertips drew upward, to gently trace the edge of the stitched wound which bisected the other Zora’s face. “..All of the things you did back then were for the sake of attention and having your peers acknowledge that you were strong. And in following you around, challenging you at every turn, I gave you attention, regardless of whether or not it was the attention you were seeking.”

A quiet grumble came from the dark-scaled Zora and he drew away from the woman’s touch, his self-consciousness impossible to still. He’d almost sent his Lieutenant to take care of this meeting in his place, because he’d wanted to allow his wound to heal a bit more before he let Gaddison lay eyes on it.

“I know, because I was after the very same thing,” Gaddison continued, regardless, choosing to place her hand against Bazz’s cheek instead, to draw his focus back to her. When his yellow eyes went to hers, he found a softened look upon her countenance, an expression that he typically would know better than to trust. He wanted to throw away his better judgement, however.

The woman’s voice was lowered to a whisper that was soft and sultry and she drew Bazz nearer, so that their foreheads touched with a quiet, metallic clink, and she let her words fade into another kiss
of gentle reassurance. “I wanted attention and to be acknowledged as strong and just. By providing me with an enemy to conquer, you allowed me to be the heroine, and I loved it.”

Her lips pressed tenderly to his, and she ignored his attempts at shyness brought on by the mark etched into his face. She payed particular attention to where Bazz’s lip had been cut, touching carefully, doting over him. Maybe she didn’t say it, but she was glad that he was safe. When she drew back, she lingered near enough for him to feel the warmth of her breath on his scales, uttering her words like a sly secret, “...And I love you, even if you are still my worst enemy, at times.”

“Gaddison..” The sound of her name was a doleful sigh from somewhere deep in the Zora man’s chest. His hesitation melted away and he drew her into his arms, holding onto her like she was the answer, like she was his epiphany, like she held the power to make him both strong and so, so weak at the very same time.

Bazz’s younger self would certainly balk if anyone had ever tried to convince him that the same hands which had brought him so many bruises and bloody lips would one day offer comfort and affection. He’d be less surprised to know that his own fall would be required for her to have what she ultimately desired.

In silence, he reconsidered the ultimatum she’d offered once before, but chose to say nothing of it. Instead, he smoothed his palms down the other Zora's back, drawing her in nearer so that she was made to transition from her stool, to being seated upon his thighs. His grip shifted, his fingerscales clinking against the armor which covered the other Zora’s gills, then they moved down once more to grasp at her hips while his mouth lowered to her neck, nipping at the soft pale of her scales.

In a way that was both bold and incredibly quiet, Bazz whispered the words, “I know we’re technically on duty..”

Predictably, Gaddison let out a breathy, little laugh, sweetly purring her reply, “You know just what I like, don’t you?”

; “Oh, if it isn’t Loreen!” Tula called out at the sight of the approaching Apostle, waving at the other young woman with a smile. At the President of the ‘Prince Sidon Fanclub’s’ notice, the other pink Zoras present turned in the direction of the short, pale Zora woman, beckoning her over.

“We haven’t seen you in such a long time,” Tula continued, once Loreen sheepishly wandered over, clearly burdened by her scholarly duties, as always. The Apostle had one of those waterproof carry bags full of documents slung over one shoulder and her pale cheeks were flushed a soft violet from the weight.

“Right?” the short girl, Laruta, chimed in, poking her tongue between her lips. “Loreen’s always so busy with her Apostle work these days.”

“Ah, hello everyone,” Loreen greeted them, feeling that their faces had grown unfamiliar since the last time she spent any time with them. Tula was the exception, of course, because she often visited the Basilica, running errands for Trello in preparation for the seasonal festivals. With a heaved breath, Loreen set her bag of documents momentarily aside. She supposed she had some time to kill, so it couldn’t hurt to take a minute to rest.

“Speaking of having not seen somebody in a long time..” Tona carried on as though the conversation hadn’t been interrupted. She had a nasally voice which became all the more exaggerated when she got excited. Loreen straightened her shawl, adjusting the Crest of Naydra which adorned it, then she
turned to Tona, a sly, knowing smile resting on her lips.

“...who here is missing our dear Prince Sidon?” Tona whined, bundling her hands and bouncing on her toes. The other women all swayed and flapped their tails in agreement, the sounds coming from them somewhere between squeals and coos.

“It’s almost time for him to wake up, right?” Loreen’s little voice squeaked.

“I heard today was the final day of his rest,” Tula confirmed in a very official day, nodding her head.

“Ohh! I can’t wait! He’s going to be even taller and more handsome,” Tona added, fanning herself.

“I’ll bet he’ll have some good ideas about how to fix all of the terrible things going on in Zora’s Domain as of late,” Loreen added, succinct and thoughtful. Her studies might have been focused around Zora history and culture, but her services were often requisitioned in the grand chambers, which were still lined with those ailed by the Water Blight. The spread had been slowed significantly by the care the Zora people were taking in avoiding it, but the trouble still felt to be far from over.

For a solemn moment, the other ladies nodded, softly ‘hmming’ in agreement, though they remained tight-lipped about the subject matter, apparently bereft of any further contribution. Loreen wasn’t so surprised. She was a Goddess-Blooded Zora, herself, but because she served the Basilica, she’d seen much more than these girls, who were mostly kept at a safe distance in the Uppercity.

Even so, Loreen was quickly overcome with guilt for ruining the positive vibe. It was perhaps a bit silly to feel bad for being the downer, but nevertheless, she couldn’t help herself, and searched nervously for the first new subject possible to fill the silence and restore the previous energy.

That first new subject came in the form of a passerby; a finely built Zora man with shining, golden scales and radiant armor. His crisp, observant gaze drifted in Loreen’s direction, like he had felt her eyes upon him, and knowingly turned to greet her appreciative stare with a welcoming glance of his own.

Actually, it was more of a passing glance, laden with questioning and mild discomfort that the Knight kept mostly hidden, but Loreen could dream.

It was Brivere, wandering past, likely on his way to his guard shift. He was in the company of the Hylian Champion and they were walking together in quiet comfort.

Loreen cleared her throat, though her voice still came out as a chirp, “Hey, I know that this is the Prince Sidon Fanclub,” she stated, her hovering suggestion turning all eyes in her direction, “but... I don’t know, did any of you ever consider... that Knight who’s always by his side?”

“Oh...” Tula hummed, glancing from the white-scaled Apostle, to the other women in her social circle, then hesitantly in the direction of Brivere’s retreating back. “You mean Brivere?”

“Yeah, him,” Loreen grinned, swishing her tail so that the beads of her shawl clicked and glimmered with her movement.

“What about him?” Tona hummed, not so impressed.

“Yeah, ew,” Laruta stuck her tongue out again, mostly just following the crowd in the way she reacted.

“What do you mean?” The pale Apostle took a perplexed step back, her feet widening apart like she was taking on a fighting pose, though it was to steady herself. The bangles around her wrists jingled
when she thrust her arms out, gesturing in the direction in which Brivere had disappeared. “Have any of you ever looked at him? Like, actually looked?”

One thing was for sure; she had looked. Actually, she’d been thinking about him on and off ever since the night of the Blood Moon. He’d occupied her thoughts like a tide that came and went, a gentle whisper that was non-invasive and polite, but ever so persistent. He was yet another face that regularly visited the Basilica, so even if she’d wanted to chase thoughts of him from her mind, he’d still be there, passing her by in silence, reminding her that he existed.

She often reflected on how valiantly he’d faced off against that hinox, only for it to prove to be more than a match for him. She’d reviewed all of the reports as part of her duties in record-keeping, finding that Brivere had a way of covering for all of the people who had set him up for failure that night. Still, Loreen knew better. She’d heard passing comments about how his own Knights had rejected his command during the incident.

It wasn’t difficult to believe. The man had a reputation and was openly disliked by many people; where Loreen was concerned, it was time to change that.

“He just looks like a total grouch.” Young Laruta stamped one foot, crossing her arms over her tiny chest.

“He isn’t beaming and beautiful like our Prince,” Tona added with a little coo.

“No, but consider this,” Loreen chirped, a confident smile upon her softly painted lips. “Brivere’s intense, brooding demeanor is a perfect compliment to Prince Sidon’s warmth and charm.”

“But wasn’t his mother like.. a Soul Bond breaker?” Tona questioned, her eyes narrowed, her voice turning very nasal again, but this time in dubiousness which bordered abhorrence.

“It is well-known that he cheated to win the tourney which elevated him to the position of being our Prince’s Knight,” Tula stated in a half-hearted way, shrugging her shoulders guiltlessly, like she was ‘just stating facts.’

“I think that if you believe our Prince to be the just, noble, righteous man that we all know he is, you’d know better than to assume he’d even accept a cheater as his Knight,” Loreen bluntly spoke up in retort. It wasn’t actually a well-know fact that Brivere had cheated, mostly a widely accepted rumor.

That was how ideas worked. They occurred, they spread, and if they were repeated enough times, with enough certainty, they steadily became accepted as truth. So, by that same logic, if Loreen didn’t back down from her own ideas, they could gain ground in the very same way.

“There must be more to it,” she stated, pounding one tiny fist into the opposite palm, her passion suddenly blazing, spilling from her much faster than the other women could reject it. “Honestly, the mystery of it all is killing me. Plus, sure, his mother committed a taboo act, but just think of it in terms of character development and story. She was a flawed woman and her tale of romance was one of tragedy. She lost her beloved on the day of their marriage, then in loneliness and isolation, she fell into the arms of another man for some shred of comfort, to remember what it felt like to be loved, for just one night, but in doing so, she set the stage for her own first born’s tragedy.”

“Girl, take a breath, please,” Tona said with a chuckle, bringing one hand in front of her mouth. At this point she was simply amused that a small Zora such as Loreen could contain so much excitement inside of herself.
Loreen laughed right along, swallowing to wet her throat from being suddenly so wordy, her cheeks flushed now in embarrassment.

“Loreen, that sounds exactly like something the Red Herring would write,” Tula breathed, folding her arms and kicking one foot, her gaze suddenly distant, though a small smile curved her lips. “I kinda wish Dunma were here, she’d love this stuff.”

Tula took a breath to regain her own composure, then she reached over to prod the short, white Zora near her side. “Alright, Loreen, we’re listening. Tell us about this Knight of yours.”

“I don’t know, I guess I’m just kinda smitten,” the Apostle confessed, her head falling forward like she’d been defeated by her own overwhelming excitement. “There’s something about him and the way he bravely shoulders the burden of his own life’s shortcomings. Sidon has his own hardships, sure, but it’s clearly not enough to dampen his vibrant spirit. Brivere, on the other hand, has a heavy, vulnerable heart that he conceals behind his sturdy walls. He’s a deep trench of mystery, yet at the very same time he’s a constant, loyal presence at our Prince’s side, supporting our lovely Sidon in all he does.”

“Ohh, you’re right, Loreen. On the night of the Champion festival, Prince Sidon gave that sweet, heartfelt speech about Princess Mipha, and one of those crotchety geezers tried to speak over him, as usual,” Tona blurted, while Tula placed her hand over her mouth to conceal a little laugh. “But Brivere was there, and he stood up for his Prince, lending his strength to allow our wonderful Sidon to share those bold and glorious ideas of his.”

“Yes!” Loreen nodded vigorously. She hadn’t actually known about that, but she was glad to hear it, now. “See, that’s just what I’m saying!”

“Wow, I never saw this before,” Tula muttered in consideration. “I thought he was just another Knight doing a job and seeking his own personal glory. But he really cares about Prince Sidon, doesn’t he?”

“Well now I kinda want him to wrap me up in those big, muscular arms,” Tona muttered in embarrassment which turned to amusement while Laruta and Tula laughed. Even Loreen couldn’t help but titter over how quickly and sharply the other woman’s opinion had shifted.

“Wrap you up…” Laruta snickered, peering up at the much taller women with a sly grin, “…or Sidon?”

“Oh my gosh, I’m squirming right now! I can’t believe you said that!” Tula blurted, overcome by a fit of giggles, her pale cheeks burning with violet warmth. Now she would have much more than just thoughts of Sidon to keep her up at night.

“Oh, but I’ll bet that even though Brivere would give anything to shroud the Prince in his strong embrace, because Prince Sidon is so much larger than him, it’s totally impossible,” Tona goaded the other women on, so that they formed a twittering chorus of bubbling laughter.

“Brivere’s arms are a symbol for tragic shortcomings and unrequited love!” Laruta squealed aloud, dancing about in joyful celebration.

Loreen quietly took a step back, gathering her documents and securing the bag around her shoulder once more. She had a funny feeling that she’d inadvertently created a monster here, yet she couldn’t help the way a sly grin crawled over her countenance as she slipped away, leaving the group to simmer in their bold, new ideas.
It was a calm, sunny afternoon. The air outside was cold, but within Sidon’s quarters, it was comfortably cozy. The expansive windows now bore covers which were elaborate in design, allowing light to shine softly through and casting it in tones of violet and rosy gold. In one corner of the room, there was a silvery cauldron where fire-charged rubies had been gathered up, so that they were luminous with radiant warmth.

Link had arrived in Zora’s Domain much earlier that morning, returning his traveling companion to his home. The Hylian lingered about for a short while, clumsily breaching the subject of Estuu’s and Brivere’s derelict dwelling in a way that was successfully embarrassing for both of them. The Knight used the stuffiest of words imaginable to explain that, because their people were very low in luminous stone, which once was quite plentiful, they hadn’t been able to fix up the extensively damaged home.

The holes had been covered and Brivere seemed to expect that it would remain that way for some time.

But Link was more hopeful. Even despite the threat posed by the Yiga Clan, he’d been successful in acquiring emergency relief from the Sheikah people for the sake of his Zora allies. And he’d already taken care of the problems faced by the Gorons, so perhaps asking for their aid on behalf of the Zoras was a good next step.

It was an unfamiliar sensation, the feeling of stepping up and taking responsibility for dilemmas, and actually making efforts to solve problems, rather than shrugging them all off and remaining apathetic to everything around him. Link hated to admit it, but he supposed that in being away from Sidon for a time, he really had learned how to emulate him, even slightly. He’d begun to live by the Prince’s example, in order to keep him around in spirit.

Link took a deep breath, then let it out in an impatient sigh; some things surely would never change. He snapped the book in his hands shut, setting it aside upon the soft of Sidon’s sheets. After decidedly following Brivere to work, the Hylian set to the task of waiting for his beloved Prince to awaken, passing the time by diving right into the first ‘Cursed Girl’ book.

But, several chapters later and the massive, red Zora hadn’t stirred. He hadn’t even twitched in his sleep. He was incredibly still, serene and burning crimson-gold in the glow of the afternoon sun. His body had reached an equilibrium, so that he was no longer growing or shifting and the tears in his flesh had smoothed entirely. He just appeared to be, actually, soundly asleep, his tail curled, his arms bundled, his face turned to one side so that his fins folded slightly and his pale cheek was pressed into his pillow.

Finally, when not even ‘The Cursed Girl’ could entertain Link’s impatient mind, the Hylian flopped onto his side, facing his beautiful, slumbering Prince. He reached out, rubbing one callused palm along the rough surface of Sidon’s forefin, then he quietly whined the words, “Come on, Sidon. Today is the day.”

It was more of a grumbled demand, but only because Link’s voice was rough from spending such a long while in silence. The Prince’s Knight had, apparently, been satisfied to avoid unnecessary conversation, opting to patrol the area near the doorway and down along the spiral stairs every now and again. He’d patter down to about the first window, pause long enough to peek out, then return. Link could hear it every time, like Brivere timed everything precisely, always doing everything exactly the same.

Now, however, the golden Zora took it upon himself to engage the Hylian in conversation, despite the previous stretch of silence. Or maybe it was because of how long the quiet had stretched on that he chose to interrupt it; Link couldn’t pretend to understand that guy’s motivations.
“I doubt you’ll welcome this information, but I should warn you,” Brivere warily began, approaching Sidon’s bedside. Link’s ears perked at the tone, and a cold, blue stare turned immediately to glare at the armored Zora.

“He has run late before.” The golden Zora delivered it like an apology. His eyes fell upon Sidon as he spoke, looking on the slumbering Prince with hopeful eagerness, yet also with some degree of wariness that was concealed, apart from the tension that slithered through his frame whenever he dared to steal a glance.

“Fuuuck,” Link hissed, kicking his feet against the mattress beneath his prone frame, causing it to wobble beneath him, yet even that didn’t rouse the Prince. When he still, Sidon remained equally so, and Link breathed a deep sigh of frustration, rolling over so that his face squashed into the pillows.

“I’m just going to go to sleep, myself,” he groaned, completely fucking serious. A nap sounded better than remaining aware of his own eagerness. He turned his head so that his words wouldn’t be completely muffled, then he curled up like some small animal, readying itself for hibernation. “Wake me up when he wakes up.”

“Hm,” the golden Zora hummed in observation, his fingerscales making soft clicks while he reached out to flip over the book that laid near Link’s side. His yellow eyes traced the front cover in familiarity, then he said, “This is Estuu’s book. He convinced you to get into this series, then, did he?”

“No, actually,” Link somewhat shrugged, “I just thought it seemed interesting.”

“Estuu certainly would enjoy having somebody to discuss it with,” came the calm purr of Brivere’s voice, then he added, “so to speak.”

“The series is unfinished, though, huh?” Link scooted back, propping himself upright in Sidon’s stack of pillows so that he could actually look at Brivere.

“Ahh, that is correct,” Brivere uttered with a nod. “These books used to be released once every year, and then.. nothing. The last of them has been in progress for quite a while.”

“Who is The Red Herring?” the Hylian asked, thinking it was a simple matter. “Do you know?”

“Nobody seems to know who they are,” the Knight replied, some certainty to his tone, like these were the undeniable facts, yet his eyes narrowed in thought as the question was posed and his arms folded across his chest.

“Are they really a red Zora?” Link asked, combing his long fringe back from his face. Having a completely unobscurred view of Brivere was absolutely vital, if one wanted to be able to read even a hint of emotion from him. Also, his hair had gotten to the point that it fully concealed his eyes if Link allowed it to fall wherever, so, it was annoying the hell out of him. In a straight-forward tone, Link added, “That would narrow it down a bit.”

The overly obvious suggestion drew a quiet scoff from the golden Zora, maybe even something of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He shook his head almost immediately, his forefins swaying to the point that he pushed them back over his shoulders. Apparently, Link wasn’t the only one having this problem.

“Of course they aren’t,” Brivere breathed.

“Then why would they name themselves ‘The Red Herring’?” Link’s hands shot up in a gesture of
confusion. “Wouldn’t it be kind of ironic?”

“I realize that naming themselves after a red fish would make for cute wordplay, but the very fact that they are shrouded in mystery seems to suggest that they chose the name with the intent to mislead,” the Knight explained, still contemplating it for himself.

Link only stared back at Brivere in confusion, his face furrowed in questioning that had only been deepened by the Knight’s attempts to better illuminate the subject matter.

“A ‘red herring’ in literature is a clue that throws the reader off the scent, in regards to a mystery or plot twist,” the golden Zora went on, clearing his throat in preparation for an entire goddamn lecture. Link swatted his hand at the Zora and nodded; he didn’t know much about literature, but he also wasn’t an illiterate fool, either.

Brivere endured the pouting Hylian’s fragile pride, pausing only momentarily before he continued, “Because a red herring is also a red fish, everyone assumes that the author must be a red Zora. That very detail is what throws people off the scent, in regards to the identity of the author. That is why it seems intentional.”

“So is there any chance of us finding out who this Red Herring is, anyway?” Link snapped, his tongue turning sharp. He had a way of becoming all the more determined to do things when people tried to convince him that it wasn’t possible. Hunting down some cucco-shit writer who hid behind a pen name, at least, would offer an entertaining distraction while he waited for his sleepy Prince to rise and shine.

“Perhaps,” Brivere purred affirmatively, cupping his own chin for a thoughtful instant. Link straightened at the offered glimmer of hope, the blue of his eyes gazing up at the Zora like his tongue held some great prize which Link was all too eager for.

He’d definitely be damned if he got into this series, knowing that the ending wasn’t finished and just accepted that it would never be done. He was going to find the Red Herring and he planned to unleash a world of hurt on their ass, whether it was red or some color otherwise.

Lorelei and General Kita deserved better. Link was going to save them from the Calamity of their realm, because that was honestly the only Calamity that he was confident enough to face at this current moment.

“My guess is that The Red Herring is likely an Apostle of the scholarly variety,” Brivere stated. In his mind, a highly educated, well-read Zora was the best candidate. That, and he’d yet to forget about the short, white-scaled woman who he’d seen at the Champion Festival. He hadn’t forgotten about the personal insult that little play dealt him, and seeing that woman proudly announce that it had been written by ‘The Red Herring.’

He had quite a few words for the Red Herring, himself.

“I know of somebody who may have ties to The Red Herring,” Brivere declared, locking his gaze with that of the Hylian Champion, finding in him an ally of circumstance once again, “..or who may actually be The Red Herring.”
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

When the Zora Prince failed to awaken in a timely manner, Brivere offered the impatient Champion a distraction in the meantime. Together, they set off on a mission to unveil the identity of the mysterious Red Herring.

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note: CONTENT WARNING FOR MEDICAL, BODY HORROR, DISSECTION TYPE STUFF. There's a note where the scene begins, so feel free to read without wariness.

Afternoon waned into the early darkening of twilight, which further deepened into evening before the dinner time hour, when the smells of food would normally flood the Domain. In this time of shortage, however, those welcoming scents were absent in the cold, night air. The days had shortened with the coming winter, but Link swore that it was the lack of Sidon’s presence which had turned the world so dark and cold.

Despite the hours which the Hylian had whittled away on the first ‘Cursed Girl’ book, Sidon had still yet to return from his potion-induced slumber, not even by the time a senior member of the Royal Order came to replace Brivere, ending his shift. At that time, the Knight Captain lingered, regarding the wearily waiting Champion with an awkward, quiet, contemplative stare. He was debating on whether or not interference was wise and against his better judgement, he strode to the Prince’s bedside in order to wrench Link from this awful waiting game.

“You know..” Brivere began, his tongue slow to produce words of interruption, “I believe there is an expression about watching a pot while waiting for it to boil..”

Link had turned listless and as bizarre as it might’ve sounded, he couldn’t remember an occasion where he’d enjoyed lazing about less than this particular one. He rolled onto his side to face the golden Zora before dragging himself upright, one hand fiddling with his mess of hair in a hopeless attempt to neaten its appearance.

“So what are you suggesting?” His voice was hazed with tired apathy, his face blank despite his dubious stare.

“Given your interest in the ‘Cursed Girl’ books..” Brivere said, shrugging like this suggestion wasn’t much, ”perhaps you would like to accompany me to the Basilica, to aid in an attempt to root out our mysterious author?”

A forlorn, backward glance was spared for the sleeping Prince while Link contemplated Brivere’s uncharacteristically mischievous offer. He’d promised to be there for Sidon when he awakened and he’d been entertaining all sorts of cliche daydreams where the Zora at last stirred and Link was given
the chance to proclaim that he’d dared not leave his side. He supposed that those meanderings of his imagination were not just inaccurate, but they also served no real purpose other than staving off Link’s boredom.

“Yeah,” Link uttered with a deep sigh, “alright.”

In the brain fog which had descended over him, Link was barely lucid enough to acknowledge that it was even more uncharacteristic that the golden Zora had already spent an entire day in the Hylian’s company, yet was welcoming further interaction. But, he supposed that he was behaving all the more out of character, because despite himself, he was actually relieved at the offer.

Maybe Link’s head wasn’t as fuzzy as he thought and he was just trying to ignore the fact that things between himself and the Prince’s Knight had turned from seething hatred to relative calm that wasn’t even begrudging. Then again, maybe his ability to despise things was just in a state of burnout and it would flicker back to life sometime soon. He hoped it didn’t take too long because his own lack of bitter defensiveness and senseless anger was causing him to feel vulnerable which was not acceptable.

The excursion took the Hylian on a detour to the golden Zora’s home beforehand, because Brivere was eager to shed his armor for the evening. Link mostly interacted with Estuu while he waited for the other Zora, which involved reciting a synopsis of every chapter of ‘The Cursed Girl’ that he’d read during the day and going over his thoughts about them while Estuu reacted with silent excitement.

When Link ran out of interesting things to say about the story, Estuu lost interest in him and wandered off rather unapologetically. The Hylian couldn’t help but chuckle over how honest the kid could be, even without speaking a word. Anyway, he clearly had some priorities of his own and some business to attend to.

With Estuu no longer about to keep Link company, the Hylian’s sights turned to the golden Zora. He watched the man’s nimble fingers meander between various straps and laces which held his armor in place, unfastening it rather skillfully but not very quickly despite how practiced he was.

“Can I, um..” the Hylian began, his own sheepishness like a stranger ambushing his usual devil-may-care attitude. In the space of his pause, Brivere’s unreadable stare was turned in Link’s direction. It was all terribly unassuming, yet even so, Link reacted to the expectant look like it served to punch him in the gut.

“For a moment, Brivere’s hands actually slowed in consideration, though from the way he blinked as he thought it over, it appeared more like he was searching for the right words to politely decline. Then, as expected, “I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it. It will only take a few moments more.”

“For a moment, Brivere’s hands actually slowed in consideration, though from the way he blinked as he thought it over, it appeared more like he was searching for the right words to politely decline. Then, as expected, “I appreciate the offer, but I can handle it. It will only take a few moments more.”

“Right,” Link replied, his tone flat. He propped himself against the nearest convenient surface and crossed his arms over his chest, the blue of his eyes plastered to the sight of the Zora being incredibly methodical about how he took that shit off. Even without glancing over, though, Brivere noticed the tension in Link’s body language and replied as brusquely as he might if it were his own younger sibling misbehaving.

“Just be patient,” Brivere uttered, the sound of his voice a soft resonance, like he was attempting to instill the calm in Link that he was imploring. Even so, the Hylian’s ears tilted backward in distaste,
the skin of his nose wrinkling as though the request was foul.

“Sure,” he breathed, his own voice an unimpressed growl, “because you asked me to do something that I’m incapable of doing, I’m now miraculously able to do it.”

“Hm,” a breathy laugh came out of the Zora when he at last wriggled free from the silverscale plating which protected his broad chest, unveiling the speckled pale from underneath, which was as dotted as his cheeks. He then turned a look of sharpened challenge to the whining Hylian and said, “And I’d come to expect you to at least pretend you are capable of doing things which you absolutely cannot. Now you’re falling short of even my expectations.”

“You prick,” Link hissed, searching the area around himself for something to throw in rebuke. When there was nothing that would have anything more than a laughable effect, he threw words. “Do you always have to act so fucking superior?”

“In the arena of patience, my superiority is no act,” Brivere replied, his lips still faintly curved in a playful way, then he took the first few steps toward the doorway to indicate his readiness and Link followed gladly, if only because.. yeah, he was tired of waiting.

“Also, if we have learned anything at all from the altercation betwixt you and I, it is that you’re much more greatly motivated by derision,” the golden Zora asserted, his tone a steady rumble, but lacking in the audible venom it held when they had faced off.

Link’s eyes rolled in annoyance, yet in relent, he chose to nod his head. He wouldn’t verbally admit that Brivere’s assessment was possessed of deadly accuracy, but it was nevertheless true. The fact that a man who lacked the empathic capabilities of Prince Sidon could still read Link with more effortless skill than the Prince, himself, was punishing.

Even so, the Hylian had a perfect and candid response. “I wasn’t offering as a way of rushing you,” he stated, more calm than what could typically be expected, “I was doing it to be nice.”

The Zora had no clever quip that could cut Link down any further in reply, and in Brivere’s silence, Link straightened, basking in the feeling of rare victory. Even the trip to the depths where the Basilica lurked couldn’t dampen Link after that. Figuratively speaking, of course, because he did end up literally dampened.

Meanwhile, the target which had served to unify the two bitter rivals was busied in the Basilica archives. Loreen was seated at one of the many available work desks, which were formed by the clever, architectural designs of her people, sculpted into the stone so that it flowed with the same fluid lap of oceanic waves.

Atop her desk, documents for her review were piled a bit haphazardly, looking as though they could teeter and crumble at the lightest brush of her fin. Scattered books and etched tablets framed the entire mess in a perimeter of total disarray, then off to the side, the only neat stack in all of the chaos awaited her attention; a scant few items which had been delivered to her from outside of the Domain.

At the peak of the single, neat stack, there waited a package that was suspiciously book-shaped and had apparently made its way to the pale Apostle from the fort downstream. That detail, alone, grabbed at Loreen’s attention and she set to opening up the package, only to find contained the first book in the ‘Cursed Girl’ series, alongside a handwritten note from the fort Sergeant.

It took Loreen a moment to properly make sense of the scrawled, chaotic handwriting, but once she completely understood the odd request being asked of her within Betaal’s letter, she tilted her head, squinting all over again to make one-hundred-percent sure that she’d read the note correctly.
“Alright, Bet, if you say so,” she mumbled to herself with a shrug, then she laid the letter down flat upon her desk, setting the book directly beside it, with the front cover opened and ready. With a glance over her shoulder to make sure that nobody was within her vicinity, nor watching her very closely, she drew her quill pen from the inkpot nearby, and set to work on the favor her dear friend had asked.

The tip of Loreen’s quill scratched carefully at the white of the inner cover and she spared several glances between the letter and the message that she was penning. Thankfully, she had finished with the secretive task and crumpled Betaal’s letter, dropping it into her disposal bin nearby before the sound of somebody clearing their throat interrupted her work.

At the surprising sound, the Apostle scurried to her feet, turning to find none other than the Knight Captain of the Royal Order standing nearby, his back straight and his hands folded politely before him. His body language was unassuming, yet even so, the sharp of his gaze held the promise of intimidation like nothing else and Loreen swallowed dryly under little more than that, her own fingers suddenly twiddling together, the unconscious reply to her tense nerves.

Had he heard the things that she’d been saying about him, somehow? Were those girls from the fanclub really that pervasive?

“You’re.. Loreen, I presume?” Brivere started, his tone calm and careful. Link stood at the Knight’s side, his own stance bored and shifting, his arms tightly crossed over his chest while he stared down the other Zora, a total offset to Brivere’s gentle manner.

Despite that Link probably looked like some lose-canon mess of a Hylian, though, he was innocently observing this girl, Loreen. She was short for a Zora, but clearly not an Undercity, though she stood only a bit taller than Link, himself. She was also incredibly pale, definitely the only solid white Zora that Link had ever laid eyes on. To offer her own complexion a pop of color, her lips were painted in a soft, pastel blue coloration which even he could admit was kinda cute.

“Oh, uh,” she squeaked in apprehension, her pale cheeks rapidly flushing with the heat bleeding into her face. “I am Loreen, er, yes, Apostle of the Basilica. Can I, um, help you.. Knight Captain?”

“Oh, um, of course,” she twittered with a smile, her eyes daring a quick glance at his face, though from the way she squinted before averting her gaze, she clearly didn’t know him at all. At least she addressed him with equal panic as she did the Knight at his side, despite that Brivere was tall and broad, every fiber of his frame built for strength, and Link was.. well.. nevermind.

At the needless interruption, the golden Zora turned a sideways glance in the direction of the Hylian who he’d invited along, a soft rumble of sound coming from him with a discontented exhale, then he refocused on the unnerved Apostle. “We have something of a request to make, if you’d be so kind as to spare the time for us.”

“Oh, well..” The Apostle’s head drooped, her gaze plastered to the floor while she fought to stutter out an acceptable answer. Link, meanwhile, wandered away from Brivere’s side, turning his back for a passing instant before he sauntered a wide circle over toward Loreen’s desk.

“..as you can see I am rather busy, but I can, uh..”
“Busy?” Link growled, his ears pinned back, though his mouth curved into a clever smirk. It took only a few moments for his eyes to wander across the desk and notice a damning clue. She turned sharply at the sound of his voice, diving for the very item that Link had set his sights on, but he snagged it up much more nimbly, hurrying back to Brivere’s side in order to flaunt his discovery, all with Loreen right on his tail.

The Hylian held up the ‘Cursed Girl’ book for both the Knight and the Apostle to feast their eyes, snapping the words, “Looks like you’re just reading fairy stories to me.”

“Hey, no, please, don’t touch that,” she hissed, attempting to grab the book out of the Champion’s grasp, her fangs flashing in her frustration, though Link pulled his hand back, pressing the book against his middle, hoarding it like some spitting, little bokoblin defending a scrap of food. They could get very brutal- Link knew all about, though all memories of bokoblin skirmishes were upside-down in his memory.

“Careful!” he spat, one hand reaching over his shoulder, his fingertips grazing the pliant leather of the sword hilt which waited there. “You wouldn’t want to accidentally spur my fighting instincts, would you? As you know, I fought against the Calamity a hundred years ago. It was a savage battle, life and death, and sometimes I just go right back there in my mind if I feel threatened. You never know. My sword hand might slip.”

Loreen took a small pace back from the Hylian, though the furrows of her countenance reflected clear doubt. She could tell with ease that this was little more than empty intimidation, and in her indignance, the prickle of her magic was building against her palms. One hand even drifted to her hip, where the hilt of her dirk welcomed her grasp, not that she intended to use it in anything more than defense. Still, it only felt right to make it clear that she could brandish a weapon in reply, if need be.

“Hey look at this- a Red Herring book. And..” Link raised the item back into Brivere’s line of sight, once the Apostle was out of grabbing range. With a flick, he snapped the front cover open, exposing a clear message written out in a careful, looping manner, each word penned in a small, polite way, alongside a signature which had been scratched down in a much wilder manner. “It’s signed. Can you believe that?”

Brivere, in his slow, calculative way, drew his stare from Loreen and the way her hand had rest upon her weapon, over to the book held out before him and the lightly smudged message that lurked beneath the front cover, which Link had so proudly revealed. Then, to soothe the woman’s clear distress, the golden Zora took the book from Link’s hand, gently shutting it before he stepped forward, in order to deliver it back to Loreen’s possession.

“I apologize for the Hylian’s behavior,” he stated, his voice both smooth, yet sturdy and unflinching. His crisp gaze was set upon Loreen with equal intensity. “..but I believe that you may be able to assist me. The favor I’m asking is but a small one, you have my word.”

“Oh,” the woman muttered, her neck bending so that her golden eyes could flicker up the towering image of the Knight standing before her. Again, she swallowed, her pupils tightening as though Brivere were some kind of shining light, gently dappling her frame with his golden warmth. Her ulnar fins flared at his proximity, the membranes deepening in hue to a soft but vivid blue. “..well, uh. I might not mind a big one, either. A favor, that is- I mean, um, I’m happy to assist you.”

A grateful nod of the Zora’s head was all that expressed his thanks, because the impassive mask of his face didn’t betray much else. Link spared him a glance, thinking that perhaps he appeared a bit softer than usual, but it would take a lot of observation to tell the difference between a ‘soft’ look and anything otherwise. Then the Hylian realized that he’d indirectly admitted that he observed Brivere.
often and was forced to abandon that whole course of thought.

“Understandably, I have reason to believe that you may have some ‘ties’ to this ‘Red Herring’,” Brivere began his request. “My younger sibling is a rather big fan of their work and he is quite troubled by the incredible lateness of the last book in the series.”

“Yeah, me, too. I’m very troubled,” Link interjected, though this time Brivere paused to allow his interruptions, welcoming the aggressive behavior that complimented his own calm, reasonable assertions. “I’m also a big fan. I mean, admittedly, I don’t understand Lorelei’s motivations at all. It doesn’t make any sense for her to go out of her way to help people who treat her like shit, but nevertheless, I wanna know what happens to her.”

“Um, please, keep it down,” the Apostle pleadingly squeaked, waving her hands before herself to quiet the two men who’d clearly come to shake her down. “I mean, uhh.. Look- the Red Herring works at the pace that they work at. You can’t rush the process, I’m sorry to say, so if your hope is to ask them to speed up, I can tell you uhh, that would be ill-received.”

“That isn’t quite the whole of my request,” Brivere purred with a soft shake of his head. He paused, the tip of his tongue touching his lips for a moment while he gave the Apostle a quick, but observant glance, measuring and calculating as he did, then he closed the space between himself and the woman further with another bold, forward pace.

The bangles around Loreen’s wrists jingled as she fumbled for the edge of the desk behind her, feeling its nearness while she inched nervously back, her eyes downcast and her gaze wildly flickering. She slid herself up onto the surface of the desk like it offered sanctuary, though by Link’s observations, it really just put her at the perfect level to smoosh her face against the golden Zora’s rather plump pectorals.

“Perhaps, if my brother could exchange correspondence with The Red Herring? I do believe it would be very exciting for him and maybe it would even serve to further motivate this mysterious author?” Brivere’s voice was softened to a dull rumble and at last he stole away the few spare inches separating himself from the Apostle. His hips touched the edge of the desk between her knees, and he bent himself lower in order to be eye to eye with her. His palms pressed to the surface before himself, and she leaned back, her eyes finally meeting his in breathless questioning.

“Surely the appreciation of a fan would be a thankful experience,” he breathed, the width of his shoulders moving lightly in something of a shrug.

“N-no, well, actually..” The woman’s voice was a weak, tiny whisper, her cheeks more colored than her painted lips in her fluster. She swallowed, the silvery rings around the pale column of her neck moving as she did, then she attempted to speak again, “T-The Red Herring doesn’t like to receive fan correspondence. I don’t know if it’s a matter of privacy, um, o-or if they just like to keep their ideas untainted by the wants and whims of others, but-”

“It sounds to me like you actually do have a pretty good idea of why they are so reclusive. Those were oddly specific suggestions, I’m just saying.” Not for the sake of following Brivere’s example, or anything, but rather to keep from being omitted from this conversation, Link slid himself onto the desk as well. He perched near Loreen’s side, so that his shoulder and thigh touched hers and Brivere moved one hand aside to make room. He remained a bit closer to the edge than she, however, lest he risked toppling her piles of work with his invading butt, and he was obviously much more courteous than that. “I bet you know whether or not they are actually red, too, huh? Maybe they aren’t red at all, but more of a pale color?”

“If you’re trying to suggest that it’s me,” the pale Zora snapped, turning her head sharply to regard
the Hylian seated next to her. Link quickly leaned away, barely dodging one of her swinging forefins as it nearly smacked him in the face.

“Well, uh, that’s a big wrong! Your mistake!” she fumbled, receiving little more than a dubiously raised brow from the Hylian. “I mean to say, you’re wrong, it’s a big mistake.”

“Regardless of who the Red Herring may be,” Brivere set Loreen’s focus on him once more with little else but the warm, enveloping rumble of his voice, “you clearly have the means to contact them. Also, though I hadn’t wanted to push the matter so forcefully, you’ve left me with minimal options.”

“.oh?” the pale woman muttered, the sound little more than a whisper which scarcely went far from the tip of her tongue. A quiet tap came from where Brivere’s hand rested, the sharp edges of his fingerscales rapping against the desk and his head tilted ever so slightly to one side while his eyes carefully studied Loreen’s face. He spoke, slowly and carefully, driving each word with dedicated precision.

“The fact of the matter is that this author unapologetically used the lives and stories of my parents as fodder for their work in that little Champion Festival play of theirs and that was incredibly disrespectful and in rather poor taste,” he purred. “I would say that they owe me, at the very least, a nominal favor in return. What do you say, Loreen?”

“Uh..” A choked, pitchy noise pushed its way from the tight cavity of the Apostle’s throat and Link’s ears twitched at it. He quietly glanced between the woman, who may have well been rendered a wide-eyed puddle of white goo, forever plastered to her desk, to the Knight, who had taken off more than just his armor, but also the steely facade which so often hid him, leaving behind something so sensuous and warm, Link was unsure if this was actually still Brivere.

“Well, I..” Loreen babbled, her voice not coming out, her lips moving as though to speak, despite that.

“Please,” Brivere bid, “just this one favor, that is all I ask.”

“O-okay, fine,” the woman uttered, gasping softly afterwards like her own words had been choking her, or as though her chest had become paralyzed around the sounds needed to form those words. She then flung her hand up, tightly furling all of her fingers but one. “If you’re so resolved to contact The Red Herring, I will accept and deliver a single letter, but no more than that. Oh and, uh, I want something in return!”

“Hm,” Brivere’s eyes narrowed, the dark of his lids heavy atop the pale yellow of his gaze. He shook his head softly, letting his long forefins sway with his movement. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“No uhh, well, you said that the Red Herring owes you a favor in return for that play, but, but, because I’m not the Red Herring, technically, I uhh.. I don’t owe you anything, really.” Loreen’s head tilted downward again, her eyes wildly searching, in all likelihood, the dotted surface of Brivere’s chest, which was taking up all available visual space unoccupied by his face. She seemed like she was trying to find a way to sound less rude about this whole business, despite that she was well within her rights to tell both Brivere and Link to fuck off.

“I’m uh, well, I’m doing this favor out of the kindness in my heart,” Loreen added decidedly, moving against the surface where she was seated.

“.and out of the passion burning in your loins,” Link commented under his breath with a chuckle. They both obviously heard him, being so close, but neglected to comment.
“S-so, um, in repayment for being the courier for this one letter, I’d like for you to retrieve some tomes for me,” the Apostle blurted, her voice suddenly louder than before, her words faster and sharper, like she wanted to evacuate the request from her palate. “I’ve uhh, been meaning to find someone capable enough, so um, it saves me a little trouble as well.”

Silence fell over the trio, as surely as Brivere was calculating the likelihood of success, should he refuse Loreen’s demand and continue to insist on his own. Link could see the Knight’s process of thought in the way his features returned to their usual look of relaxed discontentment and surprisingly, the Apostle held his gaze with hardened determination, despite her embarrassment. For a few tense seconds, Link opted to glance down at his fingernails, at how they were all mismatched in length from how he would randomly break them doing this and that, then when he, personally, couldn’t endure the stare-off any longer, he interrupted.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he addressed Brivere, leaning a bit closer to Loreen’s side like they were pals or something. “Finding stuff like this is easy work for me. I’ll retrieve the tomes. You just tell Estuu to get started on that letter.”

“Wh- really?” the Apostle twittered in surprise and excitement, fidgeting over Link’s offer. He couldn’t believe that she’d asked for books when the clear and obvious thing to demand here was less intellectual and more physical. Maybe that assumption was just the result of Link’s own dirty mind, though.

“Oh, oh my, um, okay, here, let me write a quick note on what the tomes look like and the whereabouts you may expect to find them,” Loreen uttered, her head turned a bit toward Link, though she didn’t have enough space to properly face him, or make any kind of note at all; it was actually kinda comical.

“Yeah, great,” Link sighed in mock impatience, though the smile curving his lips belied it. “Here, let me help you with that, first.”

With one bold motion, Link outstretched his arm, laying a single palm against the pliant muscle of the lingering Knight’s chest and pushed gently. Slowly, the golden Zora straightened as prompted, and the Hylian’s fingertips slid across the smooth surface of his scales, until his touch fell away entirely and a small area of space had been reclaimed.

Loreen was forced to reprocess her own intended task while shaking her head and pulling her jealous mind away from the vision of what had just occurred. Also, she was probably intensely trying to re-imagine it as though Link’s hand had been her own, but that was Link’s own assumption.

Very quickly, the white Zora located a scrap of paper and a writing utensil in order to make notes, as promised. When she handed the item off to Link, he glanced at her work, finding that on top of indicating the location of the tomes, she’d even drawn a little doodle of them, labeling it very precisely. It was more to go on than most people bothered to offer when asking tedious favors of him, so he nodded his head in satisfaction, then slid down from her work desk, taking his place at Brivere’s side.

The Knight offered a curt bow to the flustered woman, an impish grin upturning one corner of his mouth all the while. “Thank you, Wise One,” he purred, neutral and yet, somehow, utterly coy. Loreen answered it with a sheepish wave in Brivere’s direction, as he and his Hylian accomplice fled the scene.

Once the duo made it out of the Basilica archives, a sharp, suspicious glare slowly upturned to regard the golden Zora. Link’s brows were knitted together, so that the skin between them was furrowed, and the cold blue of his stare was narrowed in quiet suspicion.
Predictably, Brivere carried on for some time without acknowledging the look he was receiving from the Hylian. At last, however, he let out a relenting sigh and spoke the words, “You’re staring at me.”

“I’m still a little confused,” Link stated, blinking a bit more rapidly than normal, sure that his mouth had pulled into an odd shape with his skewed expression. “..did I just witness a seduction? Did you put moves on that girl? That wasn’t part of the plan.”

The smallest of sly grins again made its way to the pale of Brivere’s lips, and he cast his eyes downward, in Link’s direction, succinctly speaking his conclusion, “If I have a tool at my disposal, I see no reason not to make use of it.”

“..I think I misjudged you,” the Hylian breathed, his ears tilting backward in mistrust that only grew with the sudden awareness that Brivere, apparently, wasn’t always completely stuffy and serious at all times. That very mistrust blossomed into odd curiosity, which in Link’s mind was, as always, underpinned by a certain sense of inadequacy.

“Did you..” he began, uncertain of his own words and whether or not they were appropriate yet. Even so, the burden of not knowing the answer to his unasked question pressed him onward. “..did you ever try that on Sidon?”

A soft furrow of questioning made its way almost instantly to the patch of skin beneath the crest of Brivere’s brow. He clearly misunderstood something about the question, yet he answered as though he hadn’t, “I’ve never had a reason or the desire to manipulate my lord in such a way.”

“No, I just mean,” Link fumbled with his hands while he sought out the right words for clarification, “it just seems like if you’re capable of what just happened back there, you must be a pretty decent flirt. I don’t know how Sidon wasn’t more interested in you.”

“Oh,” the golden Zora breathed, his attention drifting elsewhere at the Hylian’s statement. The sound of his one-word response wasn’t quite an, ‘I understand,’ so much as it was the pained but muffled cry of his heart being dealt a blow. Link’s ears were twitching in auditory recognition of the sound which his own verbal fuckup had elicited, but against his expectation that the Zora would falter into a state of silence, Brivere continued with a query of his own.

“Do you believe that he wasn’t at all, then?” he asked, his softened voice a dull vibration. Somehow, the mask which concealed the Knight’s emotions had extended in this moment of vulnerability, to the point that the intent behind his question was lost to Link’s ear. Was he asking genuinely for the Hylian’s opinion? Was it a hopeless realization of defeat? Or was it meant as a challenge to Link’s assertion that, ‘Sidon wasn’t interested in you.’?

“All I was trying to say was that my flirting was awkward and impatient and overall, poorly executed. It’s hard to even think about,” he muttered, not wanting to stab in the dark with attempting an actual answer to Brivere’s question. Instead, he shrugged, upturning his gaze to measure the effect his words had, though he wasn’t sure why he bothered with that; as usual, Brivere’s face betrayed nothing about his innermost state.

“Anyway, about the practice we agreed on,” Link moved on, hoping to stifle his own discomfort. He didn’t want to be forced to acknowledge that there was any room for guilt in his heart, over the fact that his relationship with the Prince had left the other Zora aching and lonely. “Do you have an idea of when and where we should do it?”

“Provided my lord awakens soon, I’ll resume my regular training schedule. You know where to find me.” Brivere’s reply was curt. That was normal for him, but Link couldn’t help but notice that he suddenly seemed more guarded than before.
“Yeah. Sounds good.” With a nod of his head, Link agreed. He paused, crossing a single arm over his middle in order to rub at the arm opposite, then, with that same hand, he gestured as though they were approaching some kind of diverging hall that he would need to proceed down. “So, I have something else to handle while I’m down here.”

“As do I,” Brivere agreed.

“Right, so can we meet up at the dive bell, then?” the Hylian asked, turning to walk a bit sideways next to the golden Zora. “I do still need help returning to the surface.”

Without a word, the Knight nodded in confirmation. Link lingered for another second more, waiting for Brivere’s yellow gaze to drift downward and regard him. When it did, Link nodded in turn and averted his own eyes, his mouth forming a tight line before he stopped and proceeded in the other direction.

This was a part of the Basilica that he had certainly never seen before and it didn’t take long for the notion to occur to him that few others had ever laid eyes on this dismal place, either.

The Hylian followed after the silhouette of his Zora doctor, proceeding down the spiraling stone of the stairs, deep into the hazy, luminous corridor below. Link’s hands pressed against his sleeves for warmth, while a chill settled over his skin and seeped down to his bones. A thick puff of fog came from him with each slow, steady breath, and the rubies sewn into his scarf lit vibrant red in reply to the change of temperature.

Link stayed on the heels of his doctor, not wanting to chance that he could get lost in this never-ending, frozen labyrinth of death that she had brought him to, yet even so, he allowed his eyes to freely wander, though they ached and watered. The halls were lit in a haunting tone of pale blue that was somehow harsher than the light anywhere else in Zora’s Domain and every surface was frosted like the morning before a winter blizzard.

“The written results of the autopsies just don’t carry the same effect as seeing it with your own two eyes, Champion,” the old Zora woman guiding Link spoke, glancing back and brushing the fabric of her shawl aside in order to get a better look at the Hylian in her wake. He was taking in the grim sight of how many surfaces were lined with dead, Undercity Zoras, yet to be put into their pyres. She paused, waiting for his attention to drift back to her, then she continued, “I have to say, if not for your tip, I’d have never even noticed the anomalies in these warriors.”

Unsurprising to the Zora, her company remained silent, even when addressed. And despite the numerous years that had come and gone, she still recalled that a certain hesitance to speak was merely an innate part of his character. She left him to his thoughts for the rest of their walk, though it was but a short while before they came upon the cadavers which they’d ventured down to observe.

The pair came to a halt before several specimen tables forged from smooth stone and lined with thin, crisp, linen covers. With a brisk sweep of the Apostle’s hand, one of the sheets was drawn away from the form tucked underneath, and a Yiga Clansman’s corpse was newly exposed to their prying eyes.

The enemy’s normally dark skin tone had faded to a grayish pallor and they’d been left to lie with their face down, against the stone, so that their bare posterior was unveiled, or at least what was left of it. Their white hair had been partly shorn away to bare the flesh at the back of their head and their
body was cleanly sliced from their nape to the space between their hips. The skin was peeled away from their bones and muscles and Link allowed his eyes to linger long enough to take in the gruesome sight, then his gaze flickered elsewhere.

He didn’t exactly have a weak constitution. He’d chopped up plenty of monster bodies for the sake of harvesting their valuable organs, and he’d butchered his own quarry without any squeamishness. The difference to him here was in the fact that this was a person, little different from him. They were a person who’d been cut open in a way that mirrored what had very nearly happened to Link once before, and suddenly getting such an up close and personal glimpse of how that actually looked twisted his gut in a sickening way.

It must have been quite visible on his features, because the pinkish elder paused, sparing him a glance, before asking in the harsh grit of her voice, “Champion, are you certain that you can handle this?”

“Yeah,” he replied, his own tone rough and low. Slowly, the pale of his blue gaze shifted back to the dissected corpse, and he swallowed down his own nauseousness. “Witnessing gruesome things and death, it’s all different in the heat of battle. But I’m fine.”

“Let me know if you’re feeling too queasy at any point,” she answered with a smile, like a kindly teasing grandparent, but with knobby hands which cut bodies apart, rather than making biscuits and pies, and other heart-warming shit such as that. “...or too existential.”

“So you can laugh me out of town?” Link chuckled, allowing himself to take on an ounce of her own steadiness, crossing his arms more tightly over his chest. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m not judging you, don’t worry.” Though she couldn’t hide the titters that came from her over the entire matter. She then set her focus back to her macabre work, gesturing to the exposed spinal column that had been loosened from the surrounding muscles with some cutting precision. “So, as you can see here, along the spine, there’s this abnormal, violet growth.”

The fact that Link wasn’t quite as familiar with the small intricacies of anatomical structures beyond the few things he had hands-on experience with made it somewhat difficult for him to notice the abnormality that the medical Apostle was speaking of. He unfurled his arms, placing his hands at the edge of the table in order to lean closer for a better look.

The white protrusions of the spine were cradled by the deep, fleshy red of muscle, then traced by winding blood vessels and nerves. Link observed the structure, his eyes narrowing in uncertainty, then he shyly glanced to his side at the elder Zora. She understood, thankfully, without any verbal exchange, that he wasn’t precisely sure of which part she was trying to indicate. Mercifully, she used the sharp tips of her fingerscales to closely point out a crawling web of violet tendrils, which looked very much like blood vessels, clambering up and over each vertebrae like a boney trellis.

“It looks like.. vines, or something,” Link dully stated, finally tracing the twisting, creeping veins with his gaze, now that he had a better clue of what he was looking for.

“That’s a decent comparison, I suppose,” the Zora woman hummed, though the shrug of her shoulders was a bit dubious. “As you can see, this branching growth extends along the spine, deep into the nervous system, all the way to the stem of the brain.”

“What is it?” The Hylian posed the most obvious, yet to this point, unanswered question.

“It’s not well understood yet, I’m afraid.” The old woman reached up to rub at her chin in thought and Link turned a curious stare in her direction. She appeared as though she was having an
existential moment, herself, grappling with the reality that her climbing age could prevent her from unlocking the truth to these newly presented mysteries. She sighed after a few seconds of contemplation, then set to explaining what she could.

“The theory is that it’s much like a symbiotic organism which has integrated itself into the host, becoming one with it,” she stated, hoping that the Hylian would easily understand a broad comparison.

“What, like a leech?” he commented.

“No,” she snapped, her dulled fangs shining in the blue light, “it doesn’t feed off of its host. It doesn’t use its host to replicate itself. It doesn’t even exert any visible control over its hosts’ will, not that we can ascertain. So don’t think of it like a parasite. The most curious detail to this whole matter is that this isn’t a new discovery. Various species of monsters’ share in the presence of this secondary nervous system. Until now, we thought that monsters, alone, possessed this.. adaptation. However, ‘adaptation’ isn’t really the best descriptor, either, because we’ve seen that individuals bearing this physical structure don’t pass it to their offspring.”

The more she spoke, the less Link understood and the more confused he became. He opted to remain silent, supposing that continued listening with no intention to formulate a response would free space in his brain to take in information.

“Through a lot of experimentation, we learned that the presence of this anatomical structure coincides with the ability of a living creature to respawn upon the occurrence of the Blood Moon,” the Apostle explained and at last Link perked in interest.

“This is what gives monsters the ability to come back from the dead?” he blurted while gesturing at the corpse, perplexed and stunned and still pretty damn confused.

“That’s right.” A proud nod and a smile furrowed the Zora’s weathered features for a moment, then it all faded away once more when she was reminded that there was still so much more that they didn’t know. The soft fabric of her Basilica shawl fluttered with the shrug of her sloped shoulders, then she continued, “Don’t ask how it works, exactly, because we haven’t figured that part out. What we have discovered is that by properly dismantling this anatomical structure in the corpses of monsters, they can be prevented from respawning. The experimentation it took for us to figure out that much led to us having laws which prevented unnecessary cruelty to monsters, if you can believe that.”

The old woman was shaking her head over what she perceived to be stupid, overly moralistic law-making, which stood in the way of progress, but that part of her spiel had been virtually lost to Link while his mind wandered. He nearly flinched at the cold of his own touch, when his careful fingers raised to be pressed to the skin at his nape, which still bore the uneven pucker of scar tissue. He suddenly had the frightening suspicion, no, the frightening certainty that he, too, possessed the strange, vining structure, crawling along his back, just beneath his skin- he must have.

That was all that could explain his immortality. That was all that could finally answer the question of precisely what the Yiga Clan had been trying to do to him on the night of the Blood Moon, when they pinned him to the ground and cut him open.

“So then,” Link said, taking a breath to push away the light-headed sensation creeping up on him. He gestured to the cadaver, swallowing to wet his throat before he spoke, “..this person will return to life upon the rise of the Blood Moon?”

“I would say there’s a very high likelihood, without further medical intervention,” the old Zora
answered astutely, her forefins bobbing when she nodded her head.

“Then, the Yiga Clan has somehow unlocked a medical secret to creating immortal warriors,” Link stated, his eyes moving from side to side in thought and in dread.

“Everything in this suggests that, yes, that is the case,” the medical Apostle confirmed, her own voice turning a bit grim. “And I can see, now, why Sheikah medicine was such a well-guarded secret. This is quite the discovery, Champion.”

“Yeah, thanks for showing me,” Link breathed, his hands slowly rising to his face, the cold of his palms pressing overtop of his aching eyes. When they fell away, he kept his stare plastered to the frosted stone of the ground beneath his boots, words echoing from him like they ached in his chest, “I.. I might be feeling a bit squeamish after all, though. I’m gonna go.”

“Very well,” the Apostle replied, kindly making the effort to show her Hylian companion back out the way they came.

Brivere outstretched one arm to push aside the curtain hung upon the entryway to Kree’s recovery area. He found her seated as usual, with her face buried in a book, though her posture clearly reflected the most horrendous boredom. Her small space had been rearranged since Brivere’s last visit- it almost looked as though it were her residence now, with how she’d settled herself in.

With all of the hustle and bustle that constantly took place just outside her cubical of living space, she didn’t notice Brivere’s quiet entrance and for an awkward second, he hesitated to alert her. More than ever, he had to work up quite a nerve to interact with a person so different from himself.

“..Hello, Kree,” he softly uttered, letting the curtain fall aside as he took a small, unassuming pace forward.

The gray Zora’s head shot up at the sound of Brivere’s voice, almost as though she was surprised to see him. He had come unannounced, but it wasn’t like there was no reason for his visit. There was a reason- one she should have been aware of.

“Brivere,” she awkwardly replied. She cleared her throat and set her book aside, but her gaze did not return to him, instead being focused on her hands, which were folded in her lap.

“How are you?” Brivere asked plainly, his own arms tucked behind his back in an overly formal manner.

“Better,” the Zora woman stated, shrugging her shoulders while she did.

“You should be released soon, I would think.” Brivere’s words were slow and wary, and his eyes drifted cautiously down to the stumps of her legs. He’d usually taken care to avoid looking at them too directly, lest he’d offend her in some way. Today, though, there was something new for him to acknowledge. His yellow gaze trailed quickly back to her face, then he said, “Your bandages are off, so you must be healing well.”

“They look.. better, I guess.” She straightened the one in which her knee was still intact, glancing at the scarred masses where her scales drew unevenly together, then she breathed a sigh. “As good as they can look, really. They still hurt, though.”
“I see..” He knew all too well how he must have sounded- embarrassed and unsure. The only saving grace was that she was behaving similarly, and probably for the very same reason, he suspected.

“Kree, I..” Brivere began, taking a deep breath to steady himself, while squaring his shoulders. “I received your correspondence.”

“Oh,” she hummed. “That’s good. And?”

This kind of sheepishness was so unlike her, Brivere had to wonder what she must have been feeling, what she must have been thinking. He hadn’t seen her behave so awkwardly since he watched her propose to Prince Sidon and he distinctly recalled the beam of relief on her countenance when his lord politely declined her offer. It was worse now because she was desperate and sad, and where once she’d imagined a long, successful career for herself, now she saw marriage as her only hope for a future.

That and because, if anything, she despised Brivere. His little visits had hardly changed her mind, if her unrelenting verbal attacks were any indication.

“Could you not have asked me while I was here?” the golden Zora questioned, a little wrinkle of confusion crossing his features.

“It didn’t feel right. There was never a good time. There were never proper words to ask..” Kree explained, shaking her head so that her wide, dotted forefins flapped with her movement. Her nerves were clearly the true answer to Brivere’s questions, and very quickly they caused her previous awkwardness to melt into impatience. “Anyway, stop beating around the bush about it. Will you do it or not?”

The golden Zora, perplexed, blinked a few times in silence, and Kree at last met his eyes with her own sharp stare. Her mouth straightened into a firm line which caused the deep dimples in her cheeks to depress. Even in growing frustration, she had an imploring appearance which beckoned in a way that asked without words for Brivere to spare her pride and not reduce her to begging.

“It’s difficult for me to conceive of why you would even want to,” he stated warily, finally unfolding his arms and gesturing his own confusion. “You and I can’t even maintain a pleasant friendship, yet you want to be... married?”

“Like I’ve said before, nobody else will even consider me.” She folded her arms tight against her chest. “At the very least, you seem to make an effort. You kind of care, I suppose.”

“Oh. So now I am capable of caring about things?” he blurted in a mean, unnecessary way, feeling guilty at the way Kree faltered as he said it. He would fault that damned Hylian- he was spending too much time around him and beginning to mirror his bad habits. He didn’t want to leave it as an insult, and so added, “You have quite a way of contradicting yourself, you know.”

“I know. I’ve always been like that, so don’t fool yourself into thinking that I’m giving you special treatment, or anything. I don’t save it all for you.” Kree snapped in reply, her fangs shining with her words. Well, good, Brivere clearly hadn’t completely broken her with his own mean comment, either, if she still had that much spirit.

The gray-scaled woman let out a little huff, then leaned to one side in her chair, setting her hardest stare upon the golden Zora. She hadn’t expected this to be such a damn bargaining process. “Look, our union would restore your aristocracy, and we could have children to build a legacy from, rather than both of us remaining in this desperate position that we’re in. You have more to gain than you have to lose here.”
“And I was your last choice.” It didn’t take Brivere more than a few seconds to fire back. This time, however, he wasn’t incredibly serious and his offense was feigned. In his opinion, he shouldn’t have even been included in those Kree had considered, because every interaction between them was disastrous. Even so, he crossed his arms, and turned his head aside with a flick of movement. “Forgive me for saying so, but my pride is a little wounded.”

“Uhh..” Kree hummed, not quickly catching on to the fact that Brivere didn’t mean what he was saying, but was speaking in jest. When she did catch the well-hidden shine of mischief in his eyes, she was more offended that he’d had the audacity to joke about something which was life and death for her.

“Are you making a joke?” she hissed, letting out an impatient sigh and trying her very, very best not to lose her temper. This was the one instance when she was sure that it wouldn’t do her any good.

“You weren’t my ‘last choice’,,” she groaned, her voice coming out a bit more quietly in her embarrassment and total dishonesty. Brivere knew immediately that she was lying, and the dubious tilt of his head gave that much away.

“Okay, yeah, you were my last choice, but not because I thought you were a bad choice,” Kree backpedaled, gesturing with her hands while she tried and failed to explain herself. “Or, well, there were better choices, but it wasn’t personal. Actually, it wasn’t personal against you, but apart from hoping to get somebody from a decent family, I had another reason for being.. wary. And that was a personal reason but it’s hard to think about, so let’s just move on to your answer, maybe?”

“.Kree,” the Zora man breathed, his head shaking already. He was beyond unimpressed and beginning to lose his own typically steady sense of patience.

“Brivere, what is it? Can’t you just give me a yes or no?” the gray Zora hissed, the pitch of her voice going up with her words. “Or at least tell me if you’re only interested in men, so that I’ll know to stop wasting my time.”

“Pardon me?” Brivere uttered, his eyes narrowing.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Kree scoffed, swatting her hand at him. “You’re not the only Knight in our Order who gave Prince Sidon the googoo eyes.”

He hadn’t thought he’d been so transparent, so her answer came to him as quite a surprise. He must not have been hiding his innermost thoughts and feelings as well as he’d assumed. Regardless, he recovered from her assertion, opting to say little to deny it.

“It’s not that,” he reassured. “My preferences aren’t a narrow thing.”

“Then what?” the woman implored, seeming to take his answer as more of a, ‘I like women fine, I just don’t like you,’ and she was waiting to hear him verbally confirm it, if he had the guts to say such a thing to her face. “Am I not good enough for you, even with the promise of nobility to offer? Are you holding out for someone more capable? More glamorous? More domestic?”

“I was holding out for the hope that somebody might love me, one day,” Brivere stated, like it was the most simple and honest answer he had to offer. He believed it was and that it should have been, but only moments after he’d spoken his declaration, he faltered, his head drooping lower while a quiet sigh came from him. “I suppose that was folly and naivety on my part.”

Surprisingly, Kree said nothing. Brivere fully expected her to jump on an easy opportunity to mock him in this rare instance of vulnerability, but oddly enough she’d either chosen not to, or she was so
stunned that she couldn’t form words.

“And, for the record,” Brivere went on, deciding it was best to leave off on something better than his own emotional turmoil, “I rather like the idea of domesticity; preparing meals for those I care about and such. Gestures like that probably seem small but I’ve always felt that they were meaningful.”

It was a task that had fallen to him for so long, he couldn’t imagine leaving it all to anyone else, anyway.

In amusement which was bereft of any actual mockery, Kree let out a surprised laugh, smiling in a way which appeared genuine. “I’m sorry,” she uttered, “I never imagined that you were such a soft, little honey cake.”

“Honey cake?” the Knight parroted, the accusation eliciting a breathy laugh from him. He supposed that was the most endearing insult that had ever been hurled in his direction. Even so, within a few moments, his smile faded away and a troubled shadow crossed his features. He looked to Kree in uncertainty, conflicted over the situation at hand and he found that she shrank a bit once she quieted, too, like she could feel his rejection nearing.

“I will have to consider it,” he answered at last and her eyes snapped back to him as he did. “If somebody else confirms their interest in the meantime, so be it. If not, then I will weigh my options and get back to you. Is that fair enough, for now?”

“Yeah,” she replied, both hopeful and disappointed. “Sure, Brivere.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends. I know that this is a beast of a story, but I hope that you're all enjoying it. Please follow me on my social media, because I really appreciate the company. <3

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Thank you~
Chapter Summary

Awakenings often represented the dawn of a new day, new beginnings, fresh starts. Awakenings were meant to offer hope, to reassure one that if previous efforts had been for naught, another attempt laid before them, promising eventual success. That was not at all what this awakening was to represent, however. Instead it was dismal and hopeless, riddled with bad news and burdens to carry - but at least the Zora Prince wouldn’t be carrying those burdens alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Betaal had been rendered empty of words to speak. That had always been her dilemma, it seemed. It wasn’t that she lacked the ability to sculpt her ideas into language, oh no, but in times of stress, when delicate matters needed to be addressed, the disconnect between her head and tongue grew all the more distant.

And yet Dunma had been full of questions. In her desperation, she’d prodded at the older woman for solutions, pacing back and forth in Betaal’s room, whereas the Sergeant was absolutely still and silent.

There were no answers and it was hardly any surprise that their shoddy defenses had finally fallen. They were a living, breathing disaster pair, too swallowed up by their own infatuation to do what was right for themselves or each other.

Hadh’t Betaal said that she couldn’t be the one to guide Dunma any longer? Hadn’t she said that she couldn’t lead her? She couldn’t even guide herself anymore.

Their evening ended with Betaal’s eventual order for Dunma to leave the situation alone for the night and to get some rest instead of working herself up. She hated having to admit that the younger woman’s panic only served to further tighten her already taut nerves. Having to face the truth of the matter - that she was alone in this struggle - wasn’t any less demoralizing, but at least she could concentrate.

The following day, Betaal acted upon the only slight line of defense that she could devise in such a short amount of time. She went about her business as though nothing was amiss, then, in the afternoon lull, she set off down the stairs from her room and strode into the dining hall of the Ton Pu Inn, where a scant few travelers had gathered for lunch alongside locals and Zora refugees alike.

Dahlia’s pearlescent scales were difficult to miss. She was a beauty who turned the heads of many and upturned the noses of even more. Betaal hadn’t failed to notice that her former lover had established the inn as her haunt, but they’d said only a few polite words in passing now and again. Dahlia scarcely even acknowledged Betaal when the other Undercity woman was adorned in her armor.

However, Betaal was entirely stripped of the cumbersome silverscale, when she finally approached the other. She took a seat across from Dahlia in the dining hall, lowering her weight gently onto the
“Well hello, Sweet Blue,” the other Undercity woman cooed, disguising her own surprise with a small smile. Her gaze was a smoldering amber that warmed Betaal’s scales, likened to the very drink which Dahlia was nursing, a hot, spiced ale that the Hateno Villagers enjoyed in the autumn months.

“Hello, Dahlia.” Betaal’s voice was the usual gruff sound, but she was calm and even despite her circumstances. For a coy second, she bit at her lip, her single-eyed gaze averted in embarrassment, then slowly, her sights bravely returned to the familiar countenance of the woman across from her.

“I, um…” the Sergeant cleared her throat, raising her voice so that her words were clearly audible, “I know that I’m being rather abrupt about this, but I may need a favor from you, if you’d be so kind.”

With cheeks that were painted by an embarrassed flush, Betaal reached for the rupee pouch which hung from the belt at her hip. Her sharp fingerscales clinked against the jewels, then she drew out a small handful, opening her palm and tilting her head to one side just long enough to count them before she laid them upon the table, sliding the rather generous payment across the surface and into her former lover’s reach.

The blue Zora was patient as she awaited Dahlia’s consideration. The warmth of the other Undercity woman’s gaze was narrowed in confusion. Even in their time as partners, Betaal had never been entirely comfortable with the notion of sex trade. Dahlia knew her to be an overly righteous sort, unrelenting in her belief that this kind of work had always been beneath Dahlia in some way, though perhaps that was the product of jealousy.

Dahlia’s eyes drew upward, from the small pile of rupees, to the face of her former lover. Betaal tried hard to appear quite sure of herself, but her sheepishness was something that couldn’t be fully concealed. She was honest to a fault, and her attempts to be anything otherwise was likened to a child sneaking something past their parent’s watchful eye, all while that forbidden something was tucked beneath a sheet too comedically small to offer any kind of disguise.

Nevertheless, the intrigue of there being more to this situation than what was readily apparent was as tempting to Dahlia as the promised payment. She outstretched one hand to accept the rupees, while pushing her drink across to her former flame in offering.

“I’m happy to help you, my Sweet Blue,” Dahlia cooed with a soft smile.

;)

Without even trying, their timing had been amazingly synched. Link had spent only five or so minutes in silence, waiting for Brivere to return to the dive bell and he sighed in relief when the golden Zora appeared. He hadn’t wanted to be forced to think too deeply about the gruesome facts which had been newly revealed to him, about the bizarre structure that was undoubtedly interwoven up his spine, and of how now he possessed confirmation that he had more in common with monsters than with people.

But hey, who better to offer a distraction than the Prince’s stuffy Knight, right?

Actually, that was what Link had assumed. However, Brivere was even more distant and serious than ever, as though he, too, had been given reason to be deep in thought. He actually apologized for being so distracted, though, and while Link gleaned some momentary amusement from that, he remembered very quickly that the Knight put him in an unpleasant mood for various other reasons.

Their very last awkward conversation was hardly even the tip of this Vah Ruta-sized iceberg,
because even when Link wasn’t accidentally spewing the verbal equivalent of, ‘Nah nah, Sidon loves me, not you,’ he was still painfully aware that his presence, no, his existence, was a reminder that Brivere’s own affections had been unrequited.

And knowing that, Link couldn’t help the way his heart replied to Brivere’s company- by filling him with guilt- to which he physically replied with revulsion. Anger and jealousy had been, somehow, more palatable.

Even so, by the time they reached the surface, and Brivere kindly extended his hand to assist the Hylian in crawling free of that horrid, little aquatic prison that was his one and only way back and forth from the Basilica, Link had already simmered in his guilt to the point that he was like tender, flavorful meat, falling off the bone. Also kinda hungry; the food shortage wasn’t helping.

“I’m sorry, too,” he blurted, mumbling the words a bit, though Brivere clearly caught them, nevertheless. Since their conversation was so disjointed, however, the golden Zora paused in consideration, trying to ascertain what it was that the Champion was apologizing for, then when no clear answer came to him, he replied.

“May I ask, what have you done now that warrants forgiveness?” Brivere smoothly asked, leaving Link chuckling bitterly over his chosen phrasing.

“You asshole,” the Hylian muttered over his own breathy laughter, then he sheepishly shrugged, unsure how he even wanted to approach the answer to the golden Zora’s question. He fell in step with Brivere while he contemplated it, slowly ascending the stairs that would take them to the Uppercity. The other Zora could’ve climbed the falls with much more ease, yet he’d apparently taken the Hylian’s limitations into account.

“Just.. everything, okay? That’s what I’m apologizing for,” Link snapped, keeping his words curt not just because he couldn’t come up with anything better, but also because he’d lost his breath a bit by the time they stood at the upper landing of the stairs. It was probably for the best that he kept it short, because at least that way he was less likely to say something to make it worse.

He fully expected the self-righteous Knight’s response to be something akin to, ‘Don’t apologize. Do better,’ which would’ve been a failure to acknowledge that the attempted apology was, in fact, also an attempt to do better. Instead, Link was surprised when he brought his gaze upon the golden Zora’s normally pinched features and found his countenance softened ever so slightly, while a small upturn was present at the corners of his mouth.

Brivere gave no sharp retort. Instead, he gently nodded his head and said nothing more.

Link wished he could be satisfied with that, yet some vile, distant thing inside of him was already insisting that he didn’t deserve such ease of forgiveness. He wondered, though, if it was really Brivere’s forgiveness he had in mind, or-

The Hylian’s train of thought was averted from its previously scheduled wreck and derailed entirely when his attention was taken hold of by a large gathering of Zora civilians, lining the Uppercity square. He was immediately unnerved to see such a large group of Zora people, despite that he held a great affection for them, for the most part. Even so, Link sidestepped to shorten the distance between himself and Brivere, the alliance that had been established between them rendering itself a comforting instinct, now.

When Link’s pace momentarily stalled, Brivere paused at his side, casting a questioning glance downward quickly enough to catch the moment when the color drained from Link’s complexion and a glazed look glassed his wide-eyed stare. It didn’t take very deep thought for the Knight to be sure
that his Hylian companion must have been telling himself that these people wouldn’t commence to chanting, ‘Kill him! Kill him!’ the moment they realized he was approaching.

Carefully, the golden Zora placed his hand upon the shorter man’s shoulder and the weight of it was enough to ground the Hylian where he stood. Link took a deep breath in order to tether his wild, fighting instincts, then continued his forward momentum in order to find out why this crowd really had gathered.

He had a feeling, an instinct that was driving him; he was curious, sure, but curiosity wasn’t normally enough to forcefully insert him into a tightly woven cluster of bodies, all of which were larger than his. With Brivere following along behind him, Link pushed through the more loose area at the back of the gathering, then, using his small stature to his advantage, he began threading himself between the Zoras.

That feeling inside him intensified, tightening in his chest, trembling through his limbs; perhaps it was just excitement, apprehension, false hope. He couldn’t find the right words to define it and he wasn’t in the habit of rationalizing his blind instincts, anyway.

But those same blind instincts, despite how he failed at naming them, had rarely led him astray. That was why he trusted his gut, his intuition, and as usual, it did not disappoint him. When he broke through the main mass of the crowd, he found himself looking on the sight of a guardsman who was not quite the Guard Captain, yet who was adorned in armor that was ever so slightly fancier than the standard make; this Zora and a few others were keeping the crowd at bay, while two other very familiar individuals stood in the soft glow of the statue of the Zora Champion.

The first familiar face was that of the Royal Secretary, Laflat, who Link hadn’t interacted with since his tedious hunt through the Basilica archives. She stood at the side of a much taller figure, whose lush, red scales set the Hylian’s heart to unnerved and excited pounding, as though he’d suddenly located a priceless treasure that had gone missing. As metaphorical as that was, it wasn’t so terribly far from the truth, so Link couldn’t fault his pulse for the way it was skipping in merriment, though it certainly did cause a strange rush of blood to his head, further unsteadying him.

“Sidon,” Link murmured in a way that got lost beneath the noise from the crowd. And regardless of the way the Zora Prince was under guard, Link stepped forward, his footsteps quickening into a dash that was only overlooked thanks to the fact that everyone knew exactly who he was. Either that, or he was just so goddamn small that he slipped past without the Zoras noticing— that was also very likely.

“Sidon!” he called aloud, his voice strengthening, his dash quickening. The Zora Prince tensed at the sound of his name and at the even more welcome sound of the voice which had cried out. The length of his tail straightened in alert and his towering form turned swiftly on heel to face the onslaught of Hylian, bolting gladly in his direction.

Link did not see the instant that the Zora Prince’s melancholy expression shifted to surprise, then tender joy, but that moment fell surely somewhere between when Sidon’s golden eyes beheld the blurred rush that was his dear companion, and when Link bounded into a spring that cast him directly into the Prince’s arms.

Luckily, all the disaster in their realm could not snuff out the fulfillment that came with the purest of joys; seeing one another again, at last. A resonant laugh bubbled from the awakened Prince as Link was ensnared and pressed to his chest. He spun the Hylian around in a single circle, as though Link’s tiny weight was little different than a windswept, billowing skirt.

Sidon’s tail swung over one shoulder from the twirl, though it was easily shrugged to its usual
position down his back. The Prince cradled his dearest one in his arms like a babe, an act which would’ve been unthinkable not so long ago, and certainly not allowed nor tolerated. Now, however, before the watchful eyes of all the Domain, Link rested in the crook of his lover’s arm and stretched himself up to twine his arms around Sidon’s neck, pressing a needful kiss to the Zora’s lips.

If the entire Sovereign wasn’t privy to their romantic involvement before, they certainly were now.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t there when you woke up,” Link muttered against the Zora’s lips, the skin between his brows furrowing in his disappointment. His voice was quiet, only audible to himself and Sidon, who opened his own eyes and turned his head very slightly to one side so the slit of his pupil focused on Link’s features.

“I’d been waiting all day and you didn’t stir,” the Hylian lamented, his fingers furling, his bundled hands resting against the Prince’s collarbones. He let out a sigh, and added, “It figures that you’d get up the moment I step away for a bit.”

“Please, think nothing of it my dear one,” Sidon replied without need for thought, ever forgiving, no matter how many times Link fell short of minimal expectations. His pale lips curved into a genuine smile, however, and his golden eyes vibrantly shined at his companion’s nearness. He truly wasn’t offended, and though Link was unaware, Sidon had still sought out the Hylian’s familiar energy signature when he stirred, locating him close enough that his promise of being the first one the Prince sensed nearby was fulfilled, even so.

“It’s delightful to see you again,” the Prince uttered, his smile a faded remnant of its former brightness, manageable now for Link and Link, alone. He brought his hand close to the Hylian’s face, one knuckle providing a gentle caress to the Link’s cheek before he pressed his own much smaller hand to the Zora’s, nudging two, callused fingers into the spaces between Sidon’s.

“I’ve missed you terribly,” Sidon added, what was left of his smile at last dimming as a terrible weight stained his features and burdened his tone. He’d so often been the Champion’s source of comfort, yet like never before, he needed Link to be that in turn.

Another figure, at last, was nodded past by the Guard Lieutenant, interrupting the reunion between the Prince and Link, without the full intention of doing so. It took Brivere a few moments longer to make it through the crowd, but he managed, coming to stand nearby in silence while he waited for acknowledgment. It wasn’t something he believed was due, nor expected, but merely something that stood a chance of occurring, something that he hoped for, despite that his heart was running an uncomfortable race which his face dared not betray.

The golden Zora was bold in his own way, allowing his yellow eyes to venture across the figures before him. Sidon was awash in both pain and joy, everything about him so perfectly honest, so bittersweet. Link was much the same, happy in a way he rarely ever was, even to the point that it was outwardly visible. Brivere wished that he didn’t resent it, that he didn’t envy it. Only the former jealousy in his heart had fallen silent, replaced instead by the regret that love, for them, had been rendered a cozy home in which they resided, while he stood just outside, paying witness, uninvited.

He even felt the passing, bitter certainty that the Champion would lose whatever interest he’d grown for him over the last few days. Sidon hadn’t been around and Link was bored- that was why his attention shifted to the Knight, instead. But now? His temporary use had expired. The necessity for alliance no longer existed.

When Sidon’s gaze fell politely upon his waiting Knight, Brivere averted his own eyes immediately, letting them drift lower, instead. Even so, he’d still seen the way Sidon’s happiness shriveled in reply to his presence. Brivere didn’t need empathic powers to be all too aware- it was awkward. He made
it awkward.

Brivere dipped his head before his Prince, his tone soft and neutral as he spoke in greeting. “It heartens me to see you on your feet, my lord,” he uttered, bent in respect. “The Domain hasn’t quite been the same without your radiant presence.”

He would not raise his head until Sidon replied; that was his usual way. He was still, yet the pause extended, the silence leaving him fretting over whether he should dare to stand straight, whether he should’ve dared to speak at all, and then-

“Have you been planning on saying that all day long?” The sound of the Hylian Champion’s voice ended the quiet, his words those of mockery and yet an effort, too, to break the tension. Brivere swallowed dryly, straightening himself without any word from his Prince, his every movement slow and cautious. When he dared to raise his eyes from the ground, it was not to look upon Sidon, but Link, finding that there was mercy in the cool blue of his gaze, something apologetic to belie his words.

“That sounded really rehearsed,” Link quipped, wearing a smile at the corners of his mouth.

“It may surprise you to learn that most people do take their words into consideration before speaking them,” Brivere retorted with a great deal of ease, his words not sharp but soft, his entire being unexpectedly comforted by the exchange between himself and the Hylian- it was playfulness.

The Knight certainly never expected to find a friend in his former rival and definitely not amidst this uncomfortable period of alienation between himself and Prince Sidon. He was grateful; he hoped Link knew that.

“Hm. I see the two of you are getting on rather spectacularly,” Sidon commented, the small exchange between the others loosening his voice from where it had gotten caught. He did not notice the underlying lightheartedness and instead mistook it for actual friction. Brivere, on the other hand, recognized that the Prince’s intuitive skills had been stifled, for him to miss such a thing.

He’d walled himself off, but the Knight couldn’t be sure if it was from him, specifically, or if Sidon merely needed to give his idle, empathic abilities a rest after such extensive use. Against his own nature, he didn’t wish to think too deeply about it.

Carefully, Sidon lowered his tiny lover back to the ground, making perfectly certain that Link was steady before he took his hands away. When the Zora straightened, the very first thing Link did was crane his neck, tilting his head back to measure the new distance between himself and his Prince’s lofty height. Squinting, the Hylian flicked his fringe back from his face, then settled his hands upon his hips, finally shrugging over the matter, entirely.

“Maybe it’s just all the same to me at this point, but I can’t even tell that you’re any bigger,” he concluded. His eyes wandered up and down the Zora’s frame in further observation, but even so, Sidon was just ‘really big,’ and Link couldn’t quantify that any more accurately.

“He’s nearly a foot taller than he was before,” Brivere added, his voice a low rumble, audibly uncertain. He was sure of his answer, but not of his place in providing it. Link turned to glance at the golden Zora after he spoke, then quickly back to Sidon when the Prince said.. nothing at all. The Hylian was perfectly certain that between the three of them, he was still the most uncomfortable of all, because he was the most helpless to amend the very apparent chasm.

Eventually, Brivere broke beneath the weight of the reality that he simply wasn’t wanted, and so cleared his throat to speak once more, “My apologies if we’ve interrupted your meeting with the
Royal Secretary, my lord.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Sidon replied, relenting yet also breathing a dismal sigh at the reminder of all he’d learned upon stirring. “I surely needed something to fortify my spirits after waking up to such bleak news.”

“I see..” A curt nod of the Knight’s head was offered, his long forefins swaying with even his most subtle movement. He wanted to be relieved in thinking that his Prince’s dispirited behavior was a reaction to the poor state of Zora’s Domain, but that was hardly any better, really. Instead, it was just selfish of him. “In that case, I hope you’ll excuse my absence. I’m sure that you and the Champion have much to catch up on.”

“Indeed,” came Sidon’s simple response. Brivere bowed his head once more, then turned to retreat back through the crowd, leaving the Prince alone with the Hylian, who was peering up at him with muddled uncertainty in the blue of his eyes.

When Brivere was gone from sight, Sidon bundled one hand into a loose fist, holding it near his lips while he cleared his throat, then he placed his opposite hand upon his Hylian companion’s shoulder. There was scarcely room for even three of his fingers to rest against the smaller man, but the great difference between them was ever familiar.

“Actually, my dear one,” Sidon began, his guilty, golden eyes averted from the Champion’s own imploring gaze, “..I know that you’ve been quite patient in waiting for me, but would you mind ever so terribly giving me a bit more time to get my thoughts in order? It seems there is much for me to consider, I’m afraid.”

“Of course. Whatever you need,” Link breathed, nodding his head in easy acceptance. He brought his hand to take hold of Sidon, however, not allowing the Zora to escape him just yet. His fingertips pressed into the intricate furrows of the silverscale cuff at Sidon’s wrist, and at the grasping hold, the Prince’s hand moved to affectionately brush one of the Hylian’s pointed ears.

“Can I add just one thing to your pile of news, for the sake of making it a small bit better?” Link spoke- it wasn’t really a request. His tone of voice was assertive enough to make it a clear statement. He was quite serious about comforting the downtrodden Prince and Sidon’s attentive gaze offered silent compliance.

“While you slept, I traveled to Kakariko Village and requested that the Sheikah people send emergency food supplies to Zora’s Domain, to help with the shortage,” Link quickly explained. He didn’t even do it for the sake of pride, for the sake of being a hero, or impressing anyone; he did it because he cared and wanted to do his own part. “It’s not much, but hopefully it provides some relief.”

“Thank you, my dear one.” A tiny smile found its way back to Sidon’s lips, his heart ever warmed by his most beloved Hylian’s will to serve the Zora people like they were his own. For the sake of lessening the distance between them, Sidon stooped carefully down onto one knee, all while Link swatted a hand at the unnecessary nature of it. Nevertheless, the Prince greatly desired whatever small inkling of nearness he could obtain.

Sidon’s palms were displayed before the Hylian and Link laid his hands upon the soft pale of them, his thumbs brushing the flexible flesh of the webbings which stretched between the Zora’s fingers.

“Do you recall the guest quarters near the reservoir?” Sidon purred in questioning, “Perhaps meeting there could offer a meaningful change of scenery? I’m sure that you’re tired of staring at the walls of my tower.”
A half-hearted grin was given, like a gift, from Link to the Prince, and he quietly nodded his head. The certainty of having Sidon’s time set aside for him was pleasing, of course. It just would have been better if everything else in all the world didn’t suck- that was probably his fault.

“You’re intuitive as ever,” Link bluntly stated. He was incredibly sick of looking at the inside of Sidon’s tower. He’d found all sort of random faces in the grain of the stone, and it had begun to seem like the walls were watching him as a result.

Sidon tilted his head to one side, his forefins swaying. This is were he normally would have said something excited, exuberant; instead he skipped all of that. “Shall we meet there in order to catch up then, in an hour from now?”

Nodding, Link confirmed. Sidon clambered back to his feet and straightened, his towering height framed by the pale luminance of Mipha’s hovering, ever-watchful form, immortalized in stone. Link decided to add another, more awkward nod to reconfirm, when he realized too late that he needed to walk away, quickening his step to make up for it when at last he turned on heel and retreated.

Sidon watched while his dear companion disappeared in much the same direction as his Knight, then the Prince let out a tired sigh. He glanced in the direction of Laflat, who had been waiting quietly all the while, wishing he’d thought to permit her to leave sooner than this very moment. With a sympathetic shadow upon his features, Sidon gestured to the pink Zora, saying, “Laflat, you’re dismissed as well.”

“Highness,” she uttered weakly, her webbed toes pattering atop the stone as she took a few steps nearer. “Is there anything more you need?”

“.My people are Blighted, starving, fleeing their homes and now on the verge of infighting,” he stated gravely, the weight tight in his chest, tighter in his throat. Slowly, he turned his sights back to the timeless image of his dear sister, peering up at her much the same as he had so long ago, when he swore before her that he would protect their kingdom from harm.

“What I need is time to think, if you please,” he muttered at last.

“As you wish,” Laflat replied, bowing her head respectfully before she, too, scurried aside.

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends. I'm going to attempt to shift my update day back to Friday, but the key word in all of this is 'attempt.' We'll have to see how it works and how it goes. Also, yes this update was very, very late. I fell into a bit of writer's block and took an unofficial break.

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Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

While Betaal reconnected with an old friend, Estuu was making his best effort to fully develop a newly budded friendship. Betaal held the hope of creating a convenient illusion, though it was clear that her friend was upholding some illusions of her own. And in Estuu's case, there were few illusions to speak of, and instead a fearful mystery that seemed too threatening for him to unravel, alone. The Zora Prince, too, desperately needed an evening for reconnection, but there was peace in the knowledge that, for all the dilemmas the future wrought, he had a dear friend by his side, as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Betaal’s single eye was focused on the sun streaking through a nearby window. A warm, slanted column of light rendered the woodgrain of the walls that much deeper in hue. Tiny bits of dust drifted on the slightest rush of air when the doors opened and shut, and all of that was a welcome distraction to the feeling of Dahlia’s hand sliding up Betaal’s scarred thigh.

The other woman’s smooth fingerscales found every old furrow of damage misaligning the blue Zora’s scales, then occasionally some new ones, so tender, so full of admiration and yet.. it didn’t feel the same.

Betaal had been so sure, once upon a time, that she would’ve died for this woman. She’d sought the warmth of Dahlia’s palms against her flesh, the burning pride that would blaze to life anytime that Dahlia glanced her way. She could remember the affection in the other woman’s eyes back then, the smiles that she was so good at faking, yet were always genuine whenever she smiled at Betaal. Betaal could remember all of that in such cruel clarity, so much so that it all felt unreal now.

The memory of their romance was an empty, melancholy husk, tainted by all of the emotional disasters that took the beauty and dedication that had existed between them once and destroyed it. Maybe Dahlia’s hand on Betaal’s cheek now was a farce, a show for the curious onlookers of the Ton Pu Inn, maybe Dahlia’s lips pressed to Betaal’s own was a trick, but it almost felt, for a moment, like she was the one being fooled.

And it wasn’t necessarily the memory of their broken love, nor the fake kisses so tenderly left upon her lips that hurt her. What frightened her all the more was the sad fact that everything she once felt for Dahlia was gone, and she worried that one day, she might feel that same hollow emptiness whenever she thought of Dunma.

More than anything, Betaal was afraid that this world would poison something else so pure, leaving their hearts a scarred battleground, and a battered memorial of their love as it died.

“Ah..” A quiet sigh fell across Betaal’s lips, then gently caressed Dahlia’s own in her nearness. “Can we take this to my room?”

The passing glances and intrigued stares of people surrounding them in the dining area might have been the true point of all this, but Betaal was beginning to feel them physically. Easily enough,
Dahlia gave her a charming smile- a fake one- then she nodded her approval. The pearly-scaled woman reached for her mug, upturning it to down what remained of her spiced ale, then she got to her feet.

They climbed the stairs to Betaal’s room with laced fingers and warm palms pressed close. The off-duty Sergeant was certain that her fins had flushed vivid red from the buzz of the drink.

The light was amber and rose upon Dahlia’s scales in the privacy of the other woman’s rented quarters. They’d hardly tucked themselves behind the privacy screen before the pearly Zora’s hands went to Betaal’s chest, the soft scales of her palms flush with the hard strength that resided there. They stumbled together for a few clumsy paces, with Dahlia giggling against Betaal’s lips while she pushed her toward the bed, falling there between her thighs.

It didn’t take Dahlia long to recover from the graceless topple, and within a quick instant, her arms had tucked underneath Betaal’s own, twisting around her chest while Dahlia delivered another sweet kiss to the blue Zora’s lips.

“Nn, w-wait,” Betaal mumbled against the other woman’s lips. “Just a moment, Dahlia.”

It didn’t take much more than that to dissuade Dahlia. If she was anything, she was a good listener- that was what made her good at her job. That and she knew exactly how to appeal to almost anyone.

“What is it, Blue?” she asked, placing enough space between herself and Betaal that she could look into the other woman’s face, then, when she noticed the shadow of concern furrowing Betaal’s features, she backed off entirely, opting to seat herself at the blue Zora’s side, instead.

Betaal’s chest expanded with a deep breath that she took for steadiness, the white parts of her body seeming all the more pale, out from beneath the armor she typically wore. She let out a deep sigh, then turned to face the woman by her side, hoping that there was still enough connection between them for Dahlia to gladly offer the mercy that Betaal desperately needed.

“I haven’t been entirely honest with you,” Betaal confessed, her tone rough and low.

Dahlia blinked in uncertainty, but her voice was completely steady. “What?”

“I do need this favor from you, yes, and you can keep the payment,” Betaal hurriedly reassured, “but the favor isn’t exactly what you thought it was.”

“Hm. I knew something was amiss when you made that offer,” Dahlia purred, her tone soft velvet and her eyes narrowed as she shook her head. “I knew it wasn’t like you. What’s going on, Blue?”

“I needed to create an illusion, an illusion that I’m not tied romantically to anyone. Hopefully, by paying you for your services in front of so many people, it’ll give that impression.” In Betaal’s mind, it shouldn’t have been too much to ask, but she didn’t risk glancing up at the expression on Dahlia’s face. Her hands fumbled about while she continued, “If you could just, please, stay with me for tonight. My room is comfortable, and we could just talk like we used to, into the late hours.”

“We can still do that, right?” Betaal added with a nervous chuckle which faded back into seriousness with a shake of her head. So much for the assumption that having a few drinks in herself would make her less of a mess when it came to speaking to women. She shrugged with an exasperated breath, then gestured to dismiss her previous whimsy. “If not, I can also shut it and let you enjoy a night of peace. That’s fine, too.”

“Not a chance,” Dahlia snapped in a way that caused Betaal to visibly flinch. At last, the off-duty Sergeant’s single, golden eye drifted upward, only to catch a sly smile curving the other woman’s
pretty lips.

“I’m your guest now, so you had best be a good host,” the pearly-scaled Zora asserted, nudging her elbow into Betaal’s side in a playful way, which had the other woman sighing in relief.

“Right,” Betaal agreed, “Once I recover from the heart attack you just gave me, I’ll consider it.”

A snide, little chuckle came from the pale Zora to announce how pleased she was with herself, for grabbing that terrifying instant of vengeance on her ex lover. Now that she knew that she didn’t, in fact, have a job to do, she flopped down on her back on the surface of Betaal’s mattress, stretching her legs so they laid atop the other woman’s thighs.

“I have missed this..” Dahlia quietly uttered her admission, gazing up at the ceiling as she spoke. “I’ve missed you. I know that our split was for the best but it’s hard not to regret it. I’ve never met anyone else that I could build the same connection to, not like we had.”

The blankets puckered beneath Dahlia’s body while her shoulders rolled into a lazy shrug, then she tilted her head to one side, catching Betaal staring down at her with a distant, melancholy affection written on her features.

“..or maybe time has jaded me and I’m just not the same person I was back then,” Dahlia said.

“How so?” Betaal asked, the rough sound of her voice taking on a warm tone. “But growth is a natural change to make. If you’ve changed, even if it made you colder, or harder, it can only be for the best, I’m sure.”

“You would say that,” Dahlia uttered with a soft sigh, turning her head to one side, so that her cheek was pressed into the soft of the sheets and her tail trailed lazily off the side of the bed.

“So what is this about?” the reclined woman asked. She didn’t indicate that she already had some clue as to what was going on, but she did. She’d been present the previous evening, when a young guardsman came hurrying down from Betaal’s room, with some pretty thing chasing at his tail as though to stop him. Dahlia tipped her head back in Betaal’s direction, blinking in curiosity. “You’ve got that nervous look, like something is causing you too much distress- I still recognize it.”

“Hm,” Betaal hummed her hesitance, her lips pulling into a tight line while her tail fins twitched in thought.

Dahlia pushed herself up onto her elbows, setting a disbelieving stare upon her former love. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“I do trust you. I wouldn’t have brought you into this wild scheme if I didn’t,” Betaal hurriedly reassured, her words coming so quickly that there was no time left for doubt. “But I’ve already spent more time thinking about my situation than I’d like, so if it’s alright, I’d much rather a lighter conversation, for the sake of comfort.”

“Alright, Blue,” Dahlia muttered with a small smile, “if you say so.”

Betaal turned to look on Dahlia as she kindly agreed- her smile was still fake.

; Estuu was on a roll lately. He was beginning to think that his mystery and silence had a kind of charm, a merit that endeared him to people. He’d never considered that before, but his recent acquisition of yet another quick friend afforded him a fresh perspective, a renewed confidence.
He planned to write to Koko, as promised, as soon as possible, or as soon as he could actually produce a legible letter in which to send. First and foremost, however, he wanted to check in on his more local friend, just to see if she and her sister were still surviving.

Neydri and Zala- Estuu had been wondering if their food supply had run dry yet. He’d spent his last days gorging until he felt fat as a bog leech, so it didn’t suit him to simply ignore the possibility that they’d gone back to eating- what was it again- clay?

No, Estuu wouldn’t allow that. He was sure that in the long run, using his magic to assist two people wasn’t actually making that much of a difference, and while that had become a strangely pervasive worry in his mind, it didn’t matter for now. He would make a difference in their lives and it would matter plenty to them.

He remembered with ease the approximate location of their home, and from there it was simple enough to find. Of the many little, cave-like openings in all the Undercity, the entryway to theirs was most overgrown with the lush green of water wisteria, the furrows in the stone traced by the delicate roots of the plants, extending their reach and spreading outward in all directions. One had to wonder if their family had made the effort to cultivate the greenery and brighten up their otherwise dismal dwelling.

Estuu paddled into the underwater cavern, quick and nimble in his movements, even as the light from outside dimmed into thick shadow. He surfaced with a gasp inside the nook of shelter that was his friends’ home, his tiny chest expanding and contracting while he caught his breath and his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting.

He hated dry diving. It was the actual worst.

The young Zora’s fingerscales grappled at the moist stone as he pulled himself up from the pool, water streaming across his scarlet scales. Out of politeness, he hovered for a moment, attempting to drip mostly dry before he proceeded into the living space.

The ceiling of Neydri and Zala’s dwelling was dotted with shimmering traces of luminous stone, which lit the cavern in pale blue. Estuu’s eyes were likened to gems in their own right, wide and glassy gold, gazing and reflecting the twinkle which crested the dark space above. His fingertips brushed the edge of the table surface where he’d dined with the Undercity sisters before, a tactile inspection of the home which now seemed.. vacant?

Where had Neydri and Zala gone? Were they off attending to some kind of business, searching for food on their own, or perhaps having a sisterly outing of some kind?

Estuu’s observant gaze traced the sight of a few old, dusty pots which had once lined the wall, yet were now scattered across the floor in haphazard disarray, which left him with the vague suspicion that something wasn’t right here, that something unfortunate had occurred and all he could do was puzzle over the details left behind.

And then, from complete still and silence, the scrape of toeclaws upon stone caught Estuu’s attention and his head flicked toward the source of the noise, his forefins swinging with his rapid motion.

From a slight nook around the corner, a mysterious, unknown figure appeared, hastily making her way through as though she’d completed some routine, everyday task. When she noticed Estuu, and stopped short in surprise. He didn’t at all recognize her, but he could see immediately that she was no Undercity Zora. No, the strange woman in the boy’s midst was an Uppercity sort and an Apostle, but he certainly did not sense any warmth or benevolence from her.
She wore the shawl so common of those who served the Basilica, as well as the crest of Dinraal, which marked her as an arbitrator of the law, so it was no wonder that in her hands were a couple of tubes, which looked as though they held documents of some kind. She took a small step closer to the young Zora who’d surprised her with his presence, and at the same time, Estuu backed away.

“Whatever would an Uppercity child be doing in such a place as this?” she spoke, her voice filled with mock warmth. The sharp of her fangs flashed from beneath her thin lips, the numerous points all angled and tilted toward the front of her mouth.

“I know you,” she cooed, once more stepping forward, closing a small bit more of the distance between them. At her assertion, Estuu’s gaze drifted dangerously close to meeting her own, catching sight of the staring black of her big, round pupils. He quickly averted his eyes to look upon the way her forefins hung down against her shoulders, long tendrils with a slimy sheen to match her sandy, translucent complexion.

He certainly did not know her.

“You’re our young healer,” she stated, bending down so that she was at eye level with him. “I’ve heard much talk of your magical skills in the Basilica.”

“Look at me, young one,” the Apostle demanded, her tone still soft enough but with a recognizable authority. She pointed to her eyes, in order to make it completely clear what she was asking. Perplexed and nervous, and unsure what else to do, Estuu placated her with obedience, setting his eyes upon hers.

“Much better,” she praised. Estuu bit at the inside of his cheek, his tail twitching at the squirming feeling inside. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s dangerous for one such as yourself.”

Her words were lost, an echo somewhere in this distance, so far as he was concerned. The comfort of his physical existence had been interrupted to the point that he suddenly found his mind to be drifting outside of himself, a whirlwind of emotion that was absent of thought.

“Well then,” she cooed, gesturing for him to go, “Run along then.”

And run he did. He turned and fled with such instinctive haste, all of his former worry for his missing friends was left behind in that dark, empty place, in the dark, empty eyes of that Apostle woman.

The sun had dipped lazily below the mountainous horizon, leaving a faintly burning, orange halo around the deep blue of the surrounding peaks. Those shining mountains had turned pale, their summits dusted with the first snow of the season, and in the valley below, a thick mist had blurred the lush scenery into a silvery watercolor to frame the glassy black of the Eastern Reservoir.

And in the deep dark of that reservoir lurked a man who could be rightly compared to a beast on this particular evening. Link had been seated at the water’s edge for nearly an hour, contentedly watching the vivid red of Sidon’s topfin slash a frothy circle around and around the entire body of water, again and again, never once slowing.

“Someone clearly had some things to work out of his system,” Link commented to himself, his breath producing a soft puff of fog, his lips turning dry and chapped in the cold air. His arms were bundled against his chest, his fingers tucked underneath the scarf gifted to him by Kodah- it wasn’t quite enough. The need to be incredibly excessive was growing difficult to resist.

The Hylian crawled to his feet, stretching to relieve the numbness in his legs and the ache in his
buttocks, then he strode over to where the guest chamber was lit like a luxurious vacation lounge, pristine and packed with every amenity. Sidon had even requested for Bazz’s Lieutenant to place a guard detail at the entry points of the reservoir to assure that his privacy wasn’t disturbed, nevermind safety in the wake of the Yiga Clan attack.

The bed had been prepared prior to their arrival, and while Link was sure that somebody went out of their way to confirm that it was neat enough to meet a Prince’s standards, Link’s needs greatly differed from his Zora companion’s.

With a not-so-clean sweep that scattered cushions and pillows all over the floor, Link dragged the entire comforter off of the bed and wrapped the thick, downy-soft bedding around himself so that he very much resembled a skulltula’s dinner. The rubies from his scarf very quickly began to fill the enveloping layer with ambient warmth, which satisfied the Hylian well enough that he shuffled his cocooned self back over to the edge of the water. The silly image of him wrapped in an entire bedsprea, however, distracted the Prince from his bizarre, Zora version of pacing.

Sidon’s frame was a beacon of regal red and white, dipped but a few feet beneath the ashen steel of nighttime waters. It was difficult to see his eyes in the low light, but Link could still tell when the Prince’s head upturned to glance in his direction on his way past, and he eyed the Hylian from below. It didn’t chill Link’s blood to have a massive carnivore silently watching him from the depths any longer, though. Maybe it was just because it was Sidon.

The water lapped gently at the edge of the stone when Sidon surfaced, a smile quick to light his features as he looked upon his Hylian companion. “Well, then,” he cooed in amusement, folding his arms atop the stone so that he could perch near where Link had settled. “Aren’t you the image of coziness?”

“I’m never fully cozy until I’ve lit something on fire,” Link commented. He was only partly joking.

“Well, if the need arises, there is wood-burning stove in the guest quarters,” the Prince replied, an impish gleam to his golden eyes, like he was all-too-glad to be an enabler to the Hylian’s potentially destructive ways. Or maybe he just wanted Link to be happy and found the ability to offer that happiness personally satisfying. Link couldn’t be sure how to take it.

“You also seem..” Link trailed off, not sure what word to use to describe whatever it was that Sidon just did, nor the result. “Relieved.”

A calm sigh came from the Zora in response, so the Hylian’s choice of description must have been good enough. “To wet my scales and to rehome myself in this newly rebuilt body of mine; it’s as relieving as you say, but much more delightful than you’ve implied.” The Zora spoke with the appropriate level of satisfaction, pulling himself up from the watery abyss before the low temperatures and his idleness had a chance to lull him too much.

The water poured off of Sidon like he was a newly sharpened and well-oiled blade, puddling the stone and splishing in Link’s direction so that he had to gather his blankets and scoot away, lest they would end up soaked.

“Who would have thought that a Prince could be soothed by such simple pleasures,” Link snarked, though he did so with a slight grin on his face. Even now that he liked Sidon, loved Sidon, he’d still never let the Zora live a day without reminders of how incredibly privileged he was.

“Yes, indeed,” Sidon purred with an idle chuckle, raising one hand to rake his fingerscales against the glassy surface of his gillcovers. “My gills are still incredibly itchy, however. It’s tempting to push water through them, but with the danger of the Waterblight still lingering, I suppose it’s one simple
pleasure I will apparently be denied. But, speaking of simple pleasures, have you eaten at all, my dear one?"

“You shouldn’t be indulging me. I’m capable of feeding myself,” Link replied with a brusque, dismissive gesture, but of course Sidon tilted his head and levied the most incredulous stare upon his Hylian companion. The Hylian must have been kidding himself, because Sidon had been seducing him with offerings of free food from the very beginning. The entirety of Link’s hard heart had been softened with continued appeal to his much less guarded stomach.

“The only food here was meant to be your dinner,” Link tried all the more to resist, to reason. Some young Zora man had braved the threat of Link’s suspicion and his sword earlier for the sake of delivering a tray of food for Sidon’s evening meal. When the young man was well out of sight, Link lifted the silvery cover from overtop of the plate to investigate the contents— for safety, after all, someone might have wanted to poison the newly wakened Prince, and Link couldn’t have that.

The food was delectable in appearance, not that Link’s eyes could detect poison. It was all fresh, imported goods from other regions. Rare fruits, and Faron beef, seared so that it was still tender and rare on the inside, with a sauce made from lotus seed wine and herbs. A small salad of wild greens, with a tiny ball of spongy, pale-colored cheese that was likely from the Hateno area. Weren’t Zoras lactose intolerant? Link didn’t know any more.

He didn’t need Sidon’s delicious-looking food. Nope. He had a huge bag of apples that he’d been happily nursing ever since his last trip. He could eat twenty of them in one sitting, and he was quite sure that if apple eating contests existed, he’d waste the competition as quickly and embarrassingly as his all-apple diet was wasting his digestive tract.

“My soft muscles are exercised and my frame has snapped back together quite nicely, yet even still, my stomach is rather unsettled. I can hardly entertain the thought of food,” Sidon mused, a warmth in his eyes that was affectionately turned in his companion’s direction. “I might like a cup of tea, though. If only there were somebody talented at setting things on fire, in order to get the stove going. Hylia knows that a prissy royal such as myself would be simply incapable.”

Link blinked, his eyes narrowing as a mischievous grin spread across the pale of the Prince’s lips. “Are you saying that I can have your food if I light the stove for you?” the Hylian asked, completely serious and perhaps a little too eager.

Like a lizalfos shedding its skin, Link rolled himself free of his blanket cocoon and raced toward the guest quarter in order to accomplish the task that had been set before him. For once, he was somewhat glad that people, even Sidon, had a habit of asking for pointless, easy favors.

Sidon gave his tail one last swat to free his fins of any lingering droplets, then he bundled the discarded comforter up in order to carry it back over to the bed and spread it messily back into place. He didn’t expend much effort, opting to hold the heavy blanket at one edge, unfurling it out straight with a hard flick. He had plans which were sure to leave it tousled all over again, anyway.

While Link was fussing over selecting the perfect kindling for the stove, the Prince busied his own hands by readying the teapot. Flowery, herbal teas wouldn’t chase away the fear, inadequacies and the guilt growing in the pit of his stomach, more harsh and sickening than the first sip of Spirit Potion, but, being here with Link, sharing this moment in serenity and calm simplicity, that soothed him in some small way.

Sidon took a deep breath, stilling his mind and walling himself off from the suffering all around that threatened to overwhelm him, then he glanced over at his stooped companion, leaning against the sturdy stone of the surrounding counter top.
“So,” the Prince began, his voice smooth and light. Link didn’t look up from his work, but one ear tilted in Sidon’s direction. “I’d quite enjoy a recap of all that I missed while I was under the effects of my Spirit Potion, if you’d indulge me. What sorts of adventures have you been on?”

“Well, I carried out my promise to help the Zora people establish a refugee post in Hateno Village, then Hateno Village was attacked by some kind of raider group,” Link recounted, going out of his way to strike flint against his Wind Cleaver blade, despite its less convenient size compared to the dirk which was no longer in his possession. He’d long stashed the empty sheath inside his rucksack, and he was just hoping that Sidon saw no reason to question it, because he couldn’t bear to explain that he lost a cherished gift from the Prince in but a week’s time.

“Ah yes- I heard a scant few details from the Guard Captain’s Lieutenant,” Sidon stated, less enthusiastic than usual, his arms folded against his chest. “Please, if you could elaborate.”

“I’m really not very eloquent at describing epic battles.” Link’s voice took on a hollow sound while images of that night flashed back to the forefront of his mind; dark, smoky skies and blood sodden earth. It was all pointless bloodshed, but the blood spilled was that of Hylian people. He hadn’t moved past that as easily as he’d hoped.

Taking a breath, Link swallowed his own hesitation for the sake of stifling the disappointment which lingered in Sidon’s silence. “The people of Hateno Village made a headache out of aiding the Zora people,” Link growled with resentment. He hadn’t forgiven them, even if things seemed smooth now. His fury aided his hand, however, as he finally set the papery bark of his kindling aflame with one last, good strike. His tongue went still while he watched the tiny sparks grow into hungry flames before his eyes. He focused on the dancing fire, letting it take him back to the vivid desperation of that hilltop battle and the blaze set to Purah’s lab.

His voice was low, but unwavering when he continued, “When the attack happened, despite how the Hateno Villagers had shunned your people, the guardsmen assigned to the refugee group decided they wanted to march to defend the village from the raiders. It was really heroic on their part.”

Link shrugged, poking at the flame before feeding it some more significant wood. “They have compassion that I can’t manage, nor comprehend.”

“I should make it a point to visit the refugee post,” the Prince commented, inwardly updating his ever-growing agenda. He bundled one fist and pressed it beneath his chin, and Link glanced up to observe the focused look in his eyes. He was certainly the crowning image of the same compassion that Link had seen from the Zora guardsmen. Sidon embodied everything he lacked.

“I don’t want them to think at any point that they’ve been abandoned, and it would help if I went personally to reassure them that they are on our minds,” the Prince mused in Link’s quiet, his tone very quickly sinking. “I should like to tell them that the situation at home is improving, but.. well..”

As Sidon trailed off, letting out a doleful sigh and clenching his eyes shut, Link straightened back to a stand, treading the small distance between them to stand before the Zora, who towered over him, even seated.

“It will improve,” Link stated, assertive and brimming with belief. One hand reached out to rest upon Sidon’s knee and the Hylian nodded once the Zora’s golden eyes were once more in sight. “It will improve because you’re working to improve it. And I believe in you.”

As ever, though Sidon’s use of flattery and reassurance was masterful, when it was turned on him, it left him perplexed, astonished. He was wide-eyed for a passing instant, disbelieving and unsure, then finally, thankful.
“I should endeavor not to let you down, then,” the Prince breathed gratefully with a small ghost of his formerly beaming smiles curved subtly upon his lips. “What else did I sleep through, my friend?”

Link folded his arms in contemplation, feeling himself growing cold again, so he inched closer to the fire while Sidon hurried to place the pot atop the warmed stove.

“I came back to Zora’s Domain after the battle in Hateno,” he spoke, decidedly glazing over the fact that he and Brivere got into a rather nasty spat. That didn’t seem like a pertinent detail, anyway. “As you know, that was when the Yiga Clan attacked the city.”

“Have you had a moment of peace since I laid my head down?” Sidon interjected, turning to Link with a sharp motion, his forefins swinging. It even slightly spooked the Hylian to the point that he skipped a pace backward. Despite all of the love and trust he held for the Prince, he couldn’t still his instincts, which told him that fast movement from large creatures preceded danger.

Nothing else betrayed Link’s minor startle, however, and he even laughed over the Zora’s abhorred query, albeit bitterly. “Not one,” he snapped, not that he’d come to expect such things. He’d rarely had a moment of peace since he woke up in the accursed Sheikah shrine. For the most part, though, he’d come to terms with the fact that his life was endless hell. What he hadn’t gotten over was how it seemed that his own damned existence was dragging down the people he cared about.

“I was foolish,” Link muttered miserably, his ears tilting backward in what probably looked very much like anger, but was more akin to that same old self-loathing. “I already knew that the Yiga Clan could track my movements. They’d promised to hunt me down, but I didn’t heed their warnings. I won’t be that unwise again. That’s why it’s best for me to stay on the move from here. I can’t let them think I’ve settled anywhere, here least of all.”

With a slow step, Link neared the Prince’s side, holding his hands out to allow the hot stove to warm them. He pushed them close, too close, until the hot air began to sting against his skin and his fingers shook, but he didn’t take them away.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke over the breathy crackle of the flame. “As usual, life conspires to keep us apart.”

Link could feel Sidon’s stare upon him, like a weight on his shoulders, and even with as unobservant as he could be, he could sense the Zora’s deep desire to say, ‘Don’t go, please stay.’ He knew also that Sidon understood that he couldn’t ask such things of the Champion, no matter how much he wanted to.

‘Don’t go,’ and ‘Please stay,’ weren’t options any longer. Pretending that they were was little more than selfishness and foolishness, just as Link had already proclaimed.

Link took his stinging hands away from the stove and instead tucked one into the enveloping shroud of Sidon’s own. He never thought that he’d come so far, to be the one offering reassurances in turn, but he was glad enough that he’d learned some new tricks.

“I already told you about my trip to Kakariko Village,” the Hylian spoke softly, opting to break the silence between himself and the Zora. New tricks, indeed. “Hopefully the supplies they promised arrive soon. Next, I think I’ll double back to the Goron City in Eldin province, in order to speak with their Chief. They owe me a favor for dealing with their Divine Beast, so maybe the Chief can be persuaded to provide some meaningful supplies, to compensate for the Zora’s lack of luminous stone.”

“You continue to astound me, my dear one,” Sidon softly purred. “I’m ever grateful for all of your
aid, as I have been from the day we met. I must comment, though, you’ve become quite organized and driven in the way you operate. I daresay, you’ve begun to show leadership qualities.”

It was strange how different sincere praise sounded on the Prince’s lips and how differently Link felt in response. Normally, the Zora’s compliments grated at his nerves; all nonsense, glorification, Link couldn’t stand that. But now?

“I think you’re exaggerating,” he muttered, a quiet smile curving the corners of his mouth while his fingers tightened against Sidon’s. “But I’ll take it as encouragement.”

Soon, the teapot was steaming and the tower of Zora man by Link’s side hastened to remove it from the heat, setting it aside to allow it to steep before he tapped at the countertop where his uneaten dinner remained, reminding Link that the food awaited his consumption. Sidon was more adamant about feeding his stray than some creepy, old woman living all alone in Faron woods.

And while Link was ever so slightly forgetful, his excitement hadn’t waned. He hurriedly revealed the delicious meal from beneath the silvery dome which was keeping it warm, then he took the entire tray over to the now messy bed, where he settled down to eat.

“What about you, Sidon?” Link questioned, upturning his blue gaze to where the Zora lingered, only for Sidon to shake his head, swishing the tail that hung down his back from side to side.

“I said I wasn’t hungry, please-” he began in a gentle, reassuring way, only for Link to shake his own mussed, blonde head in reply.

“No, I mean, what are your plans?” the Hylian hurried to clarify, stuffing a heaping bite of food into his mouth to make it totally clear that Sidon’s chance to eat his own dinner was gone. He brushed the backside of his hand against his lips, chewing just enough to maneuver the entire mouthful to one side of his mouth so that he could continue speaking. “I’m sure you’ve already started formulating your own plan of action.”

“Hmm, yes..” Sidon mused, his voice distant, unveiling a quiet glimpse of how deeply he was buried in the grievous situation his people were being faced with. “I believe my most difficult upcoming battles are to be fought in the arena of our courts, which reminds me, do you know anything about the Undercity exodus, which occurred during the Yiga Clan attack?”

The Prince bent himself over the counter to check the tea. His height made every task one that he was required to stoop for, and from Link’s perspective, it seemed a rather inconvenient way to live. He never thought he’d actually be grateful for his diminutive stature.

“Undercity exodus?” Link repeated in confusion. Sidon turned back in his direction, giving an idle nod of his head and continuing as though he expected the Hylian to have at least enough of a clue to be aware of what he was speaking about.

“Yes,” said the Prince, “given that I was asleep for it, I need to learn all I can, if you can provide council. If I attempt to speak in the defense of the Undercity defectors, the fact that I was under the effects of my Spirit Potion is sure to be used to discredit anything I say. Anything you might have witnessed could be quite a valuable resource.”

“I.. uhh,” Link chewed and swallowed, wishing he had anything actually valuable or even smart to say. “I’m sorry, Sidon, but I hadn’t heard anything about this until just now. I was totally unaware.”

“Wh- You were-” Sidon muttered a few incomplete thoughts, until at last his mouth fell open as though to produce complete sentences and instead issued naught but silence forth. He blinked in his
own confusion, attempting to sort out his thoughts while a frustrated sigh hissed from between the sharp edges of his teeth.

“The Yiga Clan attack was for the purpose of capturing me and nothing more,” Link asserted, quickly grasping the implication that it was somehow connected to anything the Undercity people had done. “I don’t know what happened, but the timing must have been a coincidence.”

“It does seem that your capture was their ultimate goal, but nevertheless, it unfortunately appears more than coincidental that these defectors chose that time to flee. It would be difficult to deny that they conspired with one another, from the reports I’ve heard.” Sidon’s expression shifted then, from thoughtful and furrowed with his distaste for this incredibly unfair mess, to concern and regret which shined on the golden surface of his eyes as they were newly set upon the Hylian. “...Perhaps they even informed this ‘Yiga Clan’ of your whereabouts?”

“I don’t think so,” Link’s voice was sure, his dismissal quick. He shrugged and poked at his food, shoveling another couple of bites into his mouth while he worked over this new information. Once he’d swallowed it all down, he spoke up again, his voice chorused by the trickle of tea being poured at last. “The Yiga Clan has been tracking me prior to the attack; you know that. You saw what happened after they ambushed me in Hateno. They can trace my movements whenever I use my Sheikah Slate to warp. That’s what prompted the attack.”

“I see,” Sidon hummed, mulling over what he’d been told, while preparing not just one cup of tea, but two. Link hadn’t even asked for one, yet the Zora saw to providing, despite not being asked to do so. He turned away from the countertop and approached the Hylian, setting the beverage within his reach before he seated himself carefully, gently at Link’s side, at the edge of the mattress.

Link focused on the teacup in Sidon’s own hand; it was clearly a work of old, Hylian crafting, probably produced before the Calamity by an artisan who was long dead, now. It was tiny between Sidon’s fingers, to the point that he could hardly tuck more than a single fingertip into the curve of the handle, yet he cradled it, even so, with care and effort. He held it like it was precious, but forced his hands to maintain proper positioning as best he could, raising his pinky whenever he took a sip and savoring the flowery brew, as it was hardly more than a few mouthfuls for him.

The skin between Link’s brows furrowed beneath the hair which fell across his forehead. Sidon treated everything in the same manner as the tiny teacup clenched between his sharp claws. With care, finesse, and concern for tradition, for his image, constrained, yet cautious. All that, despite his desires to challenge those tiny boxes he’d been shoved into.

Link opted to allow his Zora lover time to think. He clearly needed it. In the meantime, the Hylian finished off the dinner he’d been gifted, though of course it didn’t take very long. The only thing giving Link reason to slow his pace was the fact that he didn’t want Sidon privy to how badly he’d been craving a decent meal. He didn’t want to give Sidon something else to worry about.

After that, Link gratefully drank the tea Sidon had prepared for him. He grasped the cup by its body instead of the handle, bundling the ceramic between his fingers for warmth.

“Sidon, what is going to happen to the defectors?” Link asked bluntly, when silence no longer suited him. He wondered, though, had the Zora fallen into a hush to cater to Link’s own quiet tendencies? Had he strained his fingers, too, to carefully cradle the delicate teacup of the Hylian’s sensibilities?

At Link’s question, Sidon visibly flinched, his tail curling with a flick to one side, his head drooping lower. He’d always given the appearance that he had all the answers, that he always had a plan, or proper preparations. When he didn’t, well, at least he had faith that everything would turn out for the best. Tonight, he had none of that. Tonight, he had a heavy heart and a tongue which stiffly spoke
the awful answer to the Hylian’s inquiry.

“The lot who were captured during the exodus are to be tried for treason,” Sidon breathed, his tone bearing a great deal of grief and frustration, perhaps even anger. “High treason, considering there was an attempt on my life during the attack.”

Link upturned his gaze while Sidon spoke, craning his neck and brushing his hair aside with one hand. He could see the slightest, snarling wrinkle upon the soft, pink patch of skin beneath the rise of the Prince’s brow. With his opposite hand, Sidon made a flicking gesture, abhorred by that which he was speaking.

“The mere circumstantial evidence seems to be near enough to find them all guilty as it is now,” the Prince snapped. “They’re lucky to even be offered a trial. Alignment with this ‘Yiga Clan’ is as good as alignment with the Calamity, which would lower them to the same legal standing as monsters, where our laws are concerned.”

“The hostage situation didn’t have anything to do with them,” Link repeated as though he needed to convince Sidon. “It was all an attempt to force my surrender.”

“Nevertheless, they’re guilty by association,” the Zora hissed. “They took an active role, and no matter how small, they enabled the events of that night in some way.”

“You don’t.. agree with that, do you?” Link’s voice was hesitant and dubious. He didn’t even know enough about the situation to have a real opinion, but something in his gut was telling him that this was wrong. In his mind, Sidon’s tone and stress was implying that he, too, felt this was unfair, but Link wanted to be completely clear on that. After all, they had a record of misunderstanding one another.

“It does no good to deny the facts as they are,” Sidon muttered. He’d ruminated on these hard facts, and was all too aware that where the courts were concerned, they wouldn’t be overlooked. “..but no. I just spent the last week of my life submerged in the fading minds of hundreds of Undercity people and I can’t help but feel that, regardless of the moral standing of their actions, they were at least a bit justified.”

Again, Link lived up to his reputation as a poor conversationalist, though now it was because he lacked any information with which to say anything valid. He didn’t know why the Undercity people left, or why it was a matter of fleeing. He wasn’t sure why it was necessary, nor justified, nor wrong.

He was an idiot Hylian, ignorant to the complexities of his Zora lover’s whole world, but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t make the effort to amend it.

“Would the Undercity people have been in trouble for leaving Zora’s Domain, if not for the attack?” Link asked, glancing over his shoulder to peer back at Sidon, awaiting his answer.

“They would still, yes,” Sidon confirmed, his countenance still hardened in his focus as he took a small sip from his teacup. “They would have been prevented from leaving altogether and if not that, then returned to their proper home with only minor punishment. Nothing at all like the penalties they’ll be facing, now.”

Link thought back to the not so distant past as Sidon spoke; he hadn’t forgotten about the checkpoint outside of Zora’s Domain and the paperwork that had been vital for the sake of Estuu traveling to Kakariko. He supposed now he understood even better why the security had been enhanced.

For the sake of keeping intruders out and keeping the Zora people in. But why?
“So, what?” Link’s shoulders stiffened in his confoundment and his face wrinkled into a mask of confusion. “Zoras aren’t allowed to leave?”

“Oh my friend,” the Prince muttered in aggravation. “Don’t you remember what a hassle it was just to add the downstream fort to our territorial claim?”

Actually, no, Link didn’t remember that. He didn’t remember it at all. He’d assumed it all went quite smoothly, but he’d also been mainly focused on himself at that time. At least now he understood exactly how self-absorbed he could be, and why it was a problem.

“Why can’t they go if they want?” he asked, skipping to what seemed like the more important question. He hoped that it saved Sidon a bit of explaining.

“Well,” Sidon breathed a sigh into his words, making it incredibly obvious how much effort it was going to take for him to bring Link up to speed- so much for Link’s attempts to save his efforts. Nevertheless, after his exhale, the Prince took another deep breath in preparation, his patience steeled and ready.

“A few hundred years prior, there was a group of Zoras who had formed something of a cultural subset that didn’t agree with other established customs. The entire group migrated across Hyrule, settling somewhere in the wetlands of the West,” Sidon spoke, slowly and clearly. This had all happened before he was hatched, but it became an important anecdote, for the legal precedent established thereafter. “It should have been a matter of considering them to be newly migrated citizens, but the Hyrulean Monarchy was none too pleased with the fact that a band of Zora people had set out to stake claim to Hyrulean lands- much the same as how the Hateno Villagers didn’t welcome us with open arms, either.”

“Good to know that we’re keeping it consistent, anyway,” Link commented, his tone deadpan, his ears pinned backward. At the very least, Sidon nodded, offering a small grin in appreciation of the attempted humor.

“It resulted in something of a disagreement between the Hyrulean Kingdom and our Sovereign, which further resulted in laws which forbid the Zora people to migrate en masse to Hyrulean territory and settle there,” the Prince finished, at last coming to the real point of his small history lesson; it was a point that Link still felt was inadequate.

“The Kingdom of Hyrule doesn’t even exist any longer,” the Hylian hissed, letting out a puff of frustration and taking a gulp of his tea. He doubted it would soothe his nerves, but at least it was an attempt, anyway. After he swallowed it down, he immediately found himself still worked up, as expected. “Your people have been polite not to claim territory sooner than you did. I don’t see why these laws matter if they’re outdated.”

“Oh, if it is written, no matter how outdated and irrelevant, it apparently matters to my people.” This time, Sidon was the one whose tone was sardonic and rough, and his tail flicked while his irritation mounted.

Link only nodded in understanding, still positive that Sidon’s patience stretched fathomless reaches beyond his own, even when it was at its last, tenuous strand.

“Sidon, what will happen to them, the defectors..” the Hylian began, his voice quiet and grim, like he already knew and feared the answer. His gaze faltered, his eyes staring into the murky surface of the steaming brew between his palms. “...if they’re found guilty?”

The Zora’s own pause reflected a fear equal or greater to Link’s own. Even so, he weathered it,
speaking the answer like a shameful confession. “They’ll be sentenced to death.”

Death for trying to leave their Sovereign? When Link, himself, had assisted another group of Zoras in doing that exact, same thing? He didn’t understand and this time he wasn’t sure if it was because he was a Hylian, or if it merely wasn’t possible to comprehend without first being a damned hypocrite.

“Do you think you can help them?” Link posed his question solemnly, but with some shred of confidence. Sidon was the very person who had taught Link how to hold out for hopeful circumstances, and yet-

“I don’t know yet,” Sidon answered, shaking his head in doubt, “...but I am a servant of the law and I will do everything in my power.”

Link’s ears twitched at his Zora companion’s tone of voice; it lacked the usual gusto, the optimism and determination which the Hylian had come to identify as Sidon’s innate, immutable, inextinguishable traits. It was a farce and a dismissal, an attempt to hide behind a mask of falsehood, and suddenly it was all very plain for Link to see. He brought his eyes up again to look on Sidon’s face, only for the Zora to chase away his own troubled expression with an empty smile.

“Are you at all tired, Link?” the Zora asked, gentle, careful, speaking the Hylian’s name with adoration; a rare treat. He shifted just enough to lay his emptied teacup aside, then he set his warm, needful stare upon his lover, hoping to chase away the lingering fear and doubt that held Link’s body in a tense, slouched position with a soft, reassuring touch.

Sidon’s hand was warm and heavy against the small Hylian’s shoulder, but he still achieved the desired result. Link’s nerves loosened and his anger diminished with such an immediate and profound effect, he was left with only the vague suspicion that the Zora’s magic had come into play, and even then he suffered no offense if that happened to be the case.

It was probably just Sidon, though; he somehow had the incredible talent of both being able to soothe away the Hylian’s anger and the capacity to incite passion where Link held naught but indifference. It was a remarkable feat.

“No, I laid around all day,” Link answered with a shrug, letting any remnant of his previous ire go with one last sigh.

“A sentiment I quite share,” Sidon stated, chuckling in a humorless way. The enveloping warmth of his hand at the Hylian’s shoulder drifted down, against Link’s back, the sharp edges of the Zora’s fingerscales pleasantly raking at the cloth-covered flesh. His voice purred, carefully testing the Hylian like Link was unknown waters, unknown waters which Sidon wanted to swim breathless, speedy laps around and around. “My sleeping schedule is going to be difficult to repair, but for this evening, I may not mind staying up into the late hours, should you wish to.. provide company.”

“Sidon, are you uh..” Link’s ears pitched upward, his face pinching tight in disbelief, “..are you asking for sex? Or am I misreading that?”

“Are you not still the insatiable being I remember you to be?” The Prince shrugged guiltlessly with a quick smile, knowing full well why his lover was so astonished. He turned his stare away just as quick, his hands retreating to his own lap. “Would you.. not enjoy a temporary reprieve from all this.. hubbub?”

“Your ability to put things aside astounds me,” Link hissed, inching himself nearer in the sudden absence of Sidon’s touch, chasing it like he’d lost a thing of great and wondrous value, not caring if
his physical actions contradicted his verbal claims. “Me, the champion of putting shit aside.”

“It isn’t as complicated as you may think,” Sidon breathed, some terrible, aching shame in his words, in uttering such things and speaking true. His stare narrowed to intense focus, then he turned his gaze upon his lover once more, passionate and pleading. “I need to put everything aside, at least for tonight. At least for now. I need to free space somewhere inside myself, space that isn’t dedicated to my obligations and duties. Then, hopefully, I can approach it anew with a fresh perspective...”

The Prince trailed off, doubt flooding in and out, like waves lapping at a shore, eroding it. His fingers furled, his hands bundled against his thighs. “I just need a moment of freedom, a moment to reconnect with myself, to feel my own emotions, rather than everyone else’s.”

Sidon let out a breath, then forced a smile onto his face. “..but I need your help to do so, if you’d be so kind, and if it suits you, of course.”

If anything could be proclaimed as truth, it was that Link was a simple man, and though he spoke very little, when he did, he spoke bluntly.

“It suits me,” he answered.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: BanishedOne and Banishfics
Twitter: @BanishedOne
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

//..My body's covered in teeth marks. Your bites worse than your bark. You ruin everything you touch, and destroy anyone you love. You’re all over me.//

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello, hello my friends! I know that the newest chapter is SUPER late, so I wanted to offer a little treat for all of your patience, and also a bit of a reassurance. The new chapter is on its way, and it is BIG. Also, it is very juicy, so for those of you who have been waiting for the SidLink NSFW, it's gonna hit the spot, I promise!

THIS isn't a new chapter. THIS is the teaser for part 2 of Coma Baby, which I've hinted at in the past. I'm posting the teaser here, and I'm also adding Part 2 to the series, so you all can go ahead and bookmark it, or throw kudos on it. (A lot of you have mentioned wanting to Kudos this story twice ahaha. Here's your chance!)

Please enjoy this TEASER, and HAPPY HALLOWEEN~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Immortal Kings

;)

“What do we do now?”

It was the masked figure in the corner who verbalized the most obvious, burning question on the minds of each desperate individual present. Their voice came in between deafening blasts which shook the wreckage where the hidden group had tucked themselves away, like rats skulking the half-flooded ruins of Hyrule Castle.

The caved-in catacombs trembled and flickered with crimson light, persistently pummelled by Guardian fire, like a blood red storm but all the more relentless. It did nothing to illuminate the dismal halls. The damp, narrow space where the group had crawled away was thick with dust from disrepair and now, destruction. With every passing second, the walls cracked and crumbled further.

The obscuring cloud in the darkness stole even the Zoras’ sharp sight, but Brivere kept his eyes focused on the unmistakable form of Estuu in the haze. The boy was bundled between worn, stone alters where bones of ancient Hylians had long turned to dust. He had his head tilted, his shoulder raised to an awkward position in an attempt to cover at least one of his sensitive ears. His only hand dared not stray from his weapon, his fingers tight on the foregrip and ready for a fight, as steady and steeled as the expression on his face.

In a burning, red flash, Estuu’s golden eyes met those of his brother across the small stretch of space
between them; a rare moment of contact, which betrayed the boy’s questioning. It was just the same as the masked shadow who had posed the question first- Estuu also was eager for someone to speak a plan of escape, if there even could be such a plan. He did not look to the group in its entirety, nor their ranked leader, however; he looked to his brother.

With each passing second, the grasping, robotic claws from outside tore at the openings to the caverns, chipping away at the shelter that kept the group temporarily safe. The gleaming chrome of their tendrils stretched into the run, reaching for the prey ducked inside, flailing and clinking the sharp blades that adorned their feet, in the hopes of snagging helpless flesh.

The sword sheathed upon the Champion’s back brightly flashed in warning, crying out a mournful wail that came again and again, as though nobody else had noticed the impossible hoard of Guardians which had pinned the group down and were now digging them out, to drag them one by one to their doom. The sword’s calls would have to go unanswered, however, despite its pleas. It was as helpless on the back of its owner, as the Champion was helpless in the arms of the Zora Prince.

The Guardians had come in the night, perhaps mere hours after the ominous, burning orb of the Blood Moon ascended to peak height in the sky, rendering the Champion unable to fight, unable to flee. The machines had locked onto the group; they had been tracking them for days, running them like quarry until they were exhausted and worn out beyond all hope.

And now, their Champion had fallen. Under the Blood Moon’s shroud, he could not take up his blade. All he could do was gaze blindly into nothing, unreachable, unresponsive, and dependent entirely on the aid of his Zora lover for protection. Sidon clutched the Hylian tighter to his chest while the crumbling tunnel quaked again, shaking free rubble from the ceiling, which scattered across the dampened stone beneath their feet.

“Send me, my lord,” snapped the first of them who grew tired of cowering. Her voice was harsh and desperate, but fearless. The warrior kneeled before her huddled Prince, daringly meeting his own troubled stare with the burning ember of her single eye. Her spear was in-hand and ready, the butt of it striking the ground with determined fervor, which set the golden emblem upon her chest alight with a hopeful glow.

The two other holy emblems present cast a golden halo upon the group, answering the first as it activated. “What good are these gifts from the Goddesses if we don’t use them,” she growled, careful fingertips resting against her chest, to touch the source of the light. “I will hold off the hoard as best I can while the rest of you flee.”

“It’ll never work,” came the hasty objection of the masked shadow, who was seated a small stretch away from the Zoras, their back pressed into the deepest corner, as though to disappear into it. They bundled their legs against their chest, head shaking beneath the mask emblazoned with an inverse Eye of Truth.

“There’s hundreds of them. They’ll reduce you to ash before we’ve even cleared their tracking parameters,” the masked one uttered dismally. The mask they wore was enough to conceal their features, but not the troubled sound of their voice nor the emotion they had invested in convincing Betaal that she should not go.

They could walk out of here, and not one single machine would strike them down. But that was not true of their friends, so for their sake, the masked one remained.

“There must be another way,” breathed the Knight at the Prince’s side. Of all present, it was his voice that remained uncomfortably calm, though the furrow upon his features told the secret of his
great and terrible fear- this night stood to claim the lives of two men he cherished more than all the world, as well as his younger sibling, who despite his own fighting proficiency, Brivere would never permit to stand alone, unprotected.

“.or something we can do,” Betaal added, her voice a growl, her eye squeezed shut in thought. Her bright fins flared, as though to display her eagerness to meet her foes in battle, to cleave their steel with her spear and yet.. in the darkness of her mind, she saw only the Calamity of a hundred years prior. She saw her father face but a single Guardian. She saw him fail and she felt his life wane in her arms. She knew that she was outmatched, even if she didn’t want to admit it.

“There is a way,” the masked one uttered, resolute and sure. Their certainty drew the attention of all others present, but even so, they hesitated to voice their plan, foolproof though it was. In their silence, the cavern shook again, one of the openings collapsing further, bringing the numerous, reaching arms nearer to them at last.

The mechanical beasts fired upon the cavern again and again, pounding and chipping away at the crumbling stone, coming closer, ever closer.

The Zoras looked away from the masked one, to the entryway of the catacombs being torn apart, and to the ceiling caving, bound for collapse, then finally back to the Yiga clansman.

“Please,” Sidon spoke at last, his golden eyes never leaving the mask which served as a face for the shadow who’d willingly followed them into this hell. “If you have the answer, speak it,” he commanded yet beckoned at the very same time.

Brivere’s attention did not immediately return to the clansman, though, his eyes fixating on the numerous arms forged of shining steel. He watched them wriggle and writhe and reach. He watched them slash and claw at the dirt and rubble. He watched them weaken the battered structure which concealed the entire group, and in his mind, he went back for the hundredth time, to the memory of the grassland fox, hidden in its burrow from the pack of Maraudo wolves attempting to dig it out and tear it apart.

“The Champion,” the hesitant clansman finally offered the solution, knowing at least two very important things in regards to it; the first was that it would work without question, and the second was that it would be impossible to convince these Zoras to act upon it, even so. “.his death will send us back far enough to offer another chance to avoid this mess, entirely.”

The silence that followed confirmed the clansman’s fears. Then, after a long pause, Betaal was the one who dared to challenge the masked phantom.

“You want to murder him?” she uttered, the lines of her face deepening in disgust, in disappointment. “While he’s helpless?”

“Look at him!” the masked one gestured to Link, where he laid in Sidon’s arms, his neck slightly bent like a lifeless, baby bird, his head pressed to the white of the Prince’s chest. His breath was a calm, slow flow, his eyes only half lidded so that the blue from beneath his lashes stared, without sight. His body was as battered as all others present, and the danger he was in was equal, but even so, nothing could jar him from his trance, save for morning’s light.

“He’s not even conscious of what’s going on,” the Yiga clansman reasoned, desperate for the rest of the band to take their suggestion and make use of it. “He’ll be revived when its all said and done.”

“.but he would remember it,” Brivere interrupted, returning his crisp gaze to the shadow seated in the corner. “He will remember the pain and suffering, which our hands forced upon him.”
“We can’t and we won’t,” Sidon snapped with finality, the sharp edges of his teeth shining when he spoke, his pupils tightened to thin slits. His gaze only softened once he tilted his head downward, to look upon his vulnerable charge. He peered down at Link, lit by the golden light of the holy gifts the band had been bestowed. The Hylian had trusted his Zora lover, he’d unveiled every inch of vulnerability to Sidon and the Prince would never betray that trust.

Never.

“He isn’t something to be sacrificed for our sake,” the Prince stated, ending the discussion with that one, sharp declaration, while the Yiga shadow wilted in reply, their own masked visage falling into their trembling palms. “His suffering won’t be the price of our safety.”

“That is his very purpose!” the clansman spat, recoiling from their own harsh tone. They took a breath, steeling whatever patience remained within them. For a quick instant, they turned their sights to the image of Betaal, still grasping her spear in readiness, even knowing that there was no hope of fighting her way out of this. The woman couldn’t see the clansman’s moment of regard, and it was just as well.

“What other answer is there?” the masked one implored- soft, patient, reasonable.

“I have a suggestion of my own,” Brivere began, his tone weighty but sure. The golden Knight glanced one last time toward the entrance where the Guardians were steadily digging them out, to his silent brother, to the helpless Hylian, and at last to the face of his Prince. “If my lord will permit it.”

;
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

“Was it worth the wait?” Sidon asked, propping himself on his elbows and gazing down at his lover with a very proud expression on his face. Link could only assume that he probably looked disheveled and messy, and helplessly exhausted.

Sidon shifted, rolling onto his side and Link curled against his chest for warmth, pressing his face into the soft white of the Zora’s scales. Quietly, he whispered, “The wait wasn’t worth it, because you would have been damn good, regardless.”

Chapter Notes

HELLO FRIENDS. Guess who didn't actually die and has been working all this time? And let me be the first to say, the fruits are my labor are sweet and juicy and bountiful. So I hope that you all will all enjoy them. :) (Also, if you're not laughing over the fact that this is Chapter 69, shame on you. You're all obligated to AT LEAST comment 'nice,' if nothing else.)

NSFW bits are clearly labeled for the folks who want to read the dialogue without sifting through the really explicit stuff. If you are a minor, you should not be here, or you should at the very least, skip this chapter.

***[WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAIN VAGINAL PENETRATION. IF THAT MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE OR DYSPHORIC, PLEASE SKIP THIS CHAPTER.][BEGIN NSFW]

Teacups and tunics had been swiftly discarded in reply to the Prince’s humble request and the battle-marked surface of Link’s flesh was bristled with goosebumps from the chill of the night. The cold air caressed his bared shoulders, while the crackling flame from the stove glowed against his back.

Sidon had gathered Link’s weight up in his palms like it was nothing, the tip of the Zora’s tongue reaching to curiously flick against the hardened flesh of the Hylian’s nipples- Link rarely allowed his lover to fixate on that part of his anatomy, but tonight the Zora’s eagerness had won out, just not without some squirming from the Hylian.

When the Prince’s tongue went lower, to trace the old, faded scars beneath his lover’s breast, that was when the impatient Hylian’s tolerance ran low. “Hey,” Link squawked, his callused fingers tugging lightly at one of the Zora’s forefins, “your weird mammal fetish is showing, Your Majesty.”

Sidon’s head snapped up at the teasing accusation, his pupils tightened to slits with his budding
arousal, his pale lips smiling softly. He affectionately bumped the point of his crest against Link’s mess of blonde hair, a quiet laugh rumbling in his chest.

“Is that right?” Sidon hissed, in rebuke as much as amusement. He skipped the explanation as to how ‘Your Majesty’ was typically used for Kings and Queens, whereas ‘Highness’ was the proper word for Princes and Princesses; he jumped, instead, to acknowledging the irony that his dearest one appeared to have just as much of a fixation upon a species that was not his own. “That is the accusation you choose to make, when you’re equally guilty?”

“Nope,” Link shrugged, sliding himself out of the Prince’s grip, in order to seat himself atop Sidon’s thighs instead, his palms idly pressed to the pretty pale of Sidon’s chest. “I told you a long time ago, I wasn’t just attracted to your people, though they’re undeniably beautiful; I liked you.”

“..‘like’ may be a strong word.” The Prince turned his head aside as though to hide his cheeky grin, or else the quiet mumble which had passed his lips. Was he holding a grudge over the fact that his dear one had admitted that he once found him annoying? Oh ho, of course not, he’d never be so petty!

“I like you now,” Link cooed, straightening his back to stretch himself closer to his pouting Prince; it didn’t do much good. The Hylian reached upward, taking Sidon’s face between his hands and pulling him down so that their lips could reach to close together.

“I missed you,” he whispered like a secret against the Zora’s mouth, the skin of his brow furrowing while his heavy lids fell shut- those words hardly scratched the surface. This still felt like a dream, an unobtainable reality to be dangled in front of the Hylian, knowing he couldn’t hang onto it, knowing that he would inevitably have to go on, missing Sidon.

And no words could quantify those feelings, or at least no words within his own comprehension.

Still, all of the tension lingering in the Prince’s frame melted away with such simple declarations and such small touches.

Link fit himself into the Zora’s space with ease, his size and stature a thing that allowed him to squeeze into every nook and cranny. It often felt as though they’d been cut from one whole and Link was molded to fill the Zora’s hollow spaces. Sidon’s hands cautiously hovered against the Hylian’s back, the sharp edges of his fingerscales lightly brushing Link’s skin, sending a shiver up his spine despite the warmth of the Zora’s enveloping palms. One thumb slid beneath Link’s arm, around to his front, to brush the crinkled, sensitive flesh of a single nipple once more- he’d definitely graduated from obsessing over the Hylian’s hair and ears, anyway.

Sidon’s touch continued downward, his fingers gripping at his lover’s hips, down, holding Link by his buttocks and pulling at him, dragging him closer, the meeting between their lips intensifying. Link’s head was tilted to one side, his own hands holding Sidon willingly prisoner in their kiss. The Zora was always so careful, letting the Hylian dominate, letting the Hylian be the one to grow ever more curious. The tip of Link’s tongue pushed past the welcoming soft of his lover’s lips, boldly touching the razor edges of Sidon’s gleaming fangs before the Prince’s own tongue came forward to greet the intrusion.

It was soft and wet, the touch mingling, caressing, gently flirting. It was equal in warm familiarity and excitement that had been renewed by their long separation, their affection like a first, intriguing greeting all over again.

[END NSFW]
When Link drew back from the kiss, he found Sidon with his eyes open, looking on the way the Hylian had been absorbed in the fondness of the task, a needful glimmer in the gold of his gaze. The Zora brought the knuckle of one finger to Link’s forehead, to sweep back his untamed tresses—a failed endeavor, really.

“Are you still alright with my use of an empathic bond between us?” Sidon purred, questioning it as though he expected to be denied in any shape or form, like perhaps there were boundaries that he only now expected to overstep. It wasn’t like he’d ever actually asked before, but it wasn’t so odd that it struck Link as terribly unusual.

Link swore Sidon only ever asked for things he knew he’d receive without question.

“It’s fine,” the Hylian answered, unperturbed, somehow welcoming the vulnerability without hesitance. He knew that Sidon was capable of digging deeper, that Sidon could easily find every dark corner of his jagged being, but Link trusted that he wouldn’t. He would never go so far as to invade; Link believed that.

He’d reach only far enough to feel the positive, the good; this was a change in Link that Sidon was responsible for, so he deserved that much.

“I do wish, though—” Link began, quickly remembering himself and forgetting his nonsense ideas just as quickly. “No, nevermind.”

“Pardon?” Sidon bent his head lower, overacting his sudden disbelief. His dark lids narrowed, yet somehow his golden eyes gleamed all the more. “Oh dear, my friend. Have you actually second-guessed something, rather than going about the first thing to come to mind? Now I know that Brivere got into your head in my absence.”

“Fuck you,” Link hissed with a laugh that he couldn’t stop from spilling out as Sidon’s own did the same, much as he tried. “Yeah, okay, he did get into my head. He’s even better at it than you, which is a feat. That’s not the problem.”

The Hylian’s ears tilted backward, while his bare shoulders moved in a shrug. “I was about to turn the focus to myself, as usual, so I’m trying to avoid being so damn selfish.”

“Well, now I’m merely curious as to what it was that you wished to say,” Sidon replied with intrigue, his mouth still holding a grin of amusement. He wondered, though, was it his own fault or Brivere’s that Link now believed he wasn’t owed any focus, whatsoever. “Allow me to focus on you, my love, I enjoy it. Now please, go on.”

Link hummed in consideration, wondering at the words he could use to explain. “Your magic always lets you feel my emotions and sensations,” he continued, gesturing in uncertainty. “...but it doesn’t allow me any additional insight into you and what you feel.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t quite work like that,” Sidon answered, though the suggestion brought an expression of curiosity to his face, followed by a pause of thought, and at last a glimmer of inspiration. With that, a small shine of his former, excitable self came to back to life in the enthusiasm of his tone. “It’s an intriguing idea, to be sure! I could certainly attempt to replicate my own experience, using my magic to manipulate your-”

All of a sudden, the rapid-fire words sliding from the Prince’s tongue screeched to a quick halt. He stopped, his mouth still open as though to continue, then he bundled his fingers into a fist before his lips and cleared his throat.
“But, my friend,” Sidon went on, calmer than before and with an audible hint of mischief, “are you even sure that you’d enjoy such a thing? Having my thoughts and feelings rattling inside your brain would probably be quite overwhelming for you. My chatter alone has always been.. something of a bother.”

Link’s head was tilted back, the steely blue of his gaze pinned upon the Zora’s features; he hardly blinked, processing a tinge of insult. “You’ll never let me live down my impatience..” he muttered.

Of course, Sidon wore a cheeky grin, perfectly aware of the Hylian’s offense, and not even bothering to deny that it had been intentional. Sidon brushed off the idea, however, shaking his head and quietly sighing the words, “I’m not even certain I can pull it off, my dearest..”

“If you want, you can try,” the Hylian reassured, reaching up to pat Sidon’s cheek, though he wore a very serious expression. “As long as you don’t warp my brain, or do any crazy, fictional shit, like causing us to switch bodies.”

Sidon’s eyes went wide at the suggestion, his breath leaving him while he contemplated such a circumstance, then he hurriedly pushed it away in his mind, clenching his eyes shut in order to block it out. “I dread to imagine what chaos could come of such a bizarre event as that. I’ll endeavor to avoid finding out at all costs.”

“Then we’re good,” Link purred with a soft titter, relaxing himself backward, into Sidon’s palms. “Go on.”

“As you wish,” Sidon agreed, bending himself down to press a soft, affectionate kiss to the Hylian’s lips. He remained, the point of his brow nuzzling fondly at the soft of Link’s hair, then he withdrew just enough space so that he could focus on the blue of his lover’s gaze.

If anything, Sidon had proven the strength of his magic, so that it offered Link palpable evidence that it could be trusted. It could be trusted, without a single doubt and with as much confidence as the magic which so often mended Link’s broken body and battered flesh. And if Mipha never failed the Hylian, after everything, why should her sibling?

Nevertheless, a slow but steady nervousness crept into the back of the Hylian’s mind under the intensity of the Zora’s focus. It was a quiet fear that Link tried hard to shush, clenching his jaw and moving his hands to Sidon’s forearms, his fingertips grasping at the Prince like he was an anchor of sorts. Maybe this had been a foolish idea and they should have just skipped to the awesome sex, though it wasn’t like that didn’t often leave him with doubts, as well.

He damned his own overeager instincts, always being so wary of every, little thing. Still, something about this struck him as familiar, familiar in an unpleasant way. He couldn’t put his finger on the reason why, however, so what option did he have but to deem himself crazy and move on? This was his own idea, so he’d be damned if he backed down now.

Link’s throat moved in an anxious swallow, then his lips parted to release an unsteady breath; Sidon either could already feel his tension, or else he could clearly see how evident it was.

“Try to relax,” Sidon spoke softly, gently, his voice a familiar, comforting warmth. The slits of his pupils flickered away, breaking eye contact for an instant, only to quickly return, along with a tiny upturn at the corners of his mouth. “..It’s easier if you let go of the idea of yourself as one,” he suggested, diligently attempting to explain something that was clearly beyond explanation. “Try not to see yourself as a single, isolated entity, drifting in your own singular reality.”

“I’m a selfish person,” Link commented, his voice hushed and idle. The sheer fact that he insisted on
replying only proved his point. “Thinking of myself as anything else seems.. impossible.”

He was one person, alone in this world, taking care of his own needs. That was his own truth. And yet-

“You’re an infinite existence, linked to everyone that ever has been and ever will be. You live temporarily in a body, which is finite, built from little more than the dirt and water of this world we call home, just like everyone and everything else.”

The Hylian blinked, his breath getting caught in his chest for a moment. The Zora’s words brought on a strange thought: the notion that nobody in this world was truly alive, and that the world, itself, was the one and only living being which truly existed. It had simply broken little pieces off from the whole, to play some complex game of pretend, where the pieces could love each other, or hate each other, or kill each other.

It sounded like the game of a bored deity.

“This is going to cause me an existential crisis,” Link breathed, shutting his eyes tightly and shaking his head.

“I’m here with you,” Sidon gently replied, a quiet chuckle rumbling in his chest. “You’re not alone. Let go of the boundaries that isolate you in your own body, in your own mind. Allow us to exist as one.”

Link was afraid that if he opened his eyes and submitted himself to the Zora’s magic, the first thought which would pass his mind was sure to be, ‘I’m not myself.’ Ever since he’d awakened in that Sheikah shrine, he’d feared, hated and tried his best to ignore that strange but constant sensation of wearing somebody else’s flesh like a disguise and if he did this, it stood to finally overwhelm him.

But since when did Link allow his fears to decide what he did and didn’t do? Slowly, he opened his eyes once more, locking his gaze with that of the Prince and holding his focus smooth and steady. After that, the searching magic found Link with ease, and suddenly the turbulence was lost with their magical unification.

The Hylian willfully discarded his unfit flesh, his very mortal existence likened to unnecessary garments to be left ashore while he swam out into the waters of oneness with not just Sidon, but all the rest of the world. Mostly Sidon, though.

The Prince met Link in the pool of infinity, his voice a distant echo, speaking the words, “Our minds are tied as one, our bodies do not exist, our souls...”

And then Sidon’s voice trailed off, hesitating, unsure. Guilty.

“Sidon?” came the call of Link’s voice, out into the void where he’d been promised company, where he feared to be left all alone.

Suddenly, as the Hylian looked around, he found himself in unfamiliar surroundings. He was no longer in Sidon’s arms, he was no longer out by the reservoir; he’d ventured some place new in what felt like the blink of an eye. Link did not get the sense that he was alone, however. In the back of his mind, he understood that Sidon was still there, that the Zora Prince was still with him in this moment.

‘I am not myself.’

There it was again, as always.
But something was different this time.

The Hylian glanced downward, observing his body, feeling it. He was a Zora. No, he was Sidon, but younger, perhaps the same age as Mipha, when she was immortalized in stone. He was inside the barracks of Zora’s Domain with a weapon in hand; it was large, too large for him to properly wield, yet nevertheless he did so. He felt tired, worn, breathless. His arms were trembling from the weight of his trident, but he fought hard to hide the tremor.

There was another man there, a Zora man whose eyes watched and judged. He measured Sidon, he levied him with expectations, he held the young Prince to impossible standards, and yet the young Zora prickled with pride, with joy that overflowed.

‘Look at me,’ he thought, ‘Yes, watch me.’

Link remembered the youthful sound of Sidon’s voice. He remembered it from the evening they spent dancing, though all of that had been in his head, too.

This vision was taken away very quickly, however. Link was torn from the connection, severed from it so suddenly that his own sense of self was all the more heavy and frightening, all the more suffocating. Sidon’s magic lunged to take hold of the Hylian as he tumbled free, but Link slipped from his grasp, overflowing with fear, with guilt, with self-hatred and responsibility that he couldn’t shoulder. Every awful thing he’d ever felt had intensified, doubling, tripling.

No.

These emotions and vulnerabilities weren’t his own.

“Link, Link,” Sidon snapped, his voice alarmed and heavy with concern. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to lose control of it like this.”

“Wha-” Link’s tongue was heavy, his sight dim. He blinked, finding his vision returned and his mind firmly planted back in reality. He was still resting in the Zora’s hands and the Prince had a look on his face of concern and terrible, terrible embarrassment.

“Are you alright, my dear one?” the Zora asked, his words rushed. “Oh please, say something.”

“I thought I said not to trick me into thinking I was you,” Link groaned, taking a deep breath to steady himself. He wouldn’t say so, but he owed Sidon’s magical screw up for a realization that he perhaps should’ve come to on his own; on the inside, the Zora Prince was just as angry and full of doubt as Link, himself. He hid it much better, of course. It made sense now, though, why Sidon always tried to lighten the Hylian’s burdens- because he really, truly understood.

“You could use a bit of practice with that magic of yours,” the Hylian commented.

“Yes, you’re quite right,” the Prince readily agreed, his fear diminishing now that his lover was responsive again, yet he remained flustered as ever over the blunder. He tried to force a smile to his face, but even in the lingering, magical haze, Link couldn’t help but feel that Sidon appeared more troubled than he should.

“Whenever I come out of the Spirit Potion, it always takes a little time for me to rediscover my own limitations again,” Sidon explained, shaking his head so that his dangling forefins swayed with his movement. His words were reasonable but hurried, his smile a mask to hide his face. “My apologies.”

Link lingered in silent suspicion, studying the soft fold in the pink patch of skin and the hardened
focus of his crested brow. The smoky dark of Sidon’s eyelids were narrowed, and the corners of his mouth were creased while he tried to smile away something unspoken.

It didn’t matter- that was Link’s conclusion. There was plenty to trouble them both, and more than a few things that he’d still refrained from telling the Zora, despite the bond of trust between them. For tonight, it didn’t matter.

‘Enjoy the dancing.’

That advice still applied, he supposed.

“It’s fine,” Link uttered rather gently, outstretching his reach to place his hand upon the Zora’s cheek. His fingers did not linger for long, wandering to one of the Zora’s forefins, trailing it with an appreciative touch. The gold of Sidon’s gaze shifted to regard the Hylian in his grasp. The fake smile faded, replaced, instead, by something more subtle, but genuinely awestruck, maybe even momentarily contented.

“Just do what you usually do,” the Hylian concluded, shrugging the whole previous matter off like it was nothing, his voice a warm, velvet sound, “and I’ll do what I do. I don’t need magical confirmation to know when I’ve done it right, your physical reactions are more than enough. And if not, you’ll tell me when I’m doing something right. You know how I like being told how wonderful I am.”

Sidon’s eyes narrowed again, perplexed and dubious. “You hate it,” he snapped.

That was true. Still-

“I hate talking more,” Link stated, providing something truer than the last statement, like it negated it. “So are we done with that, for now?”

The Prince’s mouth opened to provide an answer, but he very quickly thought better of it. He pursed his lips, instead, for the sake of forced silence, and it brought an approving smile to the Hylian’s face.

Link acted upon that satisfaction, to reward it. He drew himself forward, out of the comfortable recline offered by the Zora’s palms, though Sidon’s grasp clung to him, those sharp claws digging against the Hylian’s hips, with a want to imprison him there. Link paid it little mind, placing his hands against the pale of Sidon’s chest. The Prince was solid beneath Link’s touch, a pillar that could support Link’s weight with ease.

Sidon had all of the traits required to be incredibly imposing, but nevertheless, Link was a small, bold presence to challenge the Zora’s authority. The Prince must have found that stimulating, somehow, and Link provided ample proof of that, seeking it, enjoying it. He leaned in, as though to kiss his Zora lover, but instead he paused before delivering the affection, maintaining a small break of space between himself and the Prince.

“I think, somehow,” Link purred, going slowly, wanting to render the Zora impatient and helplessly frustrated for a change, “you’re prettier when you’re quiet.”

Sidon’s pale lips parted in his want to utter a reply, but his mouth did not open. What must he have been thinking? He was certainly eager to let Link know, as made clear by the soft furrow upon his features, the aggravation with having that tiny ounce of control stolen away, but he resisted.

Good. He must have been liking it, if he willfully went with it.

Once all sign of struggle faded from the Zora’s face, Link placed his lips against Sidon’s own. It was
soft and quick, hardly enough to fully sate what Sidon surely felt he was owed for being so patient, but Link would deliver that in something other than kisses.

[BEGIN NSFW]
The Hylian’s legs folded, then extended down, toward the floor. Slowly, Link slid himself between the Zora’s thighs, from the edge of the mattress, to the marble surface below, his hands exploring every inch available to him on the way down. Sidon’s body was a bounty of beautiful topography; rises and falls, dips and curves.

The space needed between the Zora’s legs for the lithe Hylian to fit in between was minimal, but once Link’s knees were pressed to the floor, his palms fell upon the Zora’s thighs and splayed them further apart.

Link’s sharp gaze went immediately to the smallest sign of movement from the Prince; Sidon’s hands had fallen at his side, upon the soft of the mattress, where his fingers tightened in the tangle of the sheets, suddenly tense in the excitement that his little lover was rebuilding now from earlier. It had diminished ever so slightly during the blunder with his magic, but not so much that the slit between his legs had folded itself shut completely.

The scales around the area were soft to the touch, perhaps smoother than any other part of Sidon’s body. The flesh was pliable, moving with ease overtop of the muscle, while Link drew his hands across the other man’s inner thighs, toward the bending crease where his legs met his pelvis.

The seam where the Zora’s members remained tucked away was swollen enough that it had peaked open, exposing the vulnerable, scaleless flesh from beneath, but not to the point that they protruded. A thin stream of wetness wept from the slit, down to the surface of the mattress. It stuck between the Zora’s thighs, leaving the scales there shining with moisture.

Link’s fingertips smoothed over the bloomed crease, rubbing the resulting wetness between his fingers; it was endlessly slick and clung rather stubbornly to any dry surface, making intimacy beyond messy, but blissfully free of chaffing.

The curious Hylian’s fingers, once wet, gently probed into the slit, eliciting a soft gasp from the Zora. To this point, he was unsure if he actually could shove his fingers inside of the sensitive cavern where his lover’s most vulnerable parts were pocketed, but he supposed it was a fairly small intrusion. Slowly, he pressed two fingers into the wet confines, his blue eyes upturning to gauge the Zora’s reaction, though a breathy sound met the Hylian’s ears much quicker, providing the reassurance he needed to keep going.

Sidon’s arms were shaking holding up his own weight while his body curled toward the Hylian’s touch and his thighs were now eagerly widespread to welcome Link’s attention. Link kept his eyes on Sidon’s expression as he drew his fingers slowly in and out, watching how his face went tense in focus and his dark eyelids tightly shut.

“Nnn,” was the quiet noise that came from the Prince, the sound of his enjoyment when the curious Hylian fingered that tight, secret space that only grew tighter while Sidon’s excitement climbed. His webbed toes clenched, his pale lips pursed together to entrap the sounds that would otherwise pour from him.

Link’s gaze strayed from the furrow upon the Prince’s features, down to the pleasing sight between his thighs; it was very different than Hylian anatomy, but no less attractive, nor lacking in erotic glory. The innermost flesh began to engorge from beneath the slit between the scales, so that it was swollen and pink, stretching the muscular membranes which normally held the crease tightly shut,
every inch of it shining with wetness. Link could only figure that the cavern where his fingers fit inside was the space between Sidon’s cocks, which had yet to swell enough to pop free.

Link wore a proud smile upon his face, part of his lower lip bitten beneath one canine tooth. He’d missed this and now he was going to make the most of it. He bent his head down between Sidon’s legs, the tip of his tongue lightly tracing the shape of the opening there, sampling the heady flavor of the Prince’s arousal getting ready to protrude. It differed from that of Hylians; not vastly, but noticeably. The taste was light and saline, a contrast still to the sharper flavor of their release.

The Zora hummed his contentment, one hand drifting slowly over to touch the crown of Link’s head in gentle appreciation. The sharp points of his fingerscales combed through the chestnut blonde of the Hylian’s hair, carefully scratching at Link’s scalp to offer encouragement, which had the smaller man greedily pressing his lips against the swollen slit, to lap at it all the more hungrily.

Sidon’s fingertips smoothed along Link’s hair, enjoying the softness of it nearly as much as the heat engulfing him, consuming him. He moved his fingers down, capturing the soft flesh of one ear between his digits, then he lightly tugged at it, to which Link let out a little grunt of acknowledgment. Maybe he wasn’t done obsessing over hair and ears after all.

Link hungrily licked at the wet slit, bearing down upon it so that his nose pressed against the white of Sidon’s scales, the skin wrinkling in his aggressive pursuit of the Zora’s pleasure. The Hylian’s breath came rapidly in and out, hot on the exhale, cool upon each inhale, the sensation leaving Sidon shivering, gasping, squirming, but never enough to escape- oh no, that wouldn’t do.

Then, at last, with another small stream of juices, the Zora’s members came loose from their confinement, swollen and eager, plopping against the Hylian’s cheek with a wet thud. A soft purr of joyous greeting vibrated in Link’s throat, and Sidon’s fingers in his hair tightened their grasp, rendering the Hylian unable to withdraw even enough to allow the heavy protrusions to fall away from his face, not that Link cared to get anywhere but closer.

He took one of the Zora’s wet cocks immediately in hand, pumping it slowly, his grip just tight enough to curl those adorable webbed toes all over again, and to curve the Zora’s back so that his chest pushed forward and his head fell back.

An impish gleam shined in the blue of Link’s eyes, which upturned again to watch the Zora’s reactions, all while one of the two excited members laid where it fell, wet and heavy against the skin of his cheek. He dragged the one he had in hand nearer to his mouth, smoothing it across his loosely parted lips, but without opening his mouth enough to permit it entry.

“Dear one,” Sidon purred, his voice a low rumble, his eyes a thin shine of gold from beneath his heavy lids. His face bore a soft snarl of desire, but his tongue acted against his instincts. “You know that you don’t ha-”

“Shh,” Link hissed rather insistently, his own stare hardening while his grip tightened, his one hand moving in a languid pump.

“You must really relish the idea that your body is too much, as often as you try to dissuade me from attending to you,” the Hylian growled, his voice pitched low with sensuous aggression, though his lips pulled into a grin.

“Is that what gets you going?” he teased, pressing his lips against the wet length bobbing before his face, so that Sidon could feel the movement of his words. “...When you tell me that I don’t have to, then I insist? Because the truth is, I want you so badly, I’m willing to struggle through it and I still enjoy the struggle all the same. Is that what gets you off?”
“Hmm,” Sidon blinked slowly, his fingers at last unfurling, the engulfing shroud of his palm moving from Link’s head, to his cheek, the soft pad of his thumb pressing against the Hylian’s chin. “Do you truly enjoy it, my love? Tell me more about that.”

“You know that I do,” Link breathed, a titter ghosting across his lips, shaking his shoulders. He paused, the tip of his tongue lapping along the length of the thick protrusion that had been rested against his cheek. He slipped out of Sidon’s grasp, his face nestling into the fleshy crook between the two endowments, his tongue wriggling into it. When Link bent his neck once more, upturning his head to peer up at Sidon, he continued, “You know that you’re a goddamn challenge and if there’s anything I crave, it’s that. Even if it’s impossible, even if I’m bested every time- I’ve never enjoyed losing to anyone more than you.”

“Mm yes and my anatomy,” Sidon commented, the tip of his tongue moving to wet his lips, which had turned dry from his quick breath. After, a sly smile crept across his lips, showing the shining edges of his sharp teeth, “..which you will surely never master, no matter how determined you are.”

“Oh that’s right, Your Majesty,” Link cooed, the heat of his breath and the movement of his hand causing Sidon to tense. “Go on then, taunt me. I like it.”

It was a fact- telling him that he couldn’t do something was the best way to see him accomplish it. And if it happened to be an impossible task, challenging Link to try it anyway was the best way to find out how stupid and stubborn he could be.

Link took the second of Sidon’s cocks in hand, opening his mouth at last to allow one to slide inside. The Zora let out a breath, like feeling the heat of Link’s mouth upon him was a relief. The Hylian did not live up to his fast and reckless reputation, however, taking only a mouthful of the Zora in, tasting the wet of Sidon’s swollen flesh atop his tongue, and feeling the weight of it. It was slow, exploratory, even though Link was well acquainted with this part of the Prince; he wanted to appreciate it properly.

The Hylian kept his lips tight around the shaft, his tongue moving along the underside while he suckled it, then he pulled back, slowly circling the tip with his tongue. He pumped it near the base, unhurried- no rush. His eyelids fell shut and his mouth opened, a quiet sound of desire escaping before he took Sidon into his mouth again.

Link’s head bobbed, allowing in only enough to fill his mouth. Where Sidon’s length was concerned, that wasn’t even half. The Hylian took it in and out a few times before he pulled back, spitting directly onto it and smearing it along the length with a few pumps from base to tip.

Working the Zora with both his hand and his mouth, Link resolved to swallow Sidon down, or at least to try it. His head dipped downward, allowing a bit more of the Prince’s length inside, until his cock nearly touched the back of the Link’s throat, then the Hylian drew back. He counted on having a difficult time of it, even despite having a fairly weak gag reflex. He took Sidon in again, going as deeply as he dared, testing himself to see what he could take, thankful mostly for the tapered nature of the Zora’s thickness.

He managed what he could, goaded by the moans he drew out of the Zora each time his cock began to slide down. The wetness helped most of the time, coaxing the thick, heavy mass toward the tight cavern of the Hylian’s throat slowly but surely, only hindering the process by forcing Link to pull back often, in order to swallow. He went on, he pushed, hastening his pace, lapping up and down continually and taking it more deeply each time, until the Zora was dipping toward his throat with each stroke, which was evidently enough to set Sidon on edge.

Again, Link set Sidon free, his attention alternating to the secondary member which had gone mostly
ignored to this point. The Prince tensed as it slid into Link’s mouth and he let out a soft, surprised
gasp. The lack of stimulation had left him overly sensitive, so the sudden heat around him came as a
great and pleasurable surprise.

Link backed off enough to tease, sucking at the tip while he moved his hand slowly up and down,
his grip nice and tight. His fingers were slick with Sidon’s wetness, so much so that it coated the
Hylian’s knuckles and streamed downward, toward his wrist- the Prince must have been in a terrible
state of wanting, for him to be so dripping wet. Then again, maybe it was the continued lack of being
taken fully inside any part of Link. It wasn’t something the Hylian could say for sure, but at just the
idea, he moved to challenge it.

Opening his mouth wider and taking care to cover his teeth, Link took the Zora’s length fully inside
of his mouth. He made a few quick back and forth strokes before he attempted to slide the appendage
deeper. The skin of his brow wrinkled in his focus, his eyes clenching tightly shut while he fought
his own reflexive urge to gag, finally finding success in taking Sidon down.

“Ahh, Link,” the Prince purred softly. Link moaned around the thick intrusion getting deeper into his
throat, encouraged by the rare sound of his own name on the Zora’s breath- fuck, did Sidon refrain
from using his name for the sole purpose and making it sound sensual as hell? Link certainly
responded to it like he’d been granted a goddamn gift from the goddesses, allowing Sidon to dip
down his throat with each bob of his head.

It didn’t slide in easily, however. Far from that. Each time the Zora’s member pushed down, Link felt
as though his esophagus was stretching to capacity and he was sure to find himself a bit sore
afterwards. That was a future Link problem, of course. His general dislike for idle chatter would only
aid in his recovery, anyway.

Inevitably, Link lost control of himself, and gagged on a particularly deep thrust. He quickly pulled
back, turning his head aside and sputtering the moment his mouth was emptied. He gulped for air,
wiping the dribbling wetness from his chin with the back of his hand, sure that he probably looked
like a fish out of water with how his mouth hung open.

He didn’t look directly up at Sidon at first, opting to give him something of a sideways glance, or a
slightly upturned glance as it were. It was more of a secretive stare, partly hidden beneath the mess of
his fringe. The Prince was a blurry image beyond the haze of tears which had sprung to the Hylian’s
eyes, but even so, Link could see the apologies and warnings resting on the Zora’s tongue, though
Sidon hesitated to speak them.

Nah- Link refused to be excused, just because it was difficult.

“Say that you believe in me,” the Hylian rasped, his voice already metaphorically fucked from
having his throat literally fucked.

“Pardon?” Sidon replied, his own voice equally breathy and low. From his tone, he actually hadn’t
heard or understood what Link had said.

“I said,” Link cleared his throat. It only helped nominally, “tell me that you believe in me.”

The Hylian turned his head aside, trying to rub the tears from his eyes by squishing his face into one
shoulder and then the other. Once he was satisfied with his returned visual clarity, he peered up at the
quiet Prince, pumping him idly like the stimulation might draw out the words Link was waiting to
hear.

“Mm,” Sidon hummed, his eyes shutting for an instant at the returned pleasure. The way Link’s
fingers rubbed back and forth across the tip of his cocks put him in a state of trembling delight each and every time, without fail. If his lover really wanted him to make conversation, he wasn’t helping the Zora focus, that was for sure. “My dear one, no amount of encouragement will help you accomplish the impossible.”

“I know that,” Link stated with a quiet chuckle. How funny that Sidon had decided to tell him that, like Link wasn’t the one who’d always known, like Link wasn’t the more realistic person between the two of them. “Say it anyway.”

“Say it,” Link reiterated, bowing his head low between Sidon’s thick thighs. He took his grip away from both of the Zora’s endowments, letting them heavily hang while he pressed his drenched hands against Sidon’s legs, his fingertips pushing into the plush soft of the tender, fatty areas of his innermost thighs. Link’s face nestled between the two, eager cocks and they both twitched upward at the contact, smearing his cheeks with slick wetness. It wasn’t like he wasn’t already a mess, so it hardly mattered.

Link’s mouth opened, his tongue lapping at the fleshy area at the base of his lover’s two, diverging members; it was wetter there than anywhere else. The lubrication wept steadily from the tight slit, which was stretched wide from how excitedly swollen Sidon had become. The Hylian flicked his tongue up and down in the tight space, then, without using his hands, he flatly licked the underside of one cock.

“I, ahh,” Sidon began, his head falling forward, his tail swaying against the back of his shoulders. One hand found its way to Link’s shoulder, his fingers gently smoothing up the side of the Hylian’s neck. “I believe in you.”

“That’s good,” the Hylian hummed, his fingers encircling the Zora, his tongue coming back out to flick at the tip, to probe at the tiny, leaking hole there. Link’s hand pumped, while his lips parted; the tip of his tongue came out to wet them before he took Sidon into his mouth again. How was he swallowing him before? Even the first few inches already felt to be an overwhelming amount again. Link grunted at the effort, his head moving up and down in tandem with his hand, slowly jerking the Zora’s cock. He could feel the texture of Sidon becoming more thick, more taut between his fingers, and it was even more satisfying than his words of faith.

Because even if it was impossible for Link to do a ‘good job,’ the Prince was still enjoying it enough to nearly bust into the Hylian’s mouth. Nearly.

Link drew back again, lips tight around the thick intrusion, as if he had any other choice. It was honestly hurting his jaw keeping his mouth open wide enough to permit Sidon entry, but that was irrelevant. Sidon’s cock came free from Link’s suckling mouth with a wet pop, and the Hylian took a deep breath, his lips pink from the friction, his mouth open and forming a small circle while he caught his breath.

He looked up, catching Sidon watching him, his own face pinched in desire, his pale chest heaving with his breath. Was he entranced by this? Did he find Link to be an erotic sight, kneeled before him and fighting an ongoing battle with his impossibly large endowments for the sake of his pleasure? Link sure as hell hoped so.

As though in reply, Sidon’s pale lips parted, allowing a quiet moan to escape. The corners of Link’s wet lips upturned and he bent his head down to lick one of his erections from base to tip.

‘Look at me,’ Link thought, deaf to the apparent repetition. ‘Yes, watch me.’

Again, the Hylian closed his eyes and slipped Sidon’s cock into his mouth, taking it in toward the
back of his throat on the first few strokes, taking it deeper upon the fourth. His tongue lapped at it as it passed in and out, and he could feel his throat muscles tightening in an attempt to reject the intrusion. He swallowed around it, allowing the excess juices to go down. It somewhat tricked his body into thinking that something actually should’ve been sliding down his throat, temporarily quieting his gag reflex.

Sidon hummed his approval when Link swallowed him down, a guttural moan coming out of him at the feeling of the Hylian’s throat muscles tightening around his thick cock, at the sight of how deeply his little lover was taking him in.

Link stuck with it, allowing his lover to fuck his throat, taking Sidon down again and again. His mouth was wet, so that saliva and juices were dribbling down his chin, dripping, trailing down his neck. Sloppiness was an inevitability, so Link wasn’t even fighting it any longer.

Link’s fingers on Sidon’s cock splayed, his grip tight, pumping him hard. His wrist was bent, his grip twisting around the slick member while he jerked it, quick but not too quick; he didn’t want to overstimulate the Zora with his hand, lest his mouth would lose the ability to provide meaningful stimulation.

The Zora’s cock came up with a quick, gasping expulsion, like Link had waited until the very last moment to breathe- he had. The Hylian’s cheeks burned red and his comparatively small body shook as he gasped, but his hand did not still. He swallowed, making a vain attempt to wipe his wet face.

He really just wanted to finish Sidon off like this, just once, but the Zora was right, it was impossible. Link wasn’t terribly discouraged yet, because he was too fucking aroused to be disappointed and chasing the unobtainable dream of sucking Sidon to his climax had the Hylian making his own wet mess between his thighs.

He could feel it, slick and pulsing hot between his legs, moist and sticky down to his thighs. That was the feeling of an absolute, fucking disaster. Letting out a grunt of discomfort, Link peered up at the Zora, gesturing with a little nod at his lover’s endowments, then he spoke up in a harsh, husky tone, “Hey, do you mind getting a hold of yourself?”

“A hold of- oh,” Sidon babbled, clenching his eyes shut and shaking his head at himself for not immediately ‘grasping’ what Link was saying. “Right, of course.”

Link grinned, decidedly not giving the Prince any flack. Instead, he reached for Sidon’s fumbling hand, his fingers small against Sidon’s own and wetting the Zora’s scales with his touch. He drew the Zora’s hand down to the base of his endowments, which were heavy in his excitement, yet also pointing enthusiastically outward with how firm they had become. Link guided the Prince just enough that he understood what was being asked, and Sidon palmed himself near where his protrusions had emerged, holding them steady.

In a hurry, Link reached to fumble with his own waistband, unfastening his belt and shoving both his trousers and his small clothes down, leaving them to bunch messily around his knees; they offered a bit of cushion for him to rest upon, at least. With all of that out of his way, the Hylian shoved his hand down between his legs, to quell the urge which was overcoming him.

“What,” the Hylian moaned, his head falling forward, coming to rest against Sidon’s knee in his apparent loss of control. Link’s body shook and heaved in a mix of gasps and breathy groans while his hands grasped at the swollen nub between his legs, his own moisture intermingling with that of the Prince, which coated the Hylian’s hands.

The excess of wetness made it difficult for Link to grip himself as well as he would’ve liked, but he
managed, pushing himself between his fingertips, moving them back and forth in a rushed, ecstatic way.

Sidon leaned his head to watch, his own hand large enough to nearly encircle both of his protrusions, moving slowly up and down. His tongue poked between his lips in temptation as he tried to steal a glance. Link’s hand nearly fully obscured the lovely details of his anatomy, but every now and again, his fingers pulled back far enough for the Zora to catch a glimpse of his tiny cock and the way the Hylian’s foreskin easily moved back and forth under Link’s grasp.

“Does it really entice you so?” Sidon purred, watching his helpless, Hylian lover touch himself. He reached to stroke Link’s hair, brushing it aside in order to view the heat-flushed stain of pink on the Hylian’s face. “...to the point that you can’t even finish the job without falling prey to your own eagerness?”

“Ahh, still taunting me, huh?” Link growled, tilting his head upward just enough to send a challenging glare to match the smug grin on his lover’s face.

“Cum for me, then,” the Zora coaxed, his fingers tightening in the Hylian’s hair, pulling Link’s head closer to where his swollen cocks awaited his attention. “Do it while you suck me, if you enjoy it so.”

“Nnn,” Link whined, his knees wanting to buckle and fold in his arousal. He pushed, straightening his legs in order to meet the height of Sidon’s splayed thighs, then he bent his head down, guided by the Zora’s hand. Link opened his mouth to receive one of Sidon’s cocks, somehow more aroused that the Prince had the audacity to push him down onto it. It must have been exciting for Sidon, too, because he let out a long, deep sound of pleasure while he was shoved back into the heat of his Hylian lover’s mouth.

Link lapped at the Zora’s wet length as it slid deeper, toward the back of his mouth. Sidon didn’t push him any further, but Link continued of his own volition, swallowing around the thick mass when it began down his throat. Link’s brows knitted together, but this time from the overwhelming arousal building up inside of him. Link took Sidon in until his nose bumped the Zora’s knuckles.

Sidon watched Link eagerly, hungrily, not wanting to miss a moment of the sight of his lover between his legs, bobbing on his cock while he pleasured himself. The eroticism of it pushed him, his own overwhelming sensations melding deliciously with that of his dear one.

Link’s own hand was moving furiously, feverishly against himself so that he let out muffled hums of enjoyment with Sidon still resting upon his tongue, drawing soft, breathy noises from the Zora in turn. Then, with another choked noise, Link shuddered into his own orgasm. His body trembled in release as he brought himself over the edge, waves of euphoria bursting free from his nethers, climbing part way up his spine, slithering down to his toes so they twitched and curled.

Then, in a flash, the explosive strength faded away, and left Link gasping in the overwhelming afterglow. He allowed Sidon to slide free from his mouth and he laid his head against Sidon’s thigh, quietly catching his breath.

“Mm,” Sidon let out a quiet sound of enjoyment, breathing in and basking in the feeling of his lover’s post-orgasmic bliss. “I swear to you this, my love, your pleasure is ultimately a more enjoyable treat than even my own.”

“I wish I could compare us the same way you can,” Link muttered, swallowing and wiping his face. He brushed his hair back from his eyes, feeling it cling to the sweat of his forehead. “What’s it like, Sidon?”
“Your orgasms are so full, so.. electric.” Sidon paused to search for the right words, frustration staining his features, but Link just laughed. “And you’re always ready for more.”

“Maybe we should experiment with shock arrows, you freak,” the Hylian joked, hauling the heavy, trembling mass of his body up from the floor, kicking his pants off from around his ankles as he went. He clambered back into the Zora’s embrace, with Sidon’s hands easing and guiding him all the way, though the Zora gave a visible shudder the moment his still-erect protrusions bumped the wet space between Link’s legs. Clearly, for all of his praise of Link’s pleasure, he was still wanting for some of his own.

With Link seated upon his lap once more, the Zora dipped his head low to kiss his head, then lower to nuzzle into the crook between his neck and shoulder. Sidon’s tongue poked between his lips, lapping at his lover’s soft skin and tasting the salt that clung there. A quiet whine produced a hot puff of breath, which caused the Hylian to shiver in the Zora’s grasp, and Link’s ears twitched at the faint sound of Sidon’s teeth clicking together in desire that had yet to be fulfilled.

“I was thinking..” Link hesitantly spoke, unsure whether or not his words would serve as an interruption to the current mood. Probably. Sidon drew his head upward to focus, golden eyes set upon Link in attention, so it was apparently too late to go back. “I don’t think you should be so nervous about the upcoming battles you’ll face in the courts,” Link finished off his previous thought.

The Zora cocked his head in intrigue, and perhaps minor confusion, his eyelids narrowing, his lips pulling into a tight line.

“I’m not saying this to flatter you, I mean it,” Link stated. “Your mind and tongue are so sharp, you can do twice as much good with just those as I could do damage with an actual weapon.”

“I am flattered, of course..” the Zora replied, his voice soft and slow, his tone wary. ‘But peoples’ lives are at stake. No matter how confident I am in my skills, I can’t help but fear, knowing others will suffer the consequences of my failures.” He let out a flustered breath as the haunted shadow of future events darkened his features. “Please, Link, I don’t want to-”

“But it’s okay, Sidon,” Link interrupted, upturning his gaze to meet the Zora’s. The Hylian hoped to chase away Sidon’s uncertainty with a small, confident smile, though it felt alien to the muscles of Link’s face. How many different combinations of words had the Prince used to encourage Link not to feel ashamed of his own weaknesses, vulnerabilities and failures? How many times had he told Link to ‘have faith’? ‘Prepare for disaster before it strikes, then face it head on and without fear when it does.’

Link wished he possessed even a scrap of the young Prince’s inherent wisdom.

“Whatever happens, happens,” he said, head drooping immediately at his own lack of bright, inspirational cleverness. He shrugged, but continued despite being so clearly second rate at encouragement. “And no matter what, even if it’s the worst possible outcome, the world won’t end and life will continue and we’ll carry on. I promise.”

In reply, Sidon offered a weak smile and an even gentler nod of his head. It was difficult for Link to tell if the Zora truly felt any better, or if he’d merely accepted his lover’s attempt. Maybe he really just couldn’t be consoled and his negative emotions deserved to exist, the same as the lynel, the same as the Calamity. Perhaps the negativity deserved validation, at least for a little while. Link would leave it alone.
“I just want to say one more thing,” Link stated, changing the subject, as it was clearly for the best. It still somewhat pertained to what he’d already been saying before, but the purpose was different. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you. I mean, something else I’ve been thinking about, anyway.”

“Yes?”

“When we were at that council meeting, you really surprised me, you know,” Link mumbled, momentarily getting this embarrassing feeling like he’d entered the same realm as all those lovestruck, young Zora women who were all so taken with Sidon that they couldn’t sleep at night.

“Pardon?” the Prince responded, confused as to what the smaller man was on about. Council meeting? Of course there was only one instance of Link attending a council meeting alongside him, to his memory. “You mean the emergency meeting in regards to the Water Blight? A week ago?”

“That’s the one.” Link’s head tilted forward in one, solid nod. “I haven’t been able to forget about it. Watching you speak before the council was very inspiring and all but.. there were also some physical reactions to speak of.”

Sidon chuckled over the suggestion, though his gaze escaped elsewhere in flustered disbelief while the pale of his cheeks took on more of a soft violet coloration. “Well, you certainly surprised me as well. Your performance was top tier, and you so flawlessly appealed to some of the most stubborn people I’ve ever known in my life.” The Prince hurriedly spun the praise back in Link’s direction. “But, my beautiful one, which part in particular surprised you, might I ask?”

“When you put that one council member in his place- the one who wanted to condemn the Undercity people in order to save the Uppercity ones,” Link bluntly stated.

“.I wouldn’t have thought that me showing concern for the lives of others would be particularly surprising or stimulating,” the Prince commented, not quite understanding how his Hylian lover gleaned anything arousing from that.

“.uh, no.” Link resisted the urge to comb his hands through his hair, opting, instead, to rub them on his naked thighs. “It’s just the way you did it. You just had this passion, you were so powerful in that moment and the words just.. came.”

“Interesting phrasing,” the Prince remarked with a titter.

“Oh stop that,” Link hissed, his ears folding backward. Even so, he couldn’t hold back a sheepish, breathy laugh of his own. “You see? You speak well, your words can pierce and before that meeting, I hadn’t even known that you could turn so sharp and precise. You seriously cut that guy down. You tore him to shreds, but you did it verbally, and with this.. incredible composure. And you looked damn good doing it. I can’t do that. I’m not that smooth and my tongue will never be that talented.”

Link seriously would have killed for the talent Sidon possessed. Maybe then, he would have been able to match Brivere during their fight in one, single way. Even the golden Zora had more talent when it came to saying clever things in the moment; Link seriously couldn’t stop thinking of the sharp, brooding stare on Brivere’s face when he uttered the word, ‘erroneous.’ It was just one word, but it had sounded incredible and Link utterly resented it.

He could envy it on Sidon, though.
Speaking of- the Prince had pressed his fingertips to his lips, to hide away his cheeky grin, as though he wasn’t audibly chuckling in a way that caused Link’s ears to perk forward again.

“Well, you’re very good at accidental innuendo, anyway,” he commented, providing the answer to the silent questioning of Link’s gaze. He then proceeded to bend his head lower, pressing a kiss to Link’s temple before he continued, his words soft and low against the Hylian’s ear. “But I rather beg to differ about your tongue’s talents.”

“You’re making this so impossible,” the Hylian breathed, unable to render himself as harsh and aggressive as usual with Sidon trying so hard to be a seductive bastard. Link shook his head, then spoke, “How did we even get here? I have zero skill when it comes to flirting. Apparently I can’t even genuinely compliment you without making a damn fool of myself.”

“Well perhaps I found that to be a charming quality?” Sidon stated without hesitation, chasing away his little lover’s doubt with a gentle nuzzle. He bumped the point of his brow against Link’s forehead like they were no different, and the Hylian returned it gladly. When the Prince straightened again, he let out a sigh and spoke up, though this time his voice was soft and uncertain, “…well, that and I’ve always made a habit of seeking the attention of people who I admire or look up to. It wasn’t the best habit to have, considering how pushy I can be and that I put myself into several situations which I had no place to be in… but let’s not speak of that.”

Link’s eyes widened and his expression intensified so quickly, you’d have thought someone had told him that the Calamity wasn’t real, but rather a huge prank the entire world was playing on him.

“Oh, no,” he quickly spat, his legs straightening so that he became a bit more level with the Zora Prince. He pressed his palms against Sidon’s shoulders for balance. “Now we have to speak of this. What kind of situations?”

“You may stop right there, my dear one,” the Prince stated in a hard, final manner, though he wore a smile as he did so. “There’s no need for this pity or guilt tonight. I’ve confessed that I have a tendency to put myself into compromising positions, and that I have been known to seek attention, without thinking things through. This is all that needs to be said tonight.”

“I’m trying to show my concern for you,” Link insisted.

“And I do appreciate it, but I am emotionally exhausted,” Sidon purred, making it very clear that he needed his lover’s help in refueling those energies. His hands drifted to Link’s hips, those sharp claws finding the rosy marks he’d previously left behind with the intent of brightening them. He maintained the coy curve to his mouth, the hungry gleam to his gaze, then he said, “You’re just going to have to wait for any further explorations into my very foolish adolescence or else find other ways to encourage me.”

Link replied like he’d ensnared the Prince in some kind of trap, “Now you’re the one making accidental innuendos.”

Sidon only let out a quiet laugh. “It wasn’t at all accidental.”

[BEGIN NSFW]

“Huh,” the Hylian scoffed, unable to feel clever even once. He should have known better. He cleared his throat like it ridded him of all previous verbal bumbling, then he curved his back, slowly pushing his ass cheeks against the Prince’s impatiently waiting cocks; they’d softened a bit from the rest and from their own wetness turning cold as they went untouched. “If that’s the case, I think I can see to it.”
“Mm,” Sidon hummed, his tail swishing slowly in his contented delight while his soft, warm palms
rubbed at Link’s hips in encouragement. “Why don’t we lay down? Do you remember that position
that I like?”

A grin quickly made its way to Link’s face and one of his brows quirked before he verbalized a
request of his own, in turn. “. . . Think you can be commanding about it?”

“Comm- ah, you mean as I was in court? Uhh, very well,” Sidon chuckled, an awkward, but
amused expression betraying his true feelings about the Hylian’s request. He cleared his throat,
however, and breathed a quiet sigh to focus himself, sure that he couldn’t pull this off, otherwise. His
eyes fell shut, his thoughts gathering themselves very quickly, then when his lids snapped open, his
entire disposition shifted, flipping from sweet and sultry, to intense and demanding.

“I want to see you laid across my bed, with that pretty ass exposed for my viewing pleasure,” he
growled, his voice a deep rumble. It sounded a bit more like he was trying to embody a very horny
lynel, rather than his own sharp, passionate side. “And I want it now- you know how demanding I
can be, as royalty.”

Sidon barely finished his sentence before Link lost it, snorting in laughter from the attempt. Actual,
fucking tears sprang to his eyes when they clenched tightly shut, and he gasped, trying to chase away
his apparently uncontrollable giggles.

“Oh no, was it bad?” the Prince uttered, laughing himself because Link’s genuine amusement was
utterly contagious.

“You really oversold it, yeah,” Link replied, rubbing the butt of his hands against his eyes. “It was as
bad as that exaggerated, friendly act you do. But it’s alright.”

When his laughter abated, the Hylian offered his lover a reassuring pat, though Sidon didn’t appear
too offended. “Your genuine passion is plenty sensual enough,” Link added, just to be safe,
stretching himself upward to place a needful kiss upon his lover’s pretty lips, before he crawled
carefully from the Zora’s lap, down to the soft of the sheets, below.

“I’m sorry,” the Prince breathed, good-humored about it and satisfied enough at being able to lay
himself down near the other, holding their bodies flush, with Link’s back against the pale of his
stomach and the Hylian’s buttocks within reach of Sidon’s wanting protrusions. “I merely. . . prefer
being affectionate and feeling close to my lovers.”

With a gentle tug at the Hylian’s hips, Sidon nestled him higher, so the back of Link’s shoulders
were pressed to the Zora’s chest, and Sidon stretched one arm out beneath Link’s head, to give him
somewhere to lay it. In this position, the Prince was forced to curl his body in order to penetrate his
partner, which kept him from pushing in too deeply. It also was sweet and sensual, which aptly
tickled Sidon’s fancy.

Link held his thighs together tightly and Sidon pushed himself into that tight, fleshy space, his hips
lapping slowly, his moans vibrating against Link’s back.

“This is how we did it the first time,” Link purred, chuckling and letting out a soft moan as Sidon’s
thick, wet members slid slowly back and forth, just outside of his wanting heat, rubbing him in
delightful ways. “You’re such a hopeless romantic.”

“I just like it,” the Zora muttered, somehow sheepish over the fact that he was so soft, and probably a
little sexually tepid. But the worry that his lover could ever grow bored of him got thankfully lost, in
the tight stimulation offered between Link’s beautiful thighs. Sidon’s body flicked to delve himself
into that space again and again, undulating with hardly an effort, his hips rhythmically thumping against the Hylian’s pert ass. His hand grappled and tugged at Link, trapping him, restricting his movement; it was demanding for a man so otherwise unassuming.

Link’s back curved, the friction between his legs heightening him back to full arousal, so that his body no doubt matched Sidon’s eager wetness with his own, to the point that even their calm, slow motions came with slick, messy sounds.

“Are you actually gonna go inside, or what?” Link groaned, pushing back against the teasing Zora. He was just as Sidon proclaimed, always ready for more. In fact, he was ready for more right now, that was if Sidon could get on with it.

“I was planning on it,” the Zora mumbled, a slight growl of impatience audible in his tone. It caused Link’s ears to perk in intrigue and an impish smile to cross his face.

“I want you to fuck me.” Link’s voice was a mix of breathy need and sharp demand. The sound of it, the simplicity of his chosen words, caused Sidon’s grip on him to tighten in immediate reply. He couldn’t pull off being a commanding, sexual authority, but it seemed clear that he didn’t mind Link doing it in his place.

“I am going to fuck you, you insatiable fiend,” Sidon snapped each word, his voice low and velvet, his hips pushing harder against the Hylian pressed tightly against him, as though in some kind of rebuke for Link’s impatient lust.

“Hold me close, and fuck me nice and slow,” Link said. He could feel Sidon bending his head lower to listen carefully, entangled and enticed. The arm upon which Link’s head was laid now bent and curled, so that Sidon’s hand tuck underneath Link’s chin, upturning it. The Zora’s fingers were loose around the thin column of Link’s neck, feeling the vibrations of the Hylian’s husky tone and his filthy words of encouragement, “I want you to fill me beyond capacity, in the way only you can.”

Sidon leaned low enough that the tip of his tongue traced the delicate point of Link’s ear, then he nipped, capturing the flesh between the razor edges of his teeth for an exhilarating instant before quickly letting go. His fingers tightened, not enough to choke, but enough to restrain.

“Have you absolutely no patience?” he asked, his words chastising and pleading. His breath was hot against the flesh of Link’s ear, where Sidon’s lips were pressed.

“I’ve been patient!” Link hissed, insistent, wriggling in the Zora’s grasp so that Sidon clutched him tighter, blissfully tight. His words weren’t without truth, however; he’d held out for his sleeping Prince and he yearned now for the promised prize as much as Sidon clearly did, too, despite how excruciatingly he drew it out.

“You really want to be ‘filled beyond capacity,’ do you?” Sidon muttered like it was a warning. If was a bluff on his part, but the sound of it still had the Hylian letting out a muffled whine, his body bristling and writhing for the fulfillment which was being thrust so near yet so far from where he craved it.

“I want to enjoy it tonight and regret it tomorrow,” Link purred, the tip of his tongue wetting his lips, which were dry from his excited breath. He arched his body, providing the Prince simple entry, if only Sidon would accept. He hummed in discontented longing, his voice coming out as a weak, pleading breath, “Go on.”

And then, at last, Sidon pushed himself inside. He went with smooth ease into wet heat of Link’s wanting core, the flick of his hips gentle and thorough, delivering his thick length slowly but deeply,
as per the Hylian’s numerous requests. But despite the ease, Link gasped at the sudden fullness, his body going rigid at the delectable stretch. He let out a moan from somewhere deep in his chest, his mouth gaping wide, his breath leaving him.

“Nnn,” Sidon hummed, losing a bit of his composure, losing a bit more of his usual, princely manner. He still maintained his gentle care, of course, but his carnal passion was thinly veiled just beneath. His hands tightly yanked at Link’s featherweight frame, while one toeclaw gripped into the sheets to give his movement more leverage. His teeth audibly snapped together, clicking with each deep, languid thrust, so it was more than obvious now that his prior teasing had been for the sake of driving himself wild, as well.

“Ohh,” Link gasped, squirming against the hold the Zora had on him, aroused all the more by how restricted his body was. He was left no choice but to lie still and feel the surging delight of his lover’s cock pushing inside of him, stretching his wet hole wide open. “..Sidon.”

Sidon’s laugh was a soft purr and he spoke the words, “Like that then, my beautiful one?”

He didn’t expect a response at all, because his hand upon Link’s neck slithered upward, so that the Zora’s pointer finger was resting gently against the seam of Link’s lips. He applied no pressure, but the Hylian’s mouth opened like a baby bird waiting to be fed, only for Sidon’s finger to curl into the hot, wet cavern, and for the sharp of one fingerscale to press gently against the flesh of Link’s cheek. He could’ve hooked a claw through the Hylian’s cheek and dragged him around like a hapless fish on a hook if he’d wanted, but he was offering only the sweet temptation of danger. Link greeted that temptation gratefully, his tongue lapping at the intrusion into his mouth, much the same as he had with Sidon’s cocks.

And then, when Link finally grew impatient with having his mouth occupied, he bit down. The Zora hissed in surprise, and quickly withdrew, but not without making it clear that he rather enjoyed prompting his small, angry lover to use those blunt, harmless teeth of his. Sidon’s hand drew up and over Link’s mouth like his intent was to restrict him, but he let out a soft moan when the Hylian pulled free and caught the Zora’s hand in the lunge of his teeth, biting down upon the soft flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

“Nnn.” Link voice was a heavy growl. He allowed the Zora’s hand free from the trap of his jaws, if only to hiss a sharp demand, “More.”

Sidon pushed in deeper, his hips rocking lightly. He could feel his lover’s limits and reached them, bumping himself against the fleshy walls which went no deeper. There was no ‘more’ to be had frankly, even though Sidon had length to spare.

“This is all I can do, my love,” he sweetly lamented. “I told you- it doesn’t matter how determined you are, you can’t master my body. But shouldn’t that excite you all the more?”

“It does,” Link muttered, his voice shaking with each thrust. “But, you’re wrong. I can take more.”

With a grin of reckless challenge upon his face, the Hylian turned, resting his chin against his shoulder and casting a smoldering stare back at the doubtful Prince. He reached, pressing his palm to one fleshy ass cheek, fingers spreading him open to beckon the Zora.

The sight of it left the Prince breathless; he could see, without any obscurity, his incredible girth disappearing deeply into his tiny lover, wrenched between the wet, splayed lips, and then, too, a puckered hole that had gone unused.

“I can take both of them.”
A hum of deepened arousal came from Sidon at the offer- it was painfully excessive, but just like his reckless little lover. And tempting, oh so tempting.

“‘It’ll be alright,’” Link reassured, his voice even and silky, so that he was near impossible to turn down. “You’re connected to me- you’ll be able to feel if you’ve done something wrong.”

“You make a fair point, my love,” Sidon hummed, pulling himself from where he’d been buried before, leaving Link empty with a wet squelch and gasp from the Hylian. He tutted over his lover’s reaction, but didn’t leave him disappointed and empty for long. He took hold of his dripping cock and aligned it with the tight, puckered entrance being so erotically displayed before him. The outside was already slick from the Hylian’s dribbling excess of wetness, but the Zora rubbed himself there, moistening the area further.

A quiet, wary noise came from the Hylian when Sidon applied pressure, attempting to push himself into the restrictive tight of the puckered hole, until the resistant muscles slowly loosened, giving way to allow the thick intrusion passage. The Zora was light and shallow with his movements once he was inside, though his chest heaved from the tight squeeze around him and his face wrinkled in focus.

Link pushed his face into the sheets, every last bit of air in his body expelled in a deep, loud groan. Sidon dipped his head low to whisper to the overwhelmed Hylian, saying, “Don’t muffle your cries, my love.”

Sidon was able to slide the tip of his cock inside but Link was tense and the Zora didn’t push any further, for fear of causing his lover discomfort. Even so, he didn’t neglect to tease Link’s bold, overconfident ways. “If you really want to enjoy this tonight and regret it tomorrow, then you’ll scream out your pleasure for all of Zora’s Domain to hear. Also, you need to relax.”

“I’m.. trying,” Link grunted through clenched teeth. “Just keep moving, but slowly.”

The Prince hummed in confirmation, continuing his soft, shallow thrusts, allowing his dripping fluids to wet the formerly untouched cavern as he did. The Hylian’s ass was certainly a much more resistant ordeal than his other, greedier hole, and more than once, Sidon was nearly forcefully expelled.

The Zora’s fingers encircled his two members at the base, holding them tightly together. The forgotten of the two drifted naturally toward Link’s other, dripping entrance, which was already fucked wide and allowed entry with ease, though the Hylian let out another muffled cry at being rendered so full, even if Sidon had yet to plunge very deeply inside.

Sidon’s fisted fingers stroked up and down his unused length, his hand twisting around his cocks, in an attempt to tame himself from the temptation of thrusting fully into the welcoming tightness now swallowing up both of his erections.

“So then, this is what you like, is it?” he muttered, taunting his lover again before he delved deeper with a more pronounced flick of his hips.

“Everything in wicked excess,” Link replied, raising his head a bit to allow his voice to be heard. It was thin and tremulous, his entire body shaking, heaving for lost breath. “I’ve never been guiltier of that accusation, huh?”

“Maybe you’ll learn your lesson, one day,” Sidon cooed with a grunt, at last allowing himself deeper access to the tight, silky heat of the Hylian’s little ass. It was wet and slick, and had been gently worked well enough that the formerly clenched muscles had loosened their hold around him.
“Yeah,” Link breathed, “I have no doubt that if anybody can teach me a lesson, it’ll be you.”

Sidon chuckled his amusement, curving his body to bend his head low enough that the point of his brow could bump the crown of Link’s head; comfort and reassurance in the form of affection. With appropriate softness, he hummed the words, “Does it feel good, yet?”

The Hylian was forced to laugh at the absurdity of the question; Sidon always knew exactly what he was feeling. There was still the dull burn of Link’s muscles objecting to having his ass penetrated, but also the stimulation provided and the heaviness deep inside as both of his hungry holes were filled to their limits.

“You know it does,” Link replied, one hand moving to his big, engorged clit. It was throbbing, aching in its need to be pleasured, and the Hylian’s fingers slowly stroked at it, careful not to bring an end to this too quickly. He was aroused to near euphoria and his body was eager for release; he wanted to feel Sidon cum first, however.

“I don’t know that for sure,” Sidon commented with another little grunt, pulling out and delving in again. It was slow and deep, just as Link had requested; being shoved into two, different places made it a bit more effort to thrust and that held him back. He took a deep breath, nearly at the point of overstimulation. “...it feels quite overwhelming to me, but it’s good for you?”

“I can take it,” Link’s voice was choked, stifled by the obscuring veil of his lust. He reached to touch the rough, red scales of Sidon’s arm, giving him a pat. “Keep going.”

Sidon kept his movements slow and timed. He could feel it, indeed; Link was stretched beyond measure, full beyond capacity, while he was doubly enveloped, engulfed by the incendiary heat and delectable friction. Being able to fuck with both of his cocks was a rare treat and his face pinched in pleasure and in sensation that was, just as he’d stated, overwhelming, but good, so good.

He quickened his pace, taking care to thrust a bit more shallowly. Link had now ceased in his previous squirming, going almost completely still, his legs folding slightly in order to give the Zora more access. They felt like they weren’t even attached to him any longer, heavy as though his body had cut off all sensation to them in order to focus on the wonderful invasions entering him again and again.

Link’s sight was bleary, but even so, his focus managed to escape elsewhere for a few startling moments; in the distance, far across the reservoir, he could see a drifting blue light. It didn’t playfully bounce, nor warp here or there. It maintained a steady, smooth course before vanishing from sight. The Hylian decided it was nothing to be concerned about.

And even if he hadn’t, it was impossible to be concerned about anything while his Zora lover was passionately thrusting now with timed snaps of his hips, deeper, quicker- not too quick, but enough to have the Hylian clenching his eyes shut while his mouth gaped open and his voice cried aloud.

“Sidon, fuck,” Link hissed, “ahh..”

“Losing the ability to conjure much in the way of language, are you?” Sidon asked, chuckling in a breathy way.

“Don’t be so snide..” Link muttered between his groans. “That’s my job.”

“Are you still doing well?” the Zora checked in, concerned despite his ability to feel his lover’s sensations. It was a case of being sure that Link knew his body better, even so.

“Yes, yes, I promise,” Link spat like it was a plea, one hand patting the mattress like this was a
wrestling match he was trying to tap out of, though that was clearly the opposite of what he truly wanted. “Ohh-”

“And what if it’s not?” Sidon breathed, his tone that spoke his want, his desire, his own eagerness rising to meet his partner’s.

“Yes.” It was an ever more helpless sound as the Hylian confirmed. “Go on, I want it.”

“As do I, my love,” the Prince growled, one hand reaching to take hold of Link’s hips and squeeze, the other equally tight, fisted around the base of his two thrusting protrusions.

“I want for you so terribly- do you know that?” Sidon went on, desperate for fulfillment, to quench the yearning gulf inside of him that wanted to please Link in every way, to never be out of his sight and to be whatever Link’s definition of perfect was. His voice was still a growl, one that showed the gleaming edges of his teeth, yet was laden with warmth and passion. “I know that I teased you, but truly, if I could give you every last bit of myself, I’d delight in it. If I could bury every last inch of myself inside of you, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment.”

“I know that,” Link uttered, accepting, reassuring.

“Nnn, Link…” Sidon let out a breathy moan, his eyes shutting, his hips pushing in as deeply as he dared, his pace heightening. He was careful still, feeling it closely from his lover’s perspective- it wasn’t painful. Link was so tight around him, relaxed enough now to squeeze him intentionally, for it to feel good to do so.

“Ahh, that’s good, that’s so good.” Link’s breath was coming in quick gasps, his body loose in Sidon’s grip, moving and swaying with every little pull and thrust. The only part of him still mobile of his own volition was the hand shoved between his thighs, his fingers hasty against his own swollen arousal, trying hard to rub himself closer to his finish.

“Yes, ahh!” Sidon’s hips snapped unevenly and quick as he met his peak, his cocks fully engorged, going deep into the Hylian. His body quaked in pleasure that was white-hot and powerful, his teeth clicking loudly together, his breath gasped between little grunts. The release was hot and filling, expelled into the stretched pressure of the Hylian’s deepest reaches. Link let out a groan at the feeling of heat blooming inside, thick and heavy.

The Prince’s tail flapped in his eagerness while he rode out his orgasm, his bucking hips growing steadier, rapping slowly in and out, as though to push the overflow further into the Hylian. He knew how much his lover enjoyed the sensation of being left brimming with Zora cum, and at this point Sidon could proudly say that he’d left more than his proper mark.

Breathless and overwhelmed, once his orgasm abated, Sidon went still in a contented lull, his pupils wide and dark beneath heavy lids. He didn’t even move to withdraw himself, though his organs immediately began to soften.

Link laid still in his lover’s grasp for a short, peaceful moment. It was long enough for the moisture on his skin to begin feeling cool, but that drew all the more attention back to the heated throb between his legs. And now that Sidon had fucked both holes loose and filled them with seed, it would surely be a small task for Link to get himself off once more after that. Plus, he liked the idea of draping another massive orgasm over Sidon while he was still dead in the water from how he’d just exploded.

Within the next moment, Link rolled onto his back, setting Sidon’s softened members free with a wet sound and a hummed moan at the leftover feeling of emptiness. The Hylian’s legs splayed apart, and
he reached to pleasure himself, his fingers fast and feverish, perhaps even a bit abusive while he rubbed.

“Oh no,” came the startling growl of Sidon’s voice. He’d recovered from the apparent orgasmic paralysis which had overcome him and in an instant he rolled over, his huge heft actually spooking the smaller Hylian as Link very suddenly found himself beneath it. “That simply will not do.”

With a snap of movement, one big hand encircled Link’s wrist, snatching it away to prevent this act of self-pleasure.

“Hey!” Link hissed, wriggling like some feral beast in a hunter’s snare, only for the Zora to easily still him with the strength of his words.

“I’d like to be the one to make you cum, if you please,” Sidon asserted, his pretty lips pulling into a soft, charming smile, his golden eyes blazing with carnal flame. He didn’t explain anything else, and Link didn’t resist, replying with a quiet hum of intrigue and arousal.

The Zora grappled at Link’s tiny frame, moving his entire body like it was nothing to do so. Link was drawn upward, then Sidon took hold of his legs, folding them back and splaying them further apart in order for the Prince to bow his head between them. The great mass of his tail fell against the back of his shoulders, then laid across the messy sheets.

Sidon’s tongue was a hot, enveloping shroud, which invaded the Hylian as eagerly and deeply as his thrusting cocks. He lapped at his lover’s messy crease, tasting himself there, meshed with the familiar saline tang of the Hylian’s weeping excitement.

“Ahh,” Link gasped, his eyes going momentarily wide in surprise pleasure, before clenching shut just as quickly. His hands tightly fisted the sheets and his back curved in immediate, physical reply. “Sidon, th-this is, ahh..”

“Do you like it?” the Zora muttered against his prize, consuming it like his final feast, a wolf gorging on his hard-won meal. The Zora’s tail was flicked expressively in Sidon’s excitement.

“Yeah,” Link breathed, his brain maintaining only enough clarity to remind him of the fact that, oh yeah, he’d eaten Sidon’s dinner earlier. He’d wished he known it was because the Prince intended to have him for dinner, instead. “You know you’re good at this, don’t be coy.”

“Then praise me,” Sidon suggested with a cute, little chuckle, before he flicked the tip of his tongue against his lover’s swollen arousal.

“Ahhh,” Link moaned, his voice loud and carrying, echoing out against the calm of the reservoir, indeed probably enough for the guards to hear at their posts. No matter. His chest swelled and shrunk with his quickened breath. “Yeah, yeah, you’re amazing, you’re fantastic,” he sputtered, his head falling back. “That feels so fucking good.”

Like nothing, Link came undone upon Sidon’s tongue, his body tense and shuddering as the Zora lapped and suckled. Sidon held tightly to keep Link’s body firmly pressed to the mattress, while his hips jarred and bucked, then at last, he set the Hylian free when he stilled.

[END NSFW]

“Was it worth the wait?” Sidon asked, propping himself on his elbows and gazing down at his lover with a very proud expression on his face. Link could only assume that he probably looked disheveled and messy, and helplessly exhausted.
Sidon shifted, rolling onto his side and Link curled against his chest for warmth, pressing his face into the soft white of the Zora’s scales. Quietly, he whispered, “The wait wasn’t worth it, because you would have been damn good, regardless.”

A pleasant laugh bubbled from the sweet Prince, then he purred the words, “I adore you.”

“I love you..” Link stated plainly, soft and sincere. He drew his head back to upturn the blue of his gaze, to look on the Prince’s expression and feel the plentiful warmth reflected back at him. Sidon smiled and nodded his head, which satisfied the Hylian easily enough. Then, with that, Link opted to bundle the blankets over and around himself, to provide coziness that nudity had been severely preventing. “Now please cover me up and don’t wake me in the morning. It’s my turn to sleep for a solid week.”

Indeed, with an amused chuckle, Sidon assisted his lover in this endeavor to be smothered beneath a blanketed shroud, pulling up the covers and tucking them around Link, uncovering him only enough to kiss his mussed, blonde head.

Link was still in an instant, but when he felt the mattress shift in the absence of Sidon’s great weight, he perked from inside of his cocoon, his pointed ears pushed forward in alert.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m just.. going to soak for a spell,” Sidon answered easily enough, casting a reassuring glance over his shoulder. “I’m still not terribly sleepy, but the water will relax me. I’ll come back when I’m finished. Please, rest my beautiful one.”

“Alright,” Link replied. He settled down and pulled the blankets back up around his head, sheltering himself comfortably beneath them. He was awake long enough to hear the splash that came with Sidon’s dive back to the deep dark of the night waters, and then, silence. Link dozed soon after, sinking heavily into the abyss of slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Please follow my social media. I like to interact with readers and with fellow members of various fandoms. Also, my art/fiction tumblr in particular is full of CB content, so at the very least, follow there for content and updates.

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<3 Thank you all for reading <3
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

At a time when dilemmas were so common, everyone had something that they were dealing with. Some held the fate of their people on their shoulders, and some the world, itself, while yet others could only see to their own safety from day to day.

By the time Link stirred that morning, the bed was empty. He heaved himself upright with some effort, a soft grunt coming out of him as he rubbed his eyes. The blankets were tugged around him, so that his body was shrouded in warmth, though the air had turned cold despite the morning sun and the crackle of embers nearby in the wood burning stove; Sidon must have added a log to it before he left.

The Hylian’s gaze was cast, first, across the reservoir and the calm lap of the deep waters, shimmering blue in the sunlight. All around, frost from the night was still steaming, evaporating in what little warmth the light offered.

Slowly, Link’s head turned, bringing his sight to the empty space nearby. Sidon hadn’t been there when he fell asleep and he was gone before the Hylian awakened. It wasn’t too unusual, but more than ever, it left Link with that strange sense of doubt, like the previous night had all been a dream, a creation of his mind.

The dull ache in his nether regions said otherwise, though.

Letting out a sigh, Link shuffled from the bed, nearly toppling off one side as he fought to untangle his legs from the sheets, all too glad for his swift recovery when he felt the intense cold of the marble floors sting at his bare feet. He hurriedly added some new kindling to the stove, to resurrect the graying embers, then he went in search of his clothes and gear. He expected them to be scattered about the floor, in the usual state of thoughtless chaos, but to his surprise, his garments had been gathered up and set aside on a nearby counter, alongside a covered plate of food.

Link’s ears folded backward and he shook his head- that damned Prince was a fool to be so adamant about feeding strays in the midst of a crisis. And leaving before Link had a chance to reject his offer? What a power move.

Since he had no choice, however, the Hylian settled back into bed for a while longer, lounging and grazing on Sidon’s kind offering; soft, spongy bread topped with flaked, smoked fish and a poached egg. The egg was something fancy, too small to have come from a cucco, with a deep, orange yolk that had a more intense flavor.

It was probably just Sidon’s breakfast and as usual, he’d turned his nose up.

Once Link was finished, he lingered a bit more, enjoying the silence and the warmth of the stove while the fire came back to life. It wasn’t like the world would end while he was idle, right? Strangely, that thought had lost its potential for amusement and had actually begun to scare him. He’d even started to resent these moments of idleness, just a bit.
He didn’t owe this world shit. But he did owe Sidon and the Zora people better. Perhaps when all of the destined bullcrap was said and done, there would be time for lazy afternoons, which wouldn’t be nearly as lonely as this one. After all, the Calamity was the underlying reason for Sidon always being absent.

And if nothing else, Link needed to be proactive about evading his ever persistent nemesis. He had to hasten to get a move on, lest he’d lure the Yiga Clan here all over again. There was some irony to the situation, however. It was by their dogged pursuit of his death that he’d been forced back onto his intended path.

“Wake up, Link,” he said to himself in bitter mockery, getting to his feet at last. He gathered up his weapons and gear, readying himself for his next adventure.

; “I called this meeting in order to discuss this year’s Lightning Striker Festival,” Trello stated, once the two Zoras he’d sent for were present. Sidon stood listening pleasantly enough, while the Guard Captain weathered his usual overworked state to offer the elder due respect. Both appeared as though they had other, more important matters on their minds, however, because they very obviously did.

“In all likelihood, it will almost certainly have to be cancelled. After all, I see no reason to burden my organization team and waste resources on a festival while our people are dying,” the old man spat, his hunched frame all the more heavy beneath the awful travesty of allowing something as enshrined as a tired, repetitive tradition to go unacknowledged for a single year, due to actual, dire circumstances.

“Hmm,” Sidon politely nodded, his heart not immediately in this. He was just humoring the council member, though Trello only gave him neutral glances in return. That was probably an equal attempt at politeness, given the elder openly despised the heir to the throne.

Sidon could hardly believe that Trello even bothered to summon him for something such as this, not just because of the contention between them, but because the importance of this event was a bit beneath Sidon at this particular moment.

“What is the word on the investigation into the cause of the Water Blight, Guard Captain?” the elder Zora asked, his attention turning to Bazz. The old man’s tone was guarded but somber and as Sidon watched him, he sensed a very slight emotional shift. Something vaguely hopeful in him dimmed, disappointment casting a dull shadow that hadn’t been there before. He must have been very invested in the notion that Sidon could offer a solution to this dilemma.

The Prince could only assume that in Trello’s heart, though he was too proud to admit it, maintaining cultural vibrance served to defy the death and destruction all around them. Or, perhaps he wanted to carry on because it was his job and that was all he had, personally, to feel as though he was doing his own small part in this awful time of crisis. And, despite how he’d denounced Sidon to his face, the elder had put his ego aside in the hopes that a man he believed so little in could, in fact, prove him wrong.

Sidon let out a quiet breath, in silent resignation. When had he grown so contemptuous? He could do better than this.

“The investigation is still ongoing,” Bazz was explaining. “Our forces searched the reservoir, but have yet to locate the source of the Blight. We’re doubling back now and searching again.”

“We’ve also no clue as to whether the Lightning Striker Eels have been tainted or not.” Trello shook
his head, his gaze downcast. “It’s a pointless risk.”

“Hm, no, I’m afraid I must disagree,” Sidon interjected, his back straightening, his lips holding onto a small, hopeful smile. At his words, the elder craned his neck to raise his eyes to the Prince, the jaded look he normally wore cast off.

“This festival could be just what the Zora people need,” the Prince spoke, his voice a warm purr. “If the Lightning Striker Eels are untainted, it would provide a safe, fresh food source and that alone could help restore a bit of our peoples’ spirit in these troubling times.”

“Finding the bright side as usual, I see,” the Guard Captain commented with a quiet chuckle. He even smiled through the healing wound across his lips, and dipped his head a bit. “It’s good to have you back, my lord.”

“Thank you, Guard Captain.”

Not quite so quick to invest his faith, Trello cleared his throat, though his voice remained an ever gritty sound, “Does his Highness have a plan of action, to save the festival? Or was it just a nice thought?”

“In fact, I do have something in mind,” Sidon replied pleasantly. “I can personally lead a small team downstream to head off the eel migration. We can capture one of the beasts and allow it to be tested for the Water Blight beforehand. If we discover that they are, in fact, untainted, then the festival may go on, as usual.”

“It’s a solid enough plan,” Bazz stated with a nod. His tone fell flat, however, and that small show of concern drew the Prince’s gaze to the black Zora in questioning. Bazz was quick to understand that Sidon had caught onto the implied ‘but.’

“If I may suggest—” the Guard Captain went on, “it might be best if my lord makes use of the Royal Order in this case, as the City Guard is severely overburdened.”

“It won’t be a problem.” Sidon nodded in acceptance, thanking Bazz for his frankness before he turned his attention back to the elder, who’d called this small meeting in the first place. “I’ll get right to work. Council Member Trello, keep your team on schedule with the festival for now, if you please.”

“Hm,” the old man hummed, gruff but apparently satisfied. “As you wish, your Highness.”

The sound of the bells outside of the Zora Palace held an uncanny grimness without the usual chorus of trickling waterways. Their songs were low, resonant hums, which echoed throughout the valley of Zora’s Domain, then quieted back into ghostly silence. Even the walkways themselves had turned pale and dusty, so that all of Zora’s Domain was beginning to appear like less of a shining, blue jewel, and more like sun-bleached bones, the forgotten remains of its former glory.

“Don’t worry, I’m right here,” came the steely calm of Brivere’s voice, once the bells quieted. He spared some small amount of warmth and gentleness, to serve in place of a comforting touch upon his sibling’s shoulder, which wouldn’t be any comfort at all.

Estuu, in a less steady reply, glanced from the rolled parchment of the court summon in his hand, to the reassuring presence by his side. He sucked in a slow, deep breath, then let it out as he nodded his agreement.
Together, they proceeded up the palace stairs and through the ornate archways, directed by on-duty Knights of the Royal Order. Some greeted Brivere by his title, mostly those who were his juniors, but the majority said little at all to him. The siblings were guided into a queue of other Zora people, all of whom were waiting to have minor matters settled by the King’s Council.

The wait was long and nerve-wracking, and though Brivere remained quite patient with ease, Estuu was rendered jittery by the stress. As their time to face the council neared, it grew ever more apparent how out-of-sorts he was. And while it was true that Estuu was not the most patient being, he was rarely so easily shaken. No, he was the sort to stare down very real danger without flinching, to be unyielding and even reckless, and to offer neutral regard to all else.

However, Brivere understood without a word from his brother just what was going on inside his head. The boy had faced these very same courts after their mother’s death, to decide his place in society, then again after the fateful incident involving that Undercity woman. He had little but poor experiences.

“All will be well, Estuu.” Brivere whispered a word of reassurance when they came to the front of the line. “There is no reason for this summon to play out as our former experiences have, whatever the cause for it may be.”

Brivere couldn’t tell if the boy believed him, especially considering how clear it was that he, himself had nothing to go on; nonetheless, Estuu nodded his acceptance.

Within a few more tense minutes, Estuu was called down before the court. Despite his nerves, he strode toward the numerous, staring elders with a surprising amount of grace, holding himself straight, even if he couldn’t bear to bring his eyes to meet theirs. A Knight approached the boy to receive the rolled parchment of his summon, and without much prompting, Estuu placed it into their waiting palm, allowing it to be returned to the hands of the head council member.

Each of the elder Zoras seated upon the bench were silent while the head of the council sifted through a collection of finely organized documents, soon producing the proper item, which he read aloud.

“Young Estuu,” he began, his voice a worn, weathered sound, “as the only living heir to Nobleman Zambezi, the council finds that you are the one and only rightful recipient to his properties upon his unfortunate passing.”

The old man paused, taking a breath into his narrow, feeble frame and casted a wary glance toward the extraordinarily young noble standing near. His regard showed nothing of judgement or contempt, but rather a question of whether such a child was ready for what was being lain down before him. His eyes flicked as well, to Brivere, catching the stoic elder brother in a moment of perplexed, wide-eyed surprise before the golden Zora hastened to harden himself and outwardly vanish all signs of his emotional state. It was in Brivere’s favor, however, that nobody could tell how very light-headed he had just become.

“..As such, you are to be awarded his residence and possessions including property and investments. Do you accept the council’s decision on this matter, young one?”

And as though to embody his newly boosted place among his people, Estuu allowed a placid calm to sweep across him, then he bowed his head in a slow, genteel manner, to accept as prompted. Brivere stole a sideways glance at the boy, thinking it strange and funny how cleverly his brother had embodied the exact kinds of movements one could expect from Prince Sidon.
“Very well, young one,” the council head carried on, without a single word needed from the noble. “You need only to sign off on it, for our records.”

The same Knight from before retrieved a stack of neatly contained documents from a different member of the council, carrying it over in order to hand it off to Brivere, as though he were merely his brother’s assistant. To Estuu, a document to be signed was outstretched and a quill offered for that purpose. The boy looked at the item with momentary hesitation, then drew his left hand from beneath the fine garment which draped over his shoulders, accepting the quill, though it looked rather clumsy in his grasp.

Estuu’s handwriting was slow and scrawled, but it served its purpose, nonetheless. With that much ease, the contract was sealed, and their business was completed. Both brothers offered a curt bow to the council, then made their way from the court floor, back to the stairs outside the palace; only then did Brivere finally find his lost voice.

“Estuu…” he spoke up, looking on the shorter boy in astonishment, “did you plan for this?”

In Brivere’s mind, it seemed a ridiculous notion. His sibling wouldn’t have expended so much energy worrying, had he known what was going to happen. Alas, it wasn’t in the golden Zora’s nature not to over-think every little detail.

Estuu shook his head immediately to his brother’s inquiry, but he upturned his gaze and attempted a smile, which really just consisted of him awkwardly showing his teeth. Even if he hadn’t foreseen this, he was obviously very pleased with himself.

“…this means that we can move into his old residence and out of our awful, destroyed one,” Brivere stated solemnly, staring down at the mess of deeds and paperwork in his hands. He honestly never thought he’d have the chance to leave the home he’d known for so long, so full of bad memories and baggage. Quickly, he clenched his eyes shut and shook his head. “I’m sorry, but it would be improper to celebrate something that came of a man’s death, even one as despicable as your—... as Zambezi.”

The younger of the two didn’t dwell. His shoulders moved in a shrug, then he set to hopping down the palace stairs, letting out a triumphant squeal of joy. Despite himself, Brivere smiled, following calmly behind.

They had quite a task set before them now and the best way Brivere saw to celebrate the occasion was in getting straight to work.

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Everyone claimed that the Hylian folk of Hateno Village were stubbornly unfriendly and senselessly against the presence of Zoras, but Dahlia’s experience so far with them was something otherwise. She found them to be very friendly and knew them also to rather enjoy being against Zoras in a whole, other context.

That wasn’t to say she was unaware that people held the capacity to both hate something, while also deeply wanting to screw it. No, she had seen over and over again that plenty of people liked to point fingers with one hand while pleasing themselves with the other.

The Hateno Villagers, in general, could be very outwardly prudish, not unlike Zora high-society. But behind closed doors, the full honesty of their lust and depravity was put on show, like an art gallery of carnal filth. However, in the short time which Dahlia had been making her residence here, she’d hooked a few loyal customers, who’d fallen so deeply under her sway that they no longer bothered
with pretenses of dignity; no, they approached her shamelessly during the day, placing themselves first in line for her special attention.

One of these particular characters was a local business man. He had funds to spare and Dahlia credited herself for single-handedly coaxing the man to sell his wares to the rest of the Zora refugees. Yes, literally.

So, whenever she came into his shop, he paused to make certain that his wife was nowhere within earshot, then he made his proposition. They handled it like the two respectable salespeople that they were, discussing terms, products and payment, all very professional despite the lude words necessary.

On this particular day, however, a lone guardsman happened to be present to overhear Dahlia’s bargaining. The pearl-scaled Undercity woman was hustling the shopkeeper for a higher price than usual, given that demand was high and her time left in Hateno Village was limited, when the guardsman strode directly up to Dahlia, looking down on the much shorter Zora, and saying, “Excuse me. Can I speak with you privately, please?”

The Undercity woman blinked in momentary confusion, thinking she was about to be ejected from the store by some busy-body from the Zorana City Guard. When she peered up into the face of the armor-clad woman, though, she immediately realized that she recognized this Zora. She had strong, pretty features and graceful look about her, as well as scales the color of wine; yes, Dahlia knew precisely who she was.

She was the lovely lady who’d been caught out of her armor in her Sergeant’s bedroom; Dahlia remembered the desperate way she chased another guardsman from the inn, and that was all of the context she needed to understand perfectly what had occurred.

“Of course, sir,” Dahlia replied in a pretense of respect, then she set her gaze upon the shopkeeper once more. “I’ll get back to you in a moment.”

The two women filed from the shop, with Dahlia gesturing for the violet Zora to follow. She led the younger woman over to the communal wash, where the Hylian villagers both cleaned their dirty laundry and discussed it- it just seemed appropriate.

“Oh, Guardsman,” Dahlia began, leaning herself casually against the edge of the basin, an unworried expression upon her features, “can I help you?”

The lithe, Uppercity woman had been tense before, but as her golden gaze flicked across the older Zora, it steadily began to heighten, so that she was standing abnormally still and straight, her fingers furled, the slits of her pupils tightened to hair-thin lines.

“I know about the deal Sergent Betaal made with you,” the violet Zora explained, trying her best to keep her tone professional. “You’re supposed to be helping her. How can you do that if you’re around town with.. with everyone else.”

Dahlia nodded in understanding, though a soft furrow upon her features betrayed a rising confusion as well. She wondered how much her Sweet Blue had actually explained to this troublesome, little Uppercity pet of hers. It was almost definitely more than she’d told Dahlia, and yet the young, violet-scaled woman was the one who’d missed the entire point of it, while Dahlia had put the pieces together on her own.

A quiet chuckle soon came from the Undercity Zora and she looked up at the younger woman, humoring her a bit. “Honey, everyone knows what I am. I don’t make any secret of it. If I did, well,
it wouldn’t be a very successful business,” she explained. “Blue never intended for people to believe we were together when she asked for my help. She just needed to pretend that she wasn’t getting any from anybody else, making it necessary for her to approach me in the first place.”

At Dahlia’s words, the unsteady guardsman noticeably cringed, a lavender flush rising beneath the pale of her cheeks. She waited, thinking over her own words, wanting to show restraint, despite that this issue was beyond professional pretenses- it was personal.

“To be honest, the way you’re talking to me isn’t helping my opinion right now,” she snapped.

“Pardon?” Dahlia said, genuinely confused. “The way I’m talking to you?”

The guardsman’s eyes turned aside. She couldn’t even look at the other woman as she replied. “Yes, calling me ‘honey’ and saying that my commanding officer wasn’t ‘getting any.’ Not only does that come across very patronizing, but this is serious and you obviously aren’t taking it that way.”

In real, true bafflement, Dahlia tilted her head, her mouth forming a skewed line. She hadn’t meant a word what she said in any sort of patronizing way, but it wasn’t at all surprising to her that this foolish girl was so quick to turn defensive. But how predictable, truly, that people whose thoughtless actions, which had created unnecessary dilemmas, should be so quick to defense. After all, their egos had already been wounded by their own hands and they certainly couldn’t suffer further insult, even if it came from others, merely stating facts as they were.

“Oh, my apologies, Guardsman,” Dahlia responded, actively shifting her tone, only now, to sound truly patronizing. “I’ll only speak to you completely serious, sir.”

“Do you care about her at all?” the armored woman spat, the white of her fangs shining with her words. “Her job could be in real jeopardy and she needs your help. I don’t at all see why she decided to trust you with something so important.”

Dahlia’s mouth formed a silent, ‘ohh,’ and she nodded her head. “You’re telling me that Blue’s job is in jeopardy and I don’t care about her?” she questioned, pointing to herself while putting particular emphasis on the ‘I.’ At last, her posture straightened and she inched herself a pace nearer to the armored woman, neck craned to look directly into the guardsman’s face. “What you should be asking yourself is, ‘why is her job in jeopardy and whose fault is that?’ Then ask yourself this: do YOU really care about her?”

Stunned, the guardsman fell silent at Dahlia’s accusation; it clearly hit its mark. In the younger woman’s silence, Dahlia continued, “I think the best thing that you can do at this very moment is to stop interfering. You dragged me out here to tell me that my work contradicts the favor asked of me, but you even associating with me at all makes it all the more clear that you’re involved with her. This is what contradicts the plan. This is what renders it pointless.”

Backing up, as though to finally walk away, the Undercity woman added, “And don’t worry, I’ve been keeping Blue’s secrets for a long, long time. I’m an old pro at it, unlike yourself.”

“Secrets,” the young woman muttered, her eyes narrowing, “..what secrets?”

The sun caught Dahlia’s scales, gleaming in pearly tones of pink and alabaster while she stepped out of the shadows. She let out an amused titter, her delicate shoulders moving in a shrug. “If you knew, you wouldn’t need to ask. Blue must not ‘trust’ you as much as you assumed.”

“I will not be spoken to like that by you,” the guardsman hissed through a grimace, her voice leaping in pitch, tight against her clenched throat muscles, “..by somebody like you.”
“Somebody like me?” Dahlia repeated in mock curiosity. She paused, pressing her fingers to her chin in an expression of consideration, watching as the guardsman’s head quickly dipped lower in the realization of just what she’d said and what the other woman’s reply was bound to be.

“I wonder what you could possibly mean by that,” Dahlia said. “Hmm. It’s no wonder she doesn’t trust you.”

The shelves at the Coral Reef General Store lay barren, devoid of food items, though Link hadn’t come in with the intention of grabbing a meal. The items he required, arrows, were in full stock, and though he was still drained of funds from his shopping spree in Kakariko, he was able to barter with his abundant supply of apples.

He also made an offhand joke about apples being, ‘the true white meat,’ when the shopkeeper responded to the sight of food so enthusiastically. It was inappropriate, and he felt bad, because it wasn’t even that funny. As a result, a phantom image of Brivere stood now in the back of Link’s mind, arms crossed and eyes narrowed in silent judgement over the way Link never considered his words prior to speaking them.

When Link’s shopping was out of the way, he turned to depart, only for his attention to be swiftly captured as a lone, Goron merchant made his way into the mart, hauling a bulging sack of goods. The man of stone was evidently a supplier of precious minerals, which were required for the construction of ice arrows, and the Zora shopkeeper greeted him by name.

While Link looked on, a curious notion came to mind, especially as the Goron’s rucksack was emptied, thanks to his trade deal. He stood aside until the Eldin-born resident’s dealings were concluded, then, before the Goron could leave, the Hylian strode up to him for the sake of having a quick chat.

It was the Goron, however, who managed to speak up first. He bent his head low, blinking his beady eyes at the sight of Link, a wide grin splayed across his features. “Hey there, brother,” he rumbled, “I recognize you, the Hylian Champion, right?”

“That’s exactly right,” Link nodded. “And, if it’s not too much trouble for you, brother, can I ask a favor?”

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Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Some soldiers were headed home, apprehending consequences. Other people were leaving home to become soldiers, in the hopes of delivering consequences. Fallen soldiers were far from home, avoiding consequences. Others were in new homes, facing old consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The land was white and crisp with frost, silent from the early hour, and lit in a dull shade of blue. On this particular early morning, a small group of Zoras prepped for their journey back to Fort Boko from Hateno Village.

The Champion’s Cottage, as they all referred to it, had the wood stove lit early, casting a column of gray smoke straight upward from the chimney. The fort-bound group had been fed early and each of them ate vigorously, with the knowledge that food back home was likely to be growing scarcer with each passing day.

The band of armored Zoras and requisitioned laborers lined up outside of the Champion’s Cottage at the appointed hour, waiting quietly for the orders to move out, with only the occasional clink of their uniforms and restless shifting of the gear strapped to the backs of the laborers.

The Sergeant checked over her roster to make certain everyone and everything was accounted for, then she handed it off to Dunma for double-checking, as usual. Betaal walked the neat line of guardsmen, her one eye catching sight of Dahlia tucked somewhere within the group. The Undercity laborers were surrounded by soldiers as though to prevent their escape, rather than to protect them from monsters beyond the village borders.

Betaal’s attention drifted elsewhere as Torfeau came from the cottage at the last possible second, in order to hug her brother and see him off. It served to remind the Sergeant of a matter of import and she strode in the direction of the siblings, waiting until their goodbyes were concluded before she spoke up.

“Gaurdsman,” she addressed Tottika. In reply to the stern, rough voice of his superior, he stood at attention, though he was unable to hold her gaze.

“Yes, sir?” he responded.

“You were part of the original escort mission to Hateno.” Betaal stated, though the inflection in her tone made it clear that there was an underlying question. “Doesn’t that mean that you were assigned to the guard detail here, looking after the refugee group?”

“Originally, sir,” he answered, clearing his throat when his voice cracked slightly. “However, I was given new orders before we left from Fort Boko. I was asked to return after the escort to Hateno was completed.”
These apparent orders given to Tottika hadn’t come from Betaal, so they must have come from somewhere above her chain of command, or perhaps conveniently off to the side of it– Gaddison.

Suddenly, the reason behind his intrusion that night at the Ton Pu Inn was readily apparent. He’d had nothing to report to her and no reason to be there at all, and even if what he’d witnessed was awkward, there was also no reason for him to bolt when he was discovered. His reply should have been that of neutrality. He should have made his report as though nothing was amiss.

But he didn’t, because his intention was to snoop and nothing more. Furthermore, he’d been ordered to do so and now he was taking the information he’d gleaned back to the one who’d issued the command.

Betaal’s sharp teeth clicked together, her jaw clenching in apprehension, then she breathed a sigh. “Very well, Guardsman,” she softly replied. “In that case, fall in. We’re setting out.”

General Talius stood at the bars which separated him from the woman he once loved. He did not touch the steel, he did not speak a single word for hours; all he did was watch her.

He remembered her towering silhouette in their kitchen, her auburn hair glistening in the pale morning light. He recalled having to adjust the height of their front door, so she stopped knocking her head against the top of the frame. He thought back on her strength in handling their horses, how she guided and drove them with such finesse and ease. He remembered how she grabbed at his shoulders and held onto him tightly when they made love.

What a wonderful actor she’d been.

Talius breathed a sigh, signaling that he was finally ready to do more than watch.

“When our people captured you, you were on the bridge over Lake Hylia,” he said, his voice a resonant rumble which echoed throughout the lonely prison. “You weren’t on your way to the Gerudo village at all and that begs the question- where were you headed? And why?”

The man paused, his knuckles rapping the bars to the cell door in impatience. The Gerudo woman in chains gave him nothing but silence and unspoken disdain.

“We might have never captured you, had you not left your little fortress city,” he continued when she did not reply. “So, knowing that we were hunting you, what could have possibly driven you to leave your home, hm? Especially when you were so desperate to be back that you left our life behind in the dead of night."

“Sir?” Another voice interrupted the man’s musings. The General tilted his head to one side, casting his gaze toward the lowly soldier who’d come along. They were clad in very worn armor, their frame illuminated by dim torchlight.

“What is it?” Talius answered, turning to the other soldier.

“Sir, there’s a prisoner who has been requesting your presence since the day before yesterday,” the soldier explained, wary but holding steady in the presence of the broad General.

The General stroked his chin in intrigue, his graying hair falling uncomfortably near his eyes, in terrible need of a trim. Without saying anything, he gestured for the lone soldier to lead him to the cell where the aforementioned prisoner was being held.
It was a short trip, as the soldier’s pace was eager and hurried, like this was a duty they wanted well done and over with. When Talius stood before a new cell, looking down on some frightened, Hylian man he did not recognize, he cleared his throat and said, “And who might you be?”

The man in the cell clambered shakily to his feet, his coveralls smeared in filth, his feet bare as surely as his boots had been claimed by the ones who’d captured him. He was of an impressive height and build, though he was weak from his stint in captivity and quite obviously fearful that he may never again see the light of day.

“I’m Nack, sir,” he replied, somehow clinging to a little shred of pride as he spoke his name. “I’m a land owner from Hateno Village; a farmer.”

Hateno Village. Talius’s eyes narrowed in bitterness at those words, but he said nothing, instead waiting for the prisoner to tell him something of interest. He watched the man’s rough hands fold together and the way he licked his chapped lips. He observed the way the mud smears on the man’s cheeks blended into the shadow of stubble that was well grown in along his jaw.

“I came on behalf of the people of Hateno,” Nack nervously went on, sensing that his time was growing short. “I came in the hopes of offering the bodies of your fallen back to you, so they could be put to rest in a respectful manner...” he trailed off, the weathered creases near his eyes deepening, “...though by now, they may have well been buried in the nearby valley.”

Again, Talius said nothing. Nack stole a glance up at the man’s face, remembering the odd friendliness written upon it the day Talius offered all of Hateno Village an ultimatum on behalf of the Guardians of Hyrule.

One of Nack’s hands loosely grasped at the steel bars keeping him imprisoned, then he spoke up in a hushed tone, like all of Hateno Village could hear him, though they were miles and miles away. “Also, I umm.. I wanted to offer my personal aid to your group. I produce more than enough food to feed myself and I’d like to make some kind of trade with your group, like what you were asking for the day you all rode into town.”

“Go on,” Talius spoke up at last, his weathered voice a rockfall in the suffocating silence of the underground dungeon.

“Ever since what happened back home, these Zoras moved into town,” Nack continued as prompted, his voice holding audible resentment. “We’re being forced to house them and share our own hard-earned resources with them. They even brought armed soldiers that are probably patrolling the streets at this very moment. They say it’s to keep the peace, but we’re being held hostage is what it is, sir. Personally, I’d rather make my business with Hylian folk– my own kind, sir.”

“Your grievances are fair, Nack, and your offer is appreciated,” Talius replied, suddenly warm and understanding, like a tough but caring father. “We can establish free trade and commerce with you and with any others in Hateno Village who, like yourself, are opposed to the foreign presence.”

The General gestured to the soldier waiting nearby, saying, “Open the cage and let this man out.”

A relieved smile spread across Nack’s face while the other soldier thumbed through a heavy key-ring, at last locating the correct key to unlock the cell and set him free. “I tried to tell em’ back home that you all were reasonable folk.”

“Hm,” Talius folded his arms together, cupping his chin once more in thought. He’d assumed that the attack he’d led against Hateno Village was a lost cause, but suddenly he was vaguely aware of a second chance in the making.
“If I may say, Nack, I’d like to point out that we share a common virtue, a common interest,” Talius began, now that Nack was standing before him, a free and equal man. “As you already know, our group seeks to rid Hyrule of threats to our existence; the Calamity, the Yiga Clan, and so on. We seek to unify Hyrule once more and restore power to the Hylian people.”

Nack nodded along, an expression of faith written on his features in the flickering glow of the torch. “Yes, sir.”

“Driven individuals like you, you who came all this way at great risk to yourself, could help us achieve our goals with even more than just your produce. I think you have greater things to offer.” Talius paused, setting a hard look upon the former prisoner. “How would you like to become a Guardian of Hyrule, Nack?”

Suddenly, Nack stood completely straight, all tension and fear melting away. “I’d be honored, sir,” he replied.

The morning air was slicing cold as it raced against the Hylian’s chapped cheeks. He pulled the ruby-adorned scarf twisted around his neck higher, to cover his face and block the wind while he rode. Crazy Girl’s rapid breath puffed like a smoking furnace, but she did not slow her pace even once. Link appreciated her vigor, as always, but his ass and thighs, which were still aching from the previous night, weren’t as impressed.

He’d push through it. He had worse things to occupy his mind and his horse’s determined galloping could only serve to comfort him, when it came to more disconcerting thoughts.

Link tried to put his fears from his mind, at last giving Crazy Girl’s reins a gentle tug to slow her down. Her hooves clip-clopped loudly upon the wooden walkways lain over the shallowly puddled areas of the Lanayru Wetlands surrounding Bone Pond.

The last time Link had been here, the place was swarmed with bokoblins and lizalfos, all living together in peace and harmony under the banner of the Calamity, like peace and harmony was the Calamity’s true directive; that was a laughable thought.

With another tug of the reins, Link brought his horse to a stop in a tree-lined area at the foot of an earthen swell. Atop the tiny mountain, the Lanayru Tower shone with haunting, blue light, casting its melancholy glow over the dreary, gray morning.

“Hopefully this is enough cover,” Link whispered to his horse like it was a secret. It was, in fact, but not one that he expected anyone to overhear. He found a low, but sturdy tree branch to loop and knot his horse’s reins around, so to keep her reliably in place. Making a swift getaway was a must. If anything did not go as planned, Link stood to end this day in the hands of the Yiga Clan. Of course, the moment Crazy Girl saw that she was being tied, she let out a low rumble and begun tugging at the tether.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Link attempted an apology, keeping an arm’s length worth of distance between his body and her teeth. This would be the sort of instant that she turned to biting in rebuke. “Much as I love your free-spirited personality, I can’t entertain any of your shenanigans today.”

Carefully, Link hastened to take his sack of apples from where it was strapped to his saddle, then he dumped the last of the fruit on the ground near the trunk of the tree. At the sight of the treat, Crazy Girl temporarily calmed. He would just have to hope that it was enough to keep her placated for the amount of time necessary.
The Champion bolted from the tree cover, leaving his horse behind and casting his stare upward, at the jagged cliffs reaching toward the sky, crested at the top by the shining Lanayru Tower. His eyes traced the path he would ascend, planning it in advance, then his gaze ended upon the rain clouds, which were hanging heavily overhead.

Link swallowed, taking a few nervous breathes as he ran for the cliff and began his climb, praying to anyone who would listen- yes, even Hylia- that he made it to the top before the inevitable downpour.

The foot of the hill was sloped a bit more gently and there were quite a few jagged ledges, overgrown with wild grasses and swift violet. They allowed for reliable footholds, where he could pause and recover stamina. He noticed early in his climb that the muscles of his shoulders were burning with fatigue sooner than expected, and his brow was shining with perspiration from the effort.

He was right when he’d assumed that he’d gotten soft, lying about in Zora’s Domain, on Sidon’s lap of luxury; even his muscles had softened up. It wasn’t so long ago that he had climbed the entirety of Bullshit Mountain with nothing to fuel him save for his anger and frustration.

“Come on, Link,” he groaned, his body pressed flush to the stone, his callused fingers shoved into the tiniest of nooks. “Get your worthless, lazy ass up to that tower, or else you’ll deserve it when the Yiga Clan carve you up like a spit-roasted boar.”

He took a few well-deserved gulps of air, swallowed to wet his throat, then pushed himself upward, the toes of his boots searching for places to balance his weight. The incline steepened toward the top, but the Hylian pushed, all too glad that he didn’t have to do this while dodging stones and arrows any longer.

Again, he began to feel his energy waning. Maybe his poor diet lately was to blame for his exhaustion, but no, he preferred to keep telling himself that it was because he wasn’t good enough, that he wasn’t trying hard enough. Apparently, Brivere had been right when he said that Link was more strongly motivated by derision, the smartass.

He could also imagine that his stamina was like a crisp, spring-colored circle, ever waning with each forward movement, draining away until only a sliver remained, and the threat of sliding down to his death loomed. This wasn’t exactly an accurate measure of how stamina worked, but if he fudged the measurement in his mind, he could sometimes trick himself into being able to carry on longer without giving up.

Anything to keep that annoying, golden Zora from being right.

Link felt the first tiny raindrops hit his cheeks when he made it at last to the top. They were cool against his skin, providing a slight relief from his exertion, though he didn’t linger long enough to celebrate. The Hylian ran for the tower, scaling the skeletal, golden structure with much greater ease. Even the rain, which went from a sprinkle to a downpour before he reached the top, could not deter him.

At the top of Lanayru Tower, Link huffed and brushed the back of one hand against his forehead to dry away the sweat and rain, then he cast off some of his gear, leaving behind his rucksack and weapons. He took one last moment to steady himself and steel his nerves as he took out his Sheikah Slate, preparing to warp.

Link’s finger hovered over the confirmation button, his hand furling and unfurling like it would chase away the tremble of fear. He knew the moment that he tapped the screen that his bloodthirsty pursuers would come running and then the chase would be on.
And if he could not outrun his enemies, they would not just kill him, they would prevent him from ever coming back.

A devil-may-care kind of smile made its way to Link’s face, and he breathed a defiant chuckle. Perhaps this was for the sake of self-encouragement, but before he finally struck the confirmation button, he swore to himself that he would run faster than his enemies could ever hope to pursue him. And if they caught him— if— then he would turn to meet their advance and slaughter them all.

That’s what he was good at, after all, right? He was done living in guilt over that fact. He was ready to let it be a comfort, instead.

Link shot across Hyrule, an errant streak of blue light transported and delivered directly to the shrine in Hateno Village. By the driven force of his will, he began his rush toward his cottage before he had even drawn completely back together. He was a spectre of light, bolting from the dais of the shrine, trailing blue embers behind himself until he solidified moments later.

The path to his tiny home was a calm, uneventful one and he didn’t bypass even one Hylian, nor Zora refugee until he burst across the threshold of his house. They’d hung a beaded cloth in the open doorway in lieu of a door and he swiped it out of the way with a violent motion. Inside, Finley and Sasan were in the kitchen, as were the Hylian guests and several guardsmen, already adorned in their armor and ready to start their daily duties.

It might have been rude, but Link didn’t have time for chit-chat or pleasantries. He didn’t offer a single ‘hello’ or even a wave. He stayed his course, regardless of the confused glances, clambering upstairs to the loft bedroom where his cache of weapons and gear was stored.

There were only a few things which were vital to his coming excursion, and he might have opted to leave them behind, if that had been an option. Furious hands unbuckled and unbuttoned this and that, casting stray articles aside, until Link was clad in little but his small clothes and a thin, cotton shirt. He then began pulling on each piece of his cumbersome Flamebreaker armor set, fussing over some of the straps, if only to be certain everything was secure.

Grabbing up his fireproof rucksack, Link took out his Sheikah Slate, hastening to warp himself one last time, though he was sure that this was the part in which things would grow more tricky and more dangerous.

In another flash of blue, Link shot back to the Lanayru Tower. He did nothing fancy. His gear was shoved into his flameproof rucksack and his weapons were strapped in place, then he left from the tower, diving at free-fall speed toward the ground so that when he pulled out his paraglider, it tore at him with a puff of great force. Temporary pain was better than the thought of being caught, however.

Link came to landing in his horse’s saddle, though Crazy Girl’s head shot up in surprise, and as Link reached to untie her, she very clearly considered biting a chunk out of his arm. She settled, instead, for giving the unfamiliar Flamebreaker suit a wary sniff, as though to be sure it was her owner.

Crazy Girl was set loose from where she was tied, then they rode off into the storm. Link’s saddle was already wet despite the tree cover, which caused him to slip and slide while his horse galloped. Lightning flashed in the distance, not yet fully upon them, though the thunder crackled and rolled ever closer, reverberating off the mountains.

Link took a path north, toward the Eldin province. It wasn’t until he was riding into the thick, pine forests of upper Lanayru that he became sure that he’d slithered beneath the Yiga Clan’s notice.

After a few hours of tense riding, Link had yet to see hide nor hair of any Yiga Clansmen, and he
reached his destination of the Foothill Stable in the Eldin province. The most trouble he’d encountered was from a lone mounted bokoblin, which chased him up the dusty slopes for a stint before ending on its back with an arrow in its eye. Link took the bleeder’s mount in exchange for his efforts, then sold the poor, malnourished horse off once he made it to the stable.

It was at the Foothill Stable, also, that Link met up with the Goron merchant he’d first encountered in Zora’s Domain. The man of stone was standing a slight distance from the stable, in a tree-lined area, nursing a drink he’d apparently purchased for the wait.

When he laid eyes on Link, the Goron chuckled and asked, “Run into as much trouble as you were expecting, brother?”

“Thankfully, no,” Link answered plainly, one ear cocked backward, listening carefully in case trouble decided to rear its head. “And I aim to avoid it at all costs.”

“I’m ready to go when you are, brother,” said the Goron, tipping back the last of his drink and letting out a hearty, ‘ahhh.’

“Thank you for doing this,” the Hylian muttered, his cheeks burning red over the humiliation required to stay off the Yiga Clan’s radar. Still, he nodded, straightening with a determined sigh. “I’m ready.”

“Then off we go!”

A quick, rhythmic sound chorused a soft bubble of laughter throughout the two Zoras’ new home. The sound was that of the water mattress squishing beneath the younger brother’s weight, and his webbed toes slapping it again and again as he jumped up and down.

“Aren’t you tired yet?” Brivere huffed, glancing over at his bed-jumping sibling while he turned to set down another stack of books, which teetered in his arms.

Estuu just continued as he was, happily content to go on bouncing; evidently, no, he was not tired yet. He’d never owned a fancy water mattress before, and as excited as he was to have something decent to sleep on while they were still unable to submerge, it made an even better plaything.

And then, suddenly, the boy’s bouncing ceased. Brivere immediately turned his watchful gaze in his brother’s direction again, finding the quiet boy standing still atop the water mattress. Estuu pointed toward the doorway when he realized that he had his brother’s attention, and Brivere’s focus promptly followed the younger Zora’s gesture.

The older brother’s eyes were set upon a figure in the doorway which he had not at all expected to find there— that of Prince Sidon.

“My lord.” The words came from Brivere’s mouth without thought, and his body folded softly into a bow that easily came like muscle memory. “I wasn’t expecting you. My apologies.”

“Apologies?” the Prince repeated, with a soft, hollow laugh. He stepped inside his Knight’s new home, glancing here and there in intrigue. “Whatever is there to apologize for? I’m the one who has intruded.”

A tight line stretched across the golden Zora’s pale lips. It was a fine question and one which he had no right answer to. It wasn’t terribly surprising for Brivere to hold himself to such a standard, though; to be able to predict the actions of the man he served, with nothing at all to go on.
Unable to think of any kind of reasonable reply, Brivere straightened, clearing his throat, saying instead, “Can I assist you in some way, my lord?”

“I came to assign your duties,” Sidon replied simply. He didn’t look at the other man as he spoke, opting instead to allow his golden gaze to drift across every curve and corner of the new residence, while taking slow, steady strides about the place, his arms folded neatly behind him. “I could’ve used a more official channel to do so, but I didn’t wish to be so.. formal.”

Brivere’s reply did not come promptly. A little upward quirk tugged at one corner of his mouth and his dark lids narrowed, all while he kept his gaze downcast. All he could think was, wasn’t informality something reserved for friends? And was that not a status which this very man had made clear no longer existed between them?

“I suppose times of formality and informality are.. at your discretion, aren’t they?” the golden Zora said at last, his voice a low rumble. He did not look up while he spoke these words like a thinly-veiled accusation, but nevertheless, he saw the way the Prince’s head snapped in his direction as he processed them.

And, of course, if Sidon wished to punish Brivere for his sharp tongue, despite that this was an ‘informal’ interaction between them, oh yes, that was at his discretion, too.

“I’m sorry,” Brivere stated. Empty words. “How may I serve you, my lord?”

The look on Sidon’s face was akin to that so often found upon his Knight’s: impassive, indistinct, unreadable. Maybe he was quietly sampling the small, sharp spikes to be read from the other Zora’s state of emotion or perhaps he was entirely closed off. There was no way to be certain.

No matter what the Prince was thinking, he proceeded like nothing at all was amiss. “I need a team of Knights from the Royal Order to accompany me downstream, for the sake of wrangling a Lightning Striker Eel,” he explained, coming to stand before one of the wide, lovely windows. “We’re going to test the beast for Water Blight contamination, so to ascertain whether or not we need to cancel this year’s festival.”

Brivere paused in thought, then warily uttered the words, “..a festival, my lord?”

“Quite right,” Sidon confirmed, turning away from the window, setting his golden gaze upon Brivere, with a misplaced sort of smile on his face. “Might you have something to say on the matter?”

“I do not,” came the Knight’s immediate response. He had no complaint about festivals or the work being asked of him, though it was clear that Sidon had acknowledged that he did, in fact, see some sort of issue. Brivere would not hide it.

“I’ve yet to select which Knights are to fill the slots rendered empty by the attack on Zora’s Domain, however,” the golden Zora explained, his tone turning somber, his thoughts drifting back to the image of his fellows lain waste to, and even to Kree, who would never again fight at his side. “I didn’t want to be hasty, nor treat the matter with any disrespect. It would appear rather crass to have new Knights supercede the fallen ones while their ashes are still warm.”

To this, Sidon let out a bitter sort of chuckle. It was a quick, breathy sound, and Brivere glanced in his direction, catching the way Sidon’s eyes turned distant, even while his mouth held that same, empty smile.

“‘We have plenty of forces, just give them orders and let them fight for you,’” Sidon stated, his voice
dropping lower in pitch, so to semi-accurately impersonate the steady rumble of his Knight’s tone. His golden gaze met Brivere’s, catching the rare instance of surprise and abhorrence so subtly crossing the other Zora’s features.

“There are your words, Brivere,” Sidon said as though Brivere was not aware. Both had seen their share of death recently and both of them had been vastly, permanently changed by all they’d witnessed. The difference was that it had taken Brivere a much longer time to finally, finally, understand what Sidon had known from the very beginning.

The pain of losing the people who answered to him.

“I’m glad to see that you’ve reevaluated your stance,” the Prince concluded, his tone softening to something more like his usual warm compassion. It was either as false as his smiles, or else it merely did not come as easily any longer. He breathed a sigh, a melancholy sound, emptying himself of any anger or resentment, if in fact there had been any.

“Select an unofficial team from the available candidates,” Sidon suggested. “This assignment will give you a chance to see what they’re capable of.”

“As you wish, my lord,” the golden Zora said quietly, nodding his head.

Sidon tried to smile again, as though attempting to force it to meet his eyes, then he finally gave up, turning to glance out the window again, tapping his fingerscales at the end of the sill. “You’ve moved up in the world, my friend. And you did it without my aid and without anything from me. I’m happy for you, truly.”

“I didn’t move anywhere. I’m merely riding upon my sibling’s good fortune,” said the Knight, not so eager for casual conversation and certainly not discussion of his circumstances. “But thank you, nonetheless.”

Sidon was visibly disappointed, but decidedly left the situation where it lay. “I should be on my way, then,” he purred, making his way toward the door, bypassing the Knight. “Good day to you, my friend.”

“And to you, my lord,” Brivere breathed. Sidon was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one is coming so late, my friends. I was finishing off a commission that I had already taken too long with, and really needed to get out of the way. On that same note, though, I think I might officially drop my update schedule to once a month, if only because my recent pool of motivation hasn’t been able to keep up with my old schedule. I know a lot of you had fallen behind my super-fast updates anyway, so maybe this will help us all out haha.

Thanks for reading, everyone. I appreciate all comments and kudos. <3

Here’s my social media~
TWITTER
TUMBLR
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

For one soldier, duty had come to an end, while for another, it carried on. And for the Hylian Champion, a very important mission lay before him. Hylia willing, no awkward circumstances would stand between him and his goal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The traveling soldiers closed in on the Lanayru Wetlands by the time the sun was high in the sky; a silvery orb, eclipsed by thickening cloud cover. Most of them were eager to be back, but for Betaal, suddenly Fort Boko didn’t quite feel like home.

The Zoras’ armor clinked as they marched together through the open gates amidst the back and forth of Mercay Islanders who cohabited the fort during the day. Duty for the band who’d newly arrived was over and most went their own ways or scurried off toward the armory to shed their armor and weapons for a few well-earned days of rest.

One particular black-scaled guardsman, however, strode straight in the direction of Gaddison’s tent, his head held down while he went. From a distance, Sergeant Betaal watched Tottika march off, sure it was for the sake of delivering her to her doom.

She had to wonder, though, for what? What did this boy get out of throwing her to the wolves? Rank, acknowledgment, a nice pat on the back? No, she knew better. People didn’t need reasons to hate her. What she was- that was already enough.

She felt sick.

Knowing there was nothing she could do, Betaal went to her own tent. Her mind was racing so quickly that she could hardly make sense of anything. It took her ten minutes to unfasten only the first few buckles of her armor, when normally she could have it fully off in that time.

And then came the very thing she’d been dreading, the thing that ripped her from the bizarre mental state where time was slow and the entire world felt like it was underwater: the sound of spears clicking against the stone outside of her tent, announcing the arrival of a group of unexpected guardsmen. It was followed by one of them calling aloud from outside the tent flap in a clear, distinct voice.

“Sergeant Betaal.”

The Undercity woman took a deep breath, stilling herself deep inside, as though she was about to face hopeless battle. She straightened and strode to the doorway, pushing back the canvas flap to be greeted by three guardsman who had, no, who did serve under her. Each of them was Uppercity and so towered over her. Her neck curved and her chin raised when she peered up at them, her single eye a proud, burning flame.

“Yes, Guardsman,” she said, her voice gravelled but steady.
“Sir–” the one speaking gave a tiny dip of his head to his superior. “You’re being summoned by acting Sergeant Gaddison.”

Betaal gave a curt nod of her head and allowed the guardsmen to escort her. Her topfin was flared, like a banner of defiant ruby as she was marched toward inevitable shame.

They reached their destination quickly, and one of the guardsmen held the flap to Gaddison’s tent open for Betaal to step inside, following behind her while she went. The slit of her pupil had widened to a great, black circle, as though to prepare her limited sight for the fevered rush of warfare, and yet what she laid her sight on upon entry gave her reason to pause, to question, to deny.

Gaddison stood not in the company of Tottika, who she had sent to Hateno for the very purpose of acting as her spy, but instead a lone Undercity woman with pearly scales and rosy fins.

“..Dahlia?” Betaal muttered, her fins going flat, her lips falling open softly while she tangled with her innermost thoughts for an explanation. Had Tottika reported them both? Was Dahlia going to be punished, too? Was the unfair suffering of another Undercity woman going to be the leverage Gaddison used to bring her down?

“Ah. Sergent Betaal, how nice to see you again,” Gaddison said with a smile, voice warm and honey sweet. Betaal’s eye snapped to her at the sound of fake pleasantries, watching the pastel-pale Zora seat her self atop a writing desk. “I’m sure you have a reasonable clue what this is about.”

“I’m afraid not,” Betaal replied, making no attempt to cover her own furious disdain.

“Hmm,” Gaddison hummed, nodding her head like Betaal’s denial was making this all the more enjoyable for her. “Then let me cut straight to the chase; your rank is being temporarily annulled. I’ve received word of some inappropriate conduct on your part and I’ve already reported it.”

Betaal’s one eye went from Gaddison, to Dahlia, then back. There was no look of fear or confusion on the face of the other Undercity woman, and not one single shred of remorse, but rather a steely kind of determination. Betaal’s heart dropped, tearing itself into a hundred tiny pieces.

And then she continued without it.

“..and if these rumors are false?” Betaal asked, the snarl in her voice like a warning.

“I suppose that’s for the Guard Captain to decide,” Gaddison swiftly concluded, her tongue tracing the edge of one, sharp fang before she continued. “You are to return to Zora’s Domain under guard escort in the morrow, where the appropriate reprimand will be decided. Until then, you may return to your tent, which will also be under supervision.”

The muscles of Betaal’s jaw tightened, but she did nothing. She said nothing. She nodded to the other woman, like Gaddison had merely stated the weather and nothing more, then Betaal turned and strode out in silence. The guardsmen shifted quickly out of her path, armor rattling with their haste.

Of course, as soon as Betaal exited Gaddison’s tent, the first face she saw in the distance was that of Dunma, tearfully wide-eyed in alarm, in fear. The Sergeant’s head dipped low, her one eye sharply avoiding the sight of the other woman while she strode back to her own tent, flanked by other guardsmen. She couldn’t face her now. She only wanted to be alone.

And yet, no sooner than Betaal was isolated in her quarters and fully stripped out of her armor, an uninvited guest let herself inside. The blue Zora turned to look over at the sound of her tent flap rustling, only to find Dahlia standing there like she was welcome.
“...why would you do this?” Betaal uttered, her previous facade of strength melting away to show the pain burning just beneath. Her one eye was no longer a flame, but a glistening, watery jewel, and her lips drew back from her sharp teeth as she spoke. “Why would you help that woman when all along she has only ever hated me for what I am.. for being the same as what you are.”

“Only you ever thought your presence in the guard was some kind of success for our people,” Dahlia said, her own voice equally laden with hurt, both delicate and strong in the same breath. Her body shook, yet she stood proud where she’d planted herself. “But the truth is, it just made you a traitor in my eyes.”

“A traitor?” Betaal repeated, in confusion, in pleading. “What are you-”

“That’s right, Blue, a traitor!” the pearly Zora snapped, her rosy fins flaring, her scales taking on an angry flush. “You’re a traitor to your class and your people. You’re just an Undercity Zora, handing them your complicity in your own oppression. I didn’t do this to you, Blue, you did this to yourself because they will never trust you. They will never see you as anything more than pond scum, a bottom feeder, and if that isn’t clear now, then even with one eye left, you’re totally blind.”

“Oh,” Betaal breathed, her gaze faltering, going to the stone beneath her feet. She was nodding her head like everything made perfect sense, when nothing at all made sense, not a single, fucking thing. The pale skin of her face furrowed in a bitter, grief-stricken snarl. “So you pretended to be my friend in order to sabotage me? That was what you felt you had to do, rather than just.. telling me how you felt?”

While a trail of wetness stained one of Betaal’s cheeks, Dahlia looked on, tipping her own chin upward and holding her tail out straight behind her. “You were too buried in your little fantasies about loving your enemies to take my words to heart. You needed to be brought back to the real world– only actions could accomplish that.”

Dahlia flicked the tent flap open in order to leave her old lover behind, this time for good. However, she paused upon the threshold, her pearlescent body silhouetted in the light from outside, and said, “Welcome to the world we live in, Betaal.”

A team of Knights sliced their way downstream, the water cold and racing fast against their scales. The winter rains had already begun to creep across Lanayru and provinces further west still, and as such, the rivers were high and visibility murky. The quick-racing currents only aided the Zoras, however, hastening them toward their destination. Then, well before the group reached Lake Hylia, Prince Sidon called the retreat to land, sensing their targets just ahead.

Brivere watched the Prince from a certain distance, leading in his usual manner. Sidon was ahead of everyone else, an impenetrable tower with burning, red scales and an unwavering, confident authority that often came out whenever he led missions beyond the boundaries of Zora’s Domain.

The march to where they finally found their quarry was short, yet for some, this was their first mission, so even brief, uneventful walks on land had some Knights’ fingers itching against their weapons. They were nervous, jittery, even Brivere could see it plainly, so he was sure the Prince was feeling it, in turn.

“Here they are!” Sidon announced at first sight of the Lightning Striker Eels, and at his word, the entire company gazed across the rushing river to catch sight of the migrating beasts. From where they stood, the most they could see was the glistening flicker of golden scales, the soft crest that drew along the spines of the eels breaching the water’s frothy surface, and the point of a small horn, which
adorned the top of each creature’s skull.

“Assemble,” Brivere sharply commanded his own small team. His word brought five other Knights to attention and they stood together to hear his commands. “We go in together in the proper formation, in order to separate an individual from the school. Keep the line tight, drive the beast hard, but take care that you do not come within dangerous proximity. One attack from these creatures will kill you quite instantaneously, understood?”

“Yes, Ser,” the five-strong team replied. As Brivere’s yellow gaze wandered across their faces, taking stock, he almost expected to find the gray and pale of Kree’s visage, her cheeks dimpled from her smiling confidence. He pushed that thought aside.

“Are we ready?” Sidon asked, approaching Brivere and his team. The golden Zora dipped his head before the Prince, offering a quick confirmation. When he raised his head, however, he noticed that a rather familiar Apostle was following at the Prince’s flank, twin dirks strapped at her hips like she was ready for battle.

“My lord?” Brivere breathed, only for Sidon to nod to the pure, white Zora by his side.

“Loreen is going to be aiding us,” Sidon explained. “Not to worry, she’s quite familiar with the attack formation that we’ll be using.”

“Very well,” the Knight hummed. He wasn’t at all convinced that the Apostle’s participation in such a dangerous mission was entirely wise, but what good would it do for him to disagree? None at all.

The eight of them readied themselves at the edge of the muddy river. It had stretched itself wide, surging past its own rocky banks and leaving a shallow pool sprawling overtop of grassy earth, slowly excavating it into a sodden pit. The mud squished beneath the Zoras’ webbed feet as they set off into the water, then together they leaped ahead into the deep, rushing current.

Visibility was minimal, but the group closely followed Prince Sidon’s lead, each of them entrusting their lives to his electroreceptive senses. Every Zora had their weapon drawn and at the ready, so that they formed a line of spears, surging through the river rapids toward danger.

Brivere was the only one among them who did not take out a weapon yet. His part in the formation was ever so slightly behind the rest, and he took advantage of it by keeping an eye on the structure itself, as well as each Knight in participation. While his life was in equal peril, he was also in a place to judge the performance of those serving him, while keeping them all as safe as possible. This is how he would accomplish that.

When the group drew near, the Lightning Strikers came into full, magnificent sight. Their bodies were longer than even Sidon was tall; thick, muscular columns of power, slithering effortlessly against the harsh currents pushing them back. They were covered in golden scales that appeared bronze in the brown-washed water, but the fearsome school lit the area around them with the luminous, electrical energy that crackled all around them. The beasts’ jaws gaped, exposing the jagged, needle-points of their numerous teeth, which could easily ensnare a Zora like any given fish at the end of a spear.

As these ancient foes faced off, their relationship became purely clear in the language of their instincts. Every Zoras’ pupils shot wide at the sight of the Lightning Strikers, their fins flashing and flaring in intimidation, their own sharp fangs gleaming and exposed to their prey. Even Brivere felt an inexplicable rush of animal excitement shoot through his veins, despite his squeamishness for the barbarity of these traditions.
The Lightning Strikers recognized the oncoming threat with just as much ease. Their fear response and subsequent aggression was written into their DNA by the hundred thousand generations before them, all of which had faced this same Zora onslaught. They understood and reacted to a thing which they had both never seen, yet intimately understood: Zoras were, to them, the Maraudo Wolves of this world.

And this was precisely what the Lightning Strikers were specifically adapted to combat.

The company circled the group, corralling them, spooking them, searching for the weakest individual with the intent to target it. More than once, the beasts blasted electrical charge at the sight of the approaching Zoras, but each and every time, the Apostle performed a motion with her free hand, using her own inborn magic to send a wave of force in the direction of the threat, bouncing the electricity back and away from the group of Knights.

Now Brivere understood why Sidon had decided to bring her along.

When Sidon selected which of the massive eels they were to slay, he commanded the group with a gesture and the Zora pack went in as prompted. They neared the school, swimming with the current and using it to their advantage, nimble bodies cutting through the water, fins flagging in a threat display that caused the beasts to let out ferocious, shrieking hisses that were audible, even against the rush of the current.

From the corner of his eye, Brivere noticed one of the young Knights wasn’t holding the line as tightly as she should have been, but there was no time to correct it at this phase. At last, he brought out his weapon: a Silver Bow. The golden Knight knocked an arrow and drew back the bowstring, taking aim while he smoothly paddled.

Brivere’s shot cut the water and cleanly struck its target. The beast squirmed as it was pin-pricked, squealing and setting free a burst of electricity which the Knights sharply paddled back from and the Apostle deftly blocked. Brivere saw that she was sticking right to Sidon’s flank; good.

Blood quickly pooled around the beast, flowing from its side like a cloud of crimson smoke, caught in a gust of wind. At the scent of it, the rest of the school instinctively backed away, knowing innately that it meant danger. It was convenient for the Zoras, because this gave them an open to move in and finish off the individual.

It was at this point that the team of Knights were given the order to stand down; completing the kill was a two person job, and one which Sidon and Brivere were, together, quite skilled at. The Prince swam boldly ahead of the ailing beast, clicking his teeth and flaring at it, so that the Lightning Striker expended another strong burst of electricity. Sidon was quick and quite familiar with the creature’s range, and he darted out of the way as its static brightly flashed, reaching in dancing branches of light toward the white water’s surface, as well at the stirred river bed.

Once the electrical discharge had been expelled, Brivere paddled hard toward the beast. The eel couldn’t let out another burst for at least a minute, and so it gave the golden Knight a fleeting instant of safe passage. He readied his next arrow while he swam dangerously close, ducking into the deep water along the creature’s underside.

The organs which produced the Lightning Striker’s energy could be disabled with some sharply fired arrows and a quick, steady hand. Brivere took aim for the distinctive marks along the eel’s underside, and shot an arrow into each, one coming smoothly after another, and yet another. When the Knight’s work was done, it was the Prince who initiated the final, most showy phase of all.

The animal was bleeding, weakened, and could no longer fire off any more electricity to defend
itself, but it was still a terrifying foe to face. Sidon, however, rushed in fearless, fins flicking, trident brightly shining. The eel squirmed and evaded the bright red Zora, trying helplessly to return to its school, only for them to swim away from it each time. All the while Sidon chased at the Lightning Striker’s fins, driving his weapon into it whenever it left itself open.

Brivere held mixed feelings about watching this part. Sidon was surely a sight to see, yes, and it was also his duty to make certain that the Prince was safe. At the same time, however, witnessing a frightened animal being cornered and fighting for its life wasn’t stimulating. Brivere was, frankly, surprised that his gentle Prince had accepted the tradition quite so unflinchingly, given how sensitive he was to the suffering of others, as well as his tendency to rebel at every opportunity.

He concluded that even Sidon wasn’t foolish enough to deny his own nature; Zoras had to eat, after all.

Before long, the beast was weak at the end of Sidon’s trident. One final jab perhaps did not finish the creature, as its gills were still hard pumping while its blood left its body, and its eyes began to glaze. However, it was no longer strong enough to resist as the Zora Prince speared it, then began hauling it toward the shore.

Even Sidon’s muscles strained to carry such a burden against the current, but he soon made it to the river bank, where all the Knights and Apostles in his company clapped and cheered at his accomplishment, at the display of finesse and bravery.

The Prince’s Knight didn’t follow immediately, neither with his presence nor his eyes. As far as he was concerned now, the hard work was over and done with and all that remained was staying vigilant, should monsters arrive to attack the traveling band.

On land, the eel was dealt a swift death, then the inspection of the creature fell immediately to the Apostle group. Sidon stood aside when the task was out of his hands. Only then did Brivere join him, though it was for a short, awkward moment.

The Prince was eagerly looking over the inspection process, arms folded against his chest, tail swaying gently from side to side down his back. Brivere was a golden flash of color in Sidon’s shadow.

“Well met, my lord,” Brivere uttered gently, his posture straight, his entire being unusually still at the Prince’s side.

Sidon, on the other hand, reacted as though he hadn’t even known Brivere was there. His head cocked, golden gaze tilting downward, while the length of his tail tensed so that it was held straight. He was silent for a moment, his adornments clinking with even his slightest motions, then with a few soft swishes of his tail, he let out a sound of agreement.

“You did quite fine yourself,” the Prince stated, the purr of his voice deep in his chest, but shallow in tone, veiled in some way still.

Brivere recognized with ease the sight and sound of forced neutrality. Of course, he refrained from comment, though. If Sidon was concealing something, he must have had good reason to do so. He’d let it be.

“Thank you, my lord,” he breathed, dipping his body softly and walking away. He supposed he could make better use of his time by checking over the perimeter, anyway. Even if their goal had been accomplished, the unfamiliar area still held the potential to be dangerous.
Brivere circled a few times before the familiar, white-scaled Apostle meekly scurried over to join him. “Hello again, Knight Captain Brivere,” she squeaked, her eyes elsewhere, her hands fidgeting firstly with the fabric of her shawl, then with the silverscale of the weapon holster around her hips. “I have to say, the way you swim around the beasts, dodging their notice... remarkable. It never saw you coming, not at all.”

The Knight Captain ‘hmphed’ slightly, though a small smile upturned the corners of his lips. “It’s a convenient misdirection that I have only the color of my scales to be grateful for.” He stopped and gestured in the direction of where the eel lay in the distance, four or five Apostles poking and prodding at it, yet still its golden scales glinted vibrantly in the light. “See how I’m the same as them? That’s why they don’t notice me so readily.”

Brivere’s yellow eyes flickered to the sight of the Prince then, a distant melancholy painting his features. “...That and Sidon is quite the distraction. He enchants even the gaze of fearsome beasts, doesn’t he? Who can blame the eels for not being able to look away from him.”

“That sounds a bit like projection, Knight Captain,” Loreen hummed, laughing softly over the hopeless Knight. “Are your feelings for your Prince more than dutiful?”

A breathy chuckle came from the golden Zora, despite himself, but he hesitated to give that inquiry the acknowledgment of a verbal response. After a moment, though, he relented, setting the low rumble of his voice free, “...He isn’t at all my Prince.”

Brivere’s gaze was cast down upon Loreen, who was jingling in all of her decorative bangles at his side. He felt much more comfortable moving past the previous subject matter, so he turned his own curiosities on her. “So why ever are you here? I thought you studied history?”

“I beg your pardon, but I’m more than just a bookish Apostle, I’ll have you know!” the pale Zora squeaked, standing a bit straighter. “And to answer your question– the Lightning Striker Festival is a very important historic, cultural event, so this is actually relevant to my work. Also, you might have noticed, my magic is quite useful.”

“Ah.” The Knight put a pace of distance between himself and Loreen, like he expected to have that very magic turned on him at any moment, though it was mostly in jest. His relaxed posture made the truth of his comfort clear. “Well of course I meant no offense.”

Loreen nodded her hooded head with some vigor, her hands going to her hips. “So, Knight Captain, where ever is the Hylian Champion? And how is the search for those tomes coming along?”

“I believe he had it in mind to look into once he gets back to Zora’s Domain.” He only knew this thanks to a very awkward exchange between himself and Sidon before they left the Domain. The Prince was still under the wrong notion about the relationship between Brivere and Link, but the Knight saw no benefit in contradicting him. “Currently, he is out of town, as it where.”

“Out of town, I see. Off doing something important?” Loreen asked, a dubious sound painting her words.

Brivere but nodded in a stately manner. “Yes, very important. The Champion is on a mission that is of grand importance to our people.”

“You’re going to have to take the rucksack off,” Link said, dangling upside-down off the back of a Goron at just the perfect angle that he was eye-level with the other man’s loincloth-clad ass cheeks.
The Hylian Champion wasn’t sure how this had happened. He knew in the context of what actions had led up to this point, sure: he’d stowed away inside the stone man’s rucksack in order to travel to the Goron City without the Yiga Clan catching wind of it.

As far as how he’d ended with his ankle twisted in something, though, he wasn’t completely sure. It probably had to do with gogginess from napping, his foot being asleep, and general lack of attentiveness.

The confused oaf, from which the Hylian was dangling, seemed quite sure that if he just turned around quickly enough, he could catch the Champion and tug him free. And so, here they were, in the middle of Goron town, with one grown man chasing his tail like a Hylian Shepherd, all while Link played the part of his tail.

“’Nope,’” Link said while the Goron tried to grab him again. The Goron stopped, took a breath, then twirled himself around yet again, very certain that he could do this if he was just determined enough. The only thing stopping the Hylian from being sick at this rate was how grievously empty his stomach was.

The Goron tried the maneuver a further time, whirling around with Link’s whole body twirling like a skirt in a soft breeze. His patience ran out soon after, and he set to kicking and hissing nonsense complaints, embodying something wild and vicious, caught in a hunter’s snare. That was the point when another Goron ambled over to assist, out of some deep sense of mercy.

The newly arrived Goron bundled Link in his arms, then easily pulled the Hylian’s leg free with a swift jerk of whatever offending strap he’d gotten tangled in. Link let out a relieved breath, but otherwise, his complete state of being was utterly indignant, especially when his savior did not immediately put him down, and instead continued to cradle him as though he needed some comforting to recover from this awfully traumatic event.

Link cleared his throat, then tried not to snarl like a rabid dog as he spoke, “As comfortable as your big, burly arms are, brother, could you put me down please?”

Thankfully, Link’s request was heeded and he was gently lowered to his feet. Then, upon having some of his dignity restored, the Champion dusted himself off, straightened and set out to accomplish the very, very important mission which had brought him here.

Well, he went straight to the street vendor who served Goron-style barbeque and stuffed himself silly on grilled fish, meat and mushrooms. After that, though, he set out to accomplish his very important mission.

The Chief of the Gorons seemed ecstatic to see Link again, or as ecstatic as an ornery, old Goron could be. Yunobo, who was lurking nearby, had something of a nervous appearance, however, looking on from a slight distance and wringing his hands. That was normal enough, so Link didn’t pay the young Goron much mind.

The boss invited Link into his tiny shanty, offering the Hylian a hot drink but sending Yunobo to prepare it. Link already had sweat snaking trails down every inch of his skin underneath his Flamebreaker armor, so he couldn’t reject the hydration, but he sorely wished that Gorons knew anything about cold drinks.

“So what brings you back to our mountaintop, Champion?” the Goron Chief asked with a soft groan, as he seated himself in his stone chair.

“I’m actually here on business,” Link stated, arms drawn loosely over his chest. “I’ll be blunt,
because I know the Goron people appreciate straight-forwardness and because it suits me to be frank.”

The old man smiled and stroked his thick beard, a chuckle coming out of him like a rumble through a canyon. “That’s why you’re an honorary Goron, Champion.”

Link nodded, hoping like the void that this played out favorably, because returning to Zora’s Domain with more bad news was an unbearable concept. Seeing the look of politely veiled disappointment on Sidon’s face was too much. “I’ve come on behalf of the Zoras,” he said.

“The Zoras?” the Boss repeated the word like it baffled him.

“Yes,” Link said warily, swallowing dryly. “How is the relationship between the Goron tribe and Zora’s Domain?”

The Boss immediately made a vague gesture with one of his giant hands. At the same time, Yunobo came over with a steaming, cast iron pot and a mug which he offered to Link. Link wiggled out of his helm, revealing the absolute wet, disheveled mess that he was underneath; his cheeks were burning red, his lips chapped and cracked. He muttered a word of thanks as Yunobo poured his drink and the Chief went on speaking.

“The Zoras.. they’re kind to our traveling merchant folk, but they can be mysterious. That has always made communication difficult between us,” the Chief was explaining. “They don’t often say what they mean. However, they’re a people who believe in self-sufficiency and they’re powerful warriors, which we respect.”

“They have a lot of pride and don’t like to show weakness..” Link bent his neck to sip at the hot mineral tea held between his gloved palms. It was sweet and buttery and aromatic, lighting a spiced fire in the throat on the way down. “A common trait between your people.”

The chief tittered, idly nodding his head in agreement.

“However, their Domain recently suffered a quake which damaged their city, as well as their mines. They aren’t eager to admit they need help, which is why I’m here.” Link cleared his throat. This was the part which was sure to take some of Sidon’s brand of flattery. “The Zora people could use the great strength of the Goron tribe– of course they are too proud to ask.”

The Boss Goron had a satisfied smile pulled across his weathered lips. He leaned to one side in his seat. “What can we do to aid them?”

“The Eldin province is rich in minerals and Zora’s Domain is short on luminous stone until they can get their mines repaired,” Link stated, building up to his ultimate suggestion. “It would help them mend damages in the meantime if the Goron people had any stores of luminous stone to spare.”

“Hmm,” the Chief’s hum already had a hard tone to it, like he was preparing to give Link an answer that he wouldn’t want to hear. It made the Hylian’s ears twitch, then fold backward. “While my people would otherwise be glad to lend a hand, is there anything else that the Zoras need, other than luminous stone?”

“Acquiring luminous stone was my goal. It’s very important and uhh..” Think of convincing words, Link. Think of convincing words. “Culturally significant to them.”

“Understandable, Champion,” the Chief nodded. “Unfortunately, it is also a vital resource for us.”

“Really?” Link was genuinely baffled. He glanced over his shoulder, looking around the Chief’s
shanty and further, to the various storefronts and houses beyond the wobbling, hot air rising from the magma. “I’ve never seen anything in Goron town built from luminous stone. Is it a food source, then?”

The Hylian turned back to the seated Boss, ears cocked in a curious way, though his brows were knitted together in growing disappointment. The Boss hummed quietly, his one beady eye glancing from where the Champion stood before him, over to where Yunobo nervously waited, and back.

“Normally we wouldn’t speak so freely about these things, but since you’re an honorary Goron, we’ll be blunt with one another.” the Chief muttered, his voice taut. “We use luminous stone for reproduction.”

“Oh,” Link said after a moment of pause. “...how does that work?”

“We have a secret process in which we refine the mineral to its pure form,” Boss Bludo explained, his discomfort mostly concealed beneath his overall gritty demeanor. “A parent then consumes the purified extract and from that an egg is produced.”

Great. Now Link was never going to get the image of Daruk laying an egg out of his head. He clenched his eyes shut, shaking his head and taking a long swig of his tea.

“Why don’t you let Yunobo show you to the Goron rookery?” the Chief offered. “...then after, we can talk more about what we can offer the Zora people, in the wake of their dilemma?”

Link did all he could not to audibly sigh. “Very well.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the story. All kudos and comments are appreciated. You can also follow me on social media for other content. =)

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Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Betaal returned to Zora’s Domain as ordered, where her fate was to be lain in the hands of the Guard Captain. A certain young Noble was paid a visit by a man who he’d never met before. And the Hylian Champion was getting to the bottom of Goron reproduction—the very, very bottom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So as you can see,” Gaddison went on, only now concluding what had already been quite a lengthy spiel, “there is sufficient evidence of the misconduct I’ve reported. My personal recommendation for reprimand would be the permanent dismissal of this woman from the guard entirely, as she cannot be trusted in a position of authority, and she certainly isn’t representative of the moral standards we’re meant to uphold, as servants of our Sovereign.”

Bazz had his palms tightly pressed together, his elbows poised atop his desk. His expression said little of his opinion on everything he’d just been told and with that same neutral calm, he shifted his gaze from Gaddison to Betaal.

The Guard Captain regarded the woman that he’d chosen, personally, to be the hand of Zorana authority downstream. Betaal stood before his desk now, her posture perfectly straight, her hands folded and her one eye holding a level gaze. If she was feeling any sense of unsteadiness, she hid it well.

“Sergeant,” Bazz breathed, golden eyes turned in Betaal’s direction. Her own stare went right to him as she was addressed, but she did not immediately speak up, as though unsure she was even the one who was being spoken to. She blinked in consideration, answering a second later.

“Sir?” Betaal spoke, voice strong and even.

“I’d like to speak with Guardsman Gaddison alone, if you could step outside,” Bazz asked politely enough, gesturing toward the big, heavy door to his office. Betaal dipped her head before him without question and showed herself out.

Once the door clanked shut, Bazz let out a restrained breath, his entire demeanor shifting. He stood from his seat, laying one hand down hard against the report that Gaddison had filed. “What in the void is this, Gaddison?” he said with a snarl. “Have you honestly been wasting your time assigned to the fort working on this pointless smear campaign in an attempt to have the Sergeant removed?”

The pastel Zora’s mouth fell open, her head tilting up while her pupils went tight at what she was hearing. “Pointless?” she repeated, the word snapping off the end of her tongue like the crack of a whip. “Bazz, did you hear nothing I said? This is important.”

Bazz sank back into his chair, eyes clenched shut, fingertips grinding against his temples. “This is a personal vendetta,” he hissed. “You need to take a look around, Gaddison. There’s a much bigger picture that you seem to be missing.”
“A big picture is made of numerous, tiny details,” Gaddison growled in reply, coming to stand directly before the Guard Captain’s desk. She pressed her hands against it, in some vague show of dominance, or perhaps simple rebuke. “And a large problem is made of numerous, smaller problems.”

“This has nothing to do with anything,” Bazz insisted. “We have toxic water, a food shortage, a shortage of building supplies, medical supplies, and a class conflict that could turn into a fucking civil war at any time. Your personal dislike for Sergeant Betaal is relevant to none of that. You have more important duties to be seeing to.”

“This is important!” Gaddison spat, her fangs shining while she did. She bent over Bazz’s desk, putting herself on his level as though it would help him understand, as though it would force him to understand. “This is important for Dunma. This woman has been taking advantage of Dunma’s emotional vulnerability. She has been using her rank in order to manipulate her. Even if Dunma thinks that she cares about this woman, we both know how foolish and misguided that is. Bazz, please, think of her. Think of Rivan.”

“Oh, believe me, Gaddison, I do.” Bazz growled as his dear, fallen friend’s name passed Gaddison’s lips. His bristled reaction and the danger in his tone instantly quieted the other, though the lavender Zora still glared at him with narrowed, amber eyes and a determined scowl.

Bazz breathed a sigh, his anger burning into something much more dismal and muted. He was always thinking of Rivan. He supposed Gaddison maybe hadn’t expected him to be so prepared for that little ace, but he was. He absolutely was.

The Guard Captain swallowed dryly, his mind darting away to thoughts of sweet solace offered by the bottle of courser rum in his desk, then back to the present moment.

“Rivan wasn’t perfect,” he uttered, voice low but steady, “..but those choices were his to make. His mistakes were his to make, and I wish I’d only told him, as his friend, that I held no judgement. Maybe then he would’ve been more forthcoming.”

“Oh,” Gaddison scoffed, straightening and folding her arms against her armor-plated chest. She tilted a sideways stare in Bazz’s direction, amber eyes fiery with frustration. “Now, of all times, the control freak has something to say about letting people make their own choices?”

Bazz fell silent at Gaddison’s words, but it was far from a silence of submission. If anything, it was a burning, resentful pause, which he used to deliberate on his next course of action; it did not take him long.

“Step out in the hall and ask Sergeant Betaal to come back into my office, Guardsman,” he said, voice hard with authority. Gaddison knew immediately by the way Bazz had failed to use her name that she had lost this little tussle of wills.

With her features set, Gaddison turned and strode to the heavy, swinging door. She opened it up to find the Undercity woman standing directly across the narrow hall from the door, perhaps four or five paces away. “The Guard Captain will see you now,” she stated, every word sharp.

Gaddison stood aside in order for Betaal to enter, and the Undercity woman walked past her, head high, demeanor guarded, as though she was marching to her own public execution, all while attempting to maintain her innocence and dignity.

Betaal came to stand before the Guard Captain’s desk, where she folded her arms behind her back and addressed her superior, “Sir?”
“I’m dismissing the claims against you,” Bazz stated without any hesitation. “As such, no reprimand will be issued. I’d like for you to return to duty as soon as possible, Sergeant.”

Bazz watched while Betaal’s one good eye widened fractionally at what she was hearing. The tense musculature of her powerful frame loosened as relief washed over her, despite all of her best efforts to refrain from showing anything at all. She dipped into a bow before the black Zora, saying, “Thank you, sir.”

The Guard Captain nodded, his yellow eyes flicking up to glimpse at Gaddison where she stood, violet-flushed and tail flicking. “As for you, Guardsman—” Bazz went on, “I’m appointing you permanently to your acting rank, despite this misunderstanding. As of now, I would like for you to act as my head of intelligence at the fort and from here on, remain focused on the real task at hand—dealing with the Undercity rebels and the traitors who have conspired against our Domain. Do you accept, Guardsman?”

“Yes, sir,” Gaddison uttered, her voice a steely growl that held unnaturally steady.

“Excellent,” Bazz purred with a smile that showed his fangs, yet did not reach his eyes. “Now, I would like for you both to put aside this petty fiasco and work together like the professionals you are. The Zora people have matters of import which require resolution, and so all of us must do our best work now more than ever—and we can’t do that if we’re squabbling amongst ourselves.”

The Guard Captain addressed Gaddison directly, continuing, “You may requisition a squad of guardsmen from those already working the fort to answer directly to you for the sake of your mission. Go back to your post and play nice.”

Estuu had always had a very organized book collection, but he had never had a study of his own. After moving into his new home, however, the young noble pushed aside what remained of his sire’s collection of expensive liquors, in favor of using those shelves to house numerous books. Where once there was a bar, now there was a desk surrounded by windows and scenic views of Zora’s Domain.

The boy had isolated himself in this lovely workspace and launched headlong into various, important tasks: letters to Koko in Kakariko, as well as fanmail to be delivered to none other than the Red Herring. It was a slow-going process, but Estuu was persistent. That is, he was, until an interruption came to slow his progress.

A silvery chime announced the arrival of a visitor, one who was otherwise completely unexpected. Estuu let out a little huff, then slid from the seat at his desk in order to greet whoever it was darkening his doorway.

Waiting to be permitted proper entry, a Zora man with vivid, blue scales and sharp features was positioned in the entry hall to Estuu’s residence. He appeared to be gazing nosily into the boy’s house with familiarity on his features, as well as a lick of wariness.

One of the first details that Estuu noticed about this man was that he was certainly a fellow noble, as he was adorned in fine, elaborate silverscale and expensive textiles, which encircled his shoulders and waist. The second most apparent detail was that he was totally unfamiliar to the Zora boy.

The man, on the other hand, appeared to recognize Estuu. His golden gaze dropped low to regard the boy and he gave a shallow bow of greeting, the jeweled adornments hanging from his forefins catching the light and shimmering as he did.
“Ahh– Zambezi’s young heir, Estuu– it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance at last,” he said with a smile when he righted himself, standing very straight and entering the residence as though he’d been invited to do so. “I can quite see the resemblance between father and son. You are, however, much younger than I understood you to be.”

It was all Estuu could do not to sulk at that comment. He was actually due for a growth spurt very soon, or so he was sure of that, anyway. Fretting over it would only make him seem more like a child, though, so he refrained.

The boy gave the nobleman a curt nod in greeting, then pointed to him with a delicate shrug of his shoulders in uncertainty; a request for some elaboration on this strange man’s identity.

“Oh, pardon me. I am known as Isthio and I am in your employ, young sir,” the nobleman introduced himself. His gaze darkened as it wandered again, roving across the curving architecture. The man cleared his throat and added, “I’m unfortunately the one who discovered that your father met with an untimely demise. You have my sincerest apologies for your loss.”

The topaz jewels attached to Estuu’s forefins jingled while he shook his head, extending one palm before himself to dismiss the man’s concerns. Zambezi’s death was nobody’s loss and Estuu’s gain, if anything. The cerulean-scaled Zora before the young boy softly nodded his head in some semblance of understanding, despite Estuu’s silence, then he continued to explain who he was.

“I manage the Undercity cantina primarily, but I also assisted your father in other endeavors,” Isthio went on, gesturing in a graceful, deliberate way. The movement was very distracting to Estuu’s eyes. “As for the cantina-- despite having revenue flow temporarily halted by this troublesome shortage, the taxes which we pay to the crown for ownership of the property are still due. They are quite behind schedule as well, which is the cause for my visit.”

The man let out an exasperated scoff, flicking one forefin back from his face with a dramatic roll of his golden eyes. “You’d think for as much as we pay to maintain the City Guard, those oafs would have found a solution to this silly Waterblight already. It’s preposterous, wouldn’t you say?”

Estuu was almost entirely clueless what this man was on about, despite how much he had said. It actually might’ve been easier if Isthio explained himself more succinctly, in fact. Okay, what had he said? He worked for Estuu, Estuu owed somebody money, Isthio was complaining about the City Guard. How did these ideas string together, exactly?

The young noble did the best thing he could do; he nodded his head.

Isthio wasn’t fooled.

He kindly played it off as though he didn’t find being employed by an inexperienced child baron to be an inconvenience, however. “Hmm. I suppose you weren’t given adequate tutelage in your father’s line of business. You weren’t expecting to inherit all of this, were you?”

Sincerely grateful for even feigned sympathy, Estuu shook his head.

“Do you, umm…” Isthio fumbled, not completely sure how he was meant to proceed. He hadn’t been prepared for this, either. “Do you have access to your father’s financial assets then, young sir?”

With a quiet hum of confirmation, Estuu pivoted slowly on heel in order to gesture in the direction of his study, wordlessly inviting Isthio to join him. The two nobles proceeded through a wide archway, into the other room of the fine residence. The blue Zora’s eyes went to the large cistern pool, envying the size of it, despite that it was drained and dry.
Estuu’s study was a mix of blue, stone shelves full of fiction, official documents and deeds, messy collections of ledgers that he could scarcely understand, and a single rack of fine alcohol that he had stuffed altogether and out of the way.

“Oh, may I?” Isthio gestured to the desk as they approached and Estuu politely beckoned him to sit. The man seemed like he recognized immediately what he was looking for, as he set right to the task of fingering through some documents which Estuu had stacked atop the desk; the boy had received them all the day the courts declared him the rightful owner of Zambezi’s residence and assets.

In slight nervousness, Estuu fiddled his fingers against the hem of the fine garment which draped around him, then he glanced in the direction of the front entryway. He kind of wished that Brivere were here, but he supposed he could handle this sordid business himself.

“Do you understand any of this, young sir?” Isthio’s eyes were moving quickly over the printed words, then his gaze went to Estuu. The boy avoided his stare, but shook his head in reply, which wrung a tired sigh from the other Zora. To his credit, though, Estuu had been trying very hard to understand the complex, legal jargon.

Isthio patiently laid out a few key items and gestured for Estuu to come closer, which the young boy did almost gladly. He didn’t appreciate physical closeness, but he recognized an offer of tutelage when he saw it.

“These are the deeds to parcels of land owned by your father and now by you.” The bright blue Zora’s claws clicked against one of the documents, skimming across the key areas of text. “One of these properties has long been too dangerous to access—again, what are we paying the guard for? Who knows. The others are prime areas for supplying ingredients for the production of our wines and other spirits. Our work force is now entirely absent, so the autumn harvest is far, far behind schedule, and even if it were on schedule, the City Guard has been under orders to take all food supplies and redistribute them to combat our hunger crisis. I swear to you, I could manage our Sovereign better than the court jesters on the King’s Council.”

Again, Estuu was lost, and this time he wasn’t sure if it was because this was all completely over his head, or because Isthio explained in too wordy a manner; probably both. When Isthio glanced over to see the glazed, wide-eyed expression on the young boy’s face, he quickly acknowledged that Estuu was not entirely following this lesson.

“Okay, young sir,” the noble breathed in frustration. “I can see that it’s going to take more than one lesson for you to understand the finer details of your father’s business. Allow me to manage it for you in the meanwhile and I will teach you as we go along. It’s clearly the only way to save my job at this point—by saving my own employer.”

Despite everything Estuu had read in stories, and his observations of the Hylian Champion, this one instance proved, without a doubt, that not all heroes carried swords.

Isthio brushed some of the documents aside, then cleared his throat. Estuu fidgeted on his toes in reply, already starting to recognize the signs which preceded the other Zora talking for much too long.

“The most pressing issue as of right now is this—” Isthio went on, “typically, we supply drinks for all important festivals. These events bolster our funds throughout the year. If we miss a single one, it will represent a grave loss and we are sure to fall behind in other financial obligations, not to mention profits. The autumn festival is days away and we have no product. Even if we could gather up the raw materials, they have to be processed, aged, etcetera, etcetera. One cannot do that in days.”
The noble reached one hand to rub at his prominent crest in worry, his eyes clenching shut from the stress which only he completely grasped in this circumstance. Estuu was not without some valid ideas of his own, though, and set to work on making a suggestion.

The boy looked over his shelved collection of books, spying one which he’d recently borrowed from the Basilica archives: it was about Kakariko Village and the Sheikah people. Estuu thumbed to one chapter that he recalled reading over, then he spread the open book out in front of the man seated at his desk.

“Rice wine from Kakariko Village?” The blue Zora hummed in consideration, cupping his chin and flicking his tail gently in thought. “Importation– is that your suggestion?”

Estuu’s reply was a simple one– he nodded in certainty. He didn’t completely understand the full purpose behind Link’s business in Kakariko, but he remembered the Hylian mentioning that the Sheikah people were sending food to Zora’s Domain as a favor. Surely they would be open to trade as well, right?

“We could import supply, yes, but it will be costly,” Isthio commented as he thought it over. “Then again, with most of our resources currently seized, money hasn’t been moving like it usually does and perhaps our fellow nobles will be tempted to overspend on a luxury they’ve been denied.” A wicked smile that showed the man’s sharp teeth spread across his pale features and he waggled one finger at Estuu. “You really are your father’s child.”

At that assertion, Estuu’s naturally neutral expression turned visibly sour. He supposed he would let it slide, though, since Isthio’s aid seemed a valuable resource. The young noble cleared his throat as though to speak, reaching for the notepad he often used for emergency communication. He’d gotten decent at writing with his left hand, so it didn’t bother him as much as it used to.

Estuu scrawled out a quick question, then presented it to the man sitting before him. ‘You’re good at paperwork?’ the note said. Isthio’s golden eyes flickered from side to side while he read, then he nodded in confirmation.

“It is my job, young sir,” the man replied, in almost exasperation, as though to say, ‘Was that not already clear?’

Estuu’s face brightened a bit and he gave a rough attempt at a smile, though it was more of a shining snarl that showed his fangs. With smooth, deliberate movements, the boy sauntered over to the shelf where he’d packed away what was left of Zambezi’s horrid booze collection; Estuu had to admit, though, that all of the various glass bottles held visual interest.

The boy took an empty glass down from the shelf and carried it over to the desk, sliding it toward Isthio, which caused the man to blink for a moment in confusion before he finally came to a realization.

“Are you.. offering me a drink?” the blue Zora asked with a dry swallow, his pupils turning big and round at the prospect. Apparently, he was among those poor nobles who’d been long denied their luxuries.

Estuu nodded slyly. He was offering the man some liquid encouragement, which he supposed was a good use of a resource that he absolutely had no interest in, himself. He wondered if his sire used these drinks in the same way, offering them to his guests like it was tantamount to blessings from the Goddess, herself.

After returning to the shelf and giving the selection a moment of consideration, Estuu took down a
sleek bottle of fleet lotus seed wine, presenting it for Isthio’s approval. To the boy’s surprise, however, the man gave his hand an immediate flick, the skin beneath his crest wrinkling in distaste.

“That’s much too plebeian for my tastes, young sir.”

Estuu was genuinely confused. He thought wine was the fanciest drink of all, but what did he know, really? He returned the bottle to the shelf and reconsidered the options. His contemplative gaze shifted to glance at another bottle containing a liquid that was more of an amber gold color. The shape and details of the glass were very fancy, to the point that they caught the light and sparkled. That one had to be the good stuff.

Tabantha malt? What that meant, the boy was unsure, but nonetheless, he selected it and offered it for consideration.

“Oh, that’s it. Much better,” the man purred in approval, his tail swishing excitedly.

With a satisfied nod, Estuu uncorked the glass bottle and brought it to the table, pouring the drink so the man’s glass was half-full. He also didn’t know why people never drank an entire glass, but he’d seen adults consume alcohol often enough to know that, for some reason, they didn’t fill their glasses to the top. He followed that example.

Soon, the blue-scaled noble was smiling in approval, webbed fingers caressing the glass as it was slid against his palm, and only then did Estuu present him with a book on Sovereign Law.

The noble took a sip from his drink, then tittered, “I’m sorry, sir, but do I look like an Apostle? I could do their jobs better than them, sure, but I don’t care for the law. I care for profit.”

Undeterred, Estuu flipped to a page that he’d bookmarked recently, pointing out a particular passage. Isthio read over it, breathing in the warm scent of the Tabantha malt in his glass while he did. He took another sip, face furrowing from the delightful, bitter sting, then he nodded his head in apparent agreement with a little gesture toward the book.

“I see,” he said in understanding. “You wish to further your social standing by legally injecting a bit more Goddess into the blood of your only remaining familial tie. Not at all a foolish move to make for a young noble in your position. I suppose I could speak to an Apostle serving under Dinraal on your behalf, sir, and have the proper paperwork submitted. You, of course, have to sign off on it and cover the expense. You do know that it will be costly, correct?”

Estuu couldn’t help his sudden excitement and he nodded eagerly.

“Very well, young sir. I’ll see to it.”

One iron door was all that protected the entryway to the Goron rookery. Yunobo was able to gain entry, bypassing the single guard in order to lead Link down, deep into the womb of ancient stone.

At first, the tunnel was likened to an ordinary mineshaft, but visibly weathered by time. The path was bare bedrock, chiseled from being traversed by innumerable generations of Goron. The path was a suffocating, lightless black the further Link followed Yunobo down, and it exhaled a constant stream of hot air that whistled, almost like a breeze, against the visor of Link’s helm.

Link could feel the steep downward descent in the tight muscle of his calves as he walked and though he struggled to keep his footing secure, Yunobo’s gait never faltered, never stumbled once. For a short while, the surrounding shadow became so absolute that Link was tracking his guide by
the sound of his footsteps alone, until his eyes adjusted at last, producing a soft blue, mirror-like shine in the dark.

When the path finally evened out, the appearance of the underground lair began to drastically change; Link and Yunobo passed beneath a wide, rectangular archway carved from stone and marked with glyphs that were so old, even Link couldn’t make sense of them.

Light was bursting upward from guided pools of magma, pools which had been crafted and stylized by hands of unfathomable strength and resilience, by ingenuity so proud, it mastered and controlled a force as incredible as molten stone— it was peak Goron craft, an amazing thing to behold.

The ceilings vaulted overhead, twisting with cold, luminous veins of stone that were glassy and blue, resembling a frozen waste, as though to contradict the immense heat, which Link could feel reaching unbearable heights, even inside his protective armor. He wasn’t even sodden in sweat any longer, but itching and dry, his skin stripped of moisture absolutely. If not for the fireproof layer enclosing him in a packet of safety, the delicate fat and meat of his feeble body would surely burst to flame.

The walls were carved with ornate depictions of.. well, Link wasn’t entirely sure. The Goron style differed from that of the Zoras, as well as the Sheikah, but he could easily make out images of Gorons and he could differentiate them from chiseled depictions of Hylians and dragons, perhaps? Otherwise, it meant little to him.

“This way, goro.” Yunobo nodded in the direction they were headed, swatting one hand to beckon the ‘honorary Goron’ in his company, not wanting to allow Link to get lost in the complicated, twisting cavern. The Boss would surely have his ass, if so.

So far below ground, Link could almost feel the incredible weight resting overhead, here in darkness only penetrated by the earthen fire. It made him very nervous, not unlike how he felt while being dropped a hundred feet underwater to the Zora Basilica.

“This temple of fertility is beautiful,” Link commented, swallowing dryly, a bit breathless and weak from the heat. “But wouldn’t it be easier for Goron papas to watch over their eggs from home?”

“Goron eggs need intense heat in order to incubate, goro,” Yunobo said. He sounded like a schoolboy reciting a lesson.

“Ah,” Link breathed. He supposed that explained why there weren’t many Goron families elsewhere.

They continued down a few more corridors and past some other chambers, until they reached a rounded cavern that was bathed in warm, yellow firelight. Every inch of the sloped, scooping walls were adorned in ancient carvings of quality that far outshined the makeshift build of the tiny, thrown together shanties that made up Goron town, above.

This was something to rival the magnificence of Zora’s Domain, and maybe even their Basilica. It brought about a strange curiosity in Link’s mind while he studied the polished walls; he wondered if all races had secrets that they nursed down below, away from prying, Hylian eyes.

The Goron nests were practically alters, each one cradling a sparkling orb, shaped the same as any other egg, but glimmering like raw quartz, royal blue, almost violet in the light.

Link approached one of alters, only to freeze to perfect stillness when an unexpected sound caught him by surprise. His ears tilted forward in alert beneath his helm and he almost swore.. he could hear tiny, whispering voices?
Were they from inside the eggs? Or maybe.. they were in the walls? He couldn’t pinpoint the source, nor could he make heads or tails of what he was hearing; it was enough to sound almost like language, but muffled and indistinct.

The Hylian’s head turned here and there, glancing nervously around while a shiver twisted up his spine. He inexplicably sensed a threat, as though he were being watched, measured, judged. Naturally, he glanced in Yunobo’s direction as a means of reassurance, finding that the young Goron appeared very calm, like the place of his birth had swaddled him in comfort that Link could not and would never know.

“This place gives me.. a strange feeling,” Link warily uttered, not wanting to allow the full scale of his poorly tethered panic to be viewed.

“There are things below, things that the Goron people know to respect, goro,” Yunobo answered in a soft, steady voice, a boyish smile on his face. “Things far from Hylia’s light.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Link snapped. That really, really wasn’t helping. “Come on kid, don’t get all vague and ominous on me, please.”

“Sorry. That’s what the Boss always says about our hallowed caverns, heh heh,” Yunobo chuckled softly, coming to stand closer to Link’s side and pressing an enveloping hand to his shoulder for a passing moment. The young Goron’s eyes shined as he looked around, contemplating his surroundings before speaking up.

“The veins where we mine luminous stone are considered sacred. The deeper you go into them, the richer their power. There’s life inside the dirt and stone, life that’s ancient, goro. It isn’t benevolent or malevolent, it’s neutral,” Yunobo explained. His tone took on that of a student reading a passage from a book all over again.

And while the descendant of Daruuk clearly cared deeply about his position as a Champion’s heir, and probably someone meant to one day become Chief, the history lesson wasn’t doing much to comfort Link. He upturned his head to peer at the much taller Goron, or well, as much as the helm would allow– this armor really sharply cut his mobility.

“Life in the stone?” Link repeated it like it was nonsense. Of course, he realized how it sounded as soon as he remembered, oh yeah, he was presently addressing a creature who was made of earthen elements and also a living being.

Yunobo nodded, smiling gleefully, like he deeply appreciated and even enjoyed his own history and culture. It was just too bad that Gorons, as a race, didn’t appear to highly value scholarly pursuits so much as physical prowess. No wonder the kid lacked confidence.

“You Hylians descend from Hylia– a Goddess who made herself mortal. We Gorons descend from this,” Yunobo gestured to their surroundings, to the walls rich with the purest luminous stone, “..the blood of the old ones. We live as an extension of their glory. Our life would not exist without their power, goro. That’s why the luminous stone is important to us. It is our life source, goro. It was this stone that gave the first Gorons life, long, long ago, before any of the other races of Hyrule existed, before Hylia. That’s what the word ‘Goron’ means in our old language. ‘First Ones”’

“Wait, this is actually kind of ringing a bell with me,” Link muttered, taking another look at the cradle-shaped architecture of the rookery, arms crossed over his chest in thought. A conversation between himself and his Prince leapt back to the forefront of his mind. “Goddess Bloodstone? Is that what we’re talking about here?”
Yunobo’s smile visibly faded. “Well, some call it that, goro,” he intoned. “I think I can remember the Boss saying that people who call it by that name are people who treat it like a resource. Gorons don’t look kindly on such disrespect.”

“Oh,” Link muttered. Yunobo’s voice wasn’t so severe that he was passing judgement, but there was clear disappointment to be found, enough to leave the Hylian feeling like he’d awkwardly overstepped, committing a cultural taboo with only a few words.

“Link?” the Goron mumbled after a moment of pause. He’d brought his great, big hands together and was fiddling his fingers, eyes downcast. “I mean, Champion…”

“No, Link is fine.” The Hylian swatted one hand in dismissal, then turned to stand in front of Yunobo, looking attentively up at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Umm.. actually, can I ask you about something?” The Goron’s shining, blue eyes raised enough to look Link in the face for the quickest instant before his gaze faltered once more. “Something that has been on my mind since the last time you were here..”

“Yeah, sure.” The way Link spoke was calm and steady, though the young Goron’s very apparent nervousness was having an effect on Link’s own nerve. Thinking back on it now, he had been very impatient and needlessly tense with Yunobo the last time he was here.

This kid was probably about to call Link out for being a bully.

“I, um.. I’m not sure how to explain this, goro,” Yunobo began, his boyish voice a bit too soft, his words running together, “I think that I might have imagined seeing you die?”

That wasn’t what Link was expecting. He was silent for a solid five seconds, blinking in uncertainty, until he finally responded.

“What?”

“I know, it sounds crazy, goro.” Yunobo let out a little whine, in apprehension of judgement. His face fell into his palms, but he began spilling an explanation from between the fingers splayed over his face, “I haven’t been able to talk to anybody about it since it happened. I don’t know, maybe I’m losing my mind. I think I’m just– ever since Daruuk– I mean I didn’t get to know him really, but because he died, I’ve always been– uhh, I’m sorry, this isn’t making any sense.”

“Slow down, kid, slow down.” Even Link had to take a breath after that. “Just tell me what you saw.”

When Yunobo didn’t answer very quickly, Link outstretched a hand to awkwardly pat one of the boy’s brawny forearms, and he trembled beneath the Hylian’s comparatively tiny palm.

“Ohay,” Yunobo said, voice quiet and tremulous. His hands slowly fell away from his face, but his eyes were still clenched shut. “It happened when you came to help us with Vah Rudania. We were there at the summit of Death Mountain, you and me, goro.”

The Goron opened his watery eyes, laying his sight immediately on Link. His mouth pulled into a tight line in discomfort, but he forced himself to hold the Hylian’s gaze. He could hear the Boss speaking into his mind– Face your fears, don’t be weak, look your brothers in the eyes when you speak.

“You leapt down toward the Divine Beast, into the belly of the mountain, but you landed on a narrow, unstable ledge. I saw– I saw you..” His body shivered when the memory was forcefully
regurgitated and Yunobo took a shaky breath to combat the nausea sweeping over him. “I remember wanting to do something to help, but I couldn’t. There was no time. I saw you start to slip. I just stood there and watched, goro.”

Despite himself, Yunobo’s gaze fell to the floor again in shame. He stopped, mind working over everything. His eyes climbed as high as where Link’s hand still rested, against his arm. The Hylian was so unshaken, so impenetrable. Yunobo both failed to understand how it was possible, all while desperately trying to embody even an ounce of it.

Quietly, he continued, “. . . Your armor started to melt and then I saw you catch fire, clinging to the ledge for dear life. There was screaming, terrible screaming and I finally turned away. I covered my face. But then, there was a blinding, golden flash. It was like an explosion of light, but with enough force to knock me back, goro.”

It was at this point that Yunobo’s tone began to take on a sound more akin to utter doubt, letting some of his previous horror bleed away. “I rolled up, covering myself with the cloak of my magic and then when things were still again, I went back to the ledge, to look over. When I did, I saw you on the landing of Vah Rudania, walking inside the Divine Beast like nothing had happened, goro.”

He shrugged, eyes wet with tears that the heat consistently dried before they could fall. “I’ve been so confused about what I saw,” Yunobo said, breathing these words like a confession, like something to be utterly ashamed of. “Did I dream it all up? Am I crazy?”

“You didn’t dream it up. It all happened,” Link stated, voice low and bleak. He didn’t know what the hell he was meant to be feeling. There was so much and somehow, his idiot head didn’t know how to translate all of the sudden static. He was overwhelmed. He’d shoved the memory even deeper into the darkest pits of his psyche than the Goron boy had tried to.

And yet, as heartless and cruel as it was to be glad that somebody had watched him die, there was some relief in that level of validation. Link didn’t say as much, of course.

He offered the best comfort that he personally understood; the reassurance that Yunobo wasn’t losing his mind. “You’re not going crazy at all. I’m sorry that you saw that— but I’m here. I’m fine.”

“It happened, goro?” Yunobo whimpered, the fingers of one hand pressing against his lips, like maybe he wanted to bite at them. He didn’t appear any happier to possess this knowledge. If anything, he was greatly disconcerted at being informed that the gruesome thing he’d witnessed was totally real. “S— So you remember it?”

“Yeah,” Link muttered, subconsciously moving his palms to rub at his own arms, like the terrible sting of fire still existed somewhere under his skin. “It’s hard to forget.”

“I don’t understand,” the young Goron softly stated, shaking his head. “How?”

A bitter chuckle came out of the Champion at the Goron’s fretting confusion. By the Goddess, if that wasn’t a damn mood hearty enough to go around. “I don’t understand it that well myself,” he said. “There’s something inside that resurrects me, the same as the Blood Moon bringing fallen monsters back from death.”

Yunobo nodded, attempting to process it. In such simple terms, it probably made perfect sense to him. However, Link had to wonder if the young Goron had realized the unfairness of it— that of all the Champions to survive the Calamity, of all the Champions for death not to be synonymous with an ending, it was this one before him now, rather than the Grandfather who Yunobo had scarcely even gotten to know, the family he’d sorely been missing.
Link wondered if Sidon would think something similar, if.. when Link admitted this to him.

“I’m alright,” Link said in a renewed attempt to smooth this over, for Yunobo’s sake, at least. “Well.. maybe I’m not exactly ‘alright’. The things that have happened to me– nobody could be alright after.” He let out a tiny, exasperated huff; he wasn’t doing very well at this. “I’m alive and there’s no reason to worry about me.”

“Hmm,” the young Goron nodded, seeming to accept Link’s words, regardless of how fumbled they were. Shortly after, a small, gentle smile softly curved Yunobo’s lips. “Knowing what I know, it’s.. hard to believe all that you endured, just to help us. We owe you so much, goro,” he stated.

He sounded entirely sincere, like he genuinely admired Link’s grit and bravery and strength and other such things that Gorons tended to fixate on. Those kinds of praises made the Hylian itch in bitterness, but as long it gave Yunobo something to distract himself from the traumatizing experience he’d unwittingly gone through because of Link, who was the Hylian to say no?

“We can’t offer our luminous stone to the Zora people, but we can help them, goro,” Yunobo went on. “You said that their mines were damaged in a quake and that was the real reason for their shortage, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Link head snapped up in attention and his ears perked beneath his helm. “What are you getting at, kid?”

“Nobody can dig out a mine like a Goron,” the boy said with a sheepish, little laugh. “As a favor to you, we could volunteer a workforce to help the Zoras repair their mines. I’m sure we could get it done very quickly.”

“Wh- that- yes!” Link yelled in excitement, his sudden fervor spooking Yunobo ever so slightly, as the boy visibly flinched. He gave the Goron a playful slap in the arm to loosen him up; it only slightly hurt Link’s hand. “You’re brilliant, kid. That’s just what they need. That’s an even better idea than my original one.”

Yunobo had a grateful smile on his face and suddenly his blue eyes looked like watery jewels again. Somebody really needed to hug this kid, and since his suggestion had put Link into such a joyful mood, the Hylian figured it might as well be him.

With a leap, Link threw himself into Yunobo’s arms and the boy instinctively caught the much smaller Hylian, despite that he hadn’t at all been expecting this. The wriggling Hylian threw an arm around the boy’s shoulder, using his other hand to playfully muss Yunobo’s white hair, wringing a giggle out of him.

“We can bring it up to the Chief,” Yunobo said, still sniffling but also laughing. “I’m sure he’ll agree to it.”

“Alright, great.” Link affectionately patted his shoulder. “Now can you do one more favor for me? I need to find a good place to mine diamonds. Maybe you and I can go digging together?”

“Yes, of course, Link,” Yunobo readily agreed.

Chapter End Notes
Hello friends, if you're still reading in 2019, leave kudos, comments, and come follow me on Tumblr and Twitter. I love you all! Goodnight! <3

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Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

Upon Betaal's return to Fort Boko, she reunited with Dunma. Everything in their world was falling apart, and yet they were spared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sentries and guards outside of Fort Boko nearly failed to recognize their Sergeant, without her armor.

The entire fort was apparently on high alert, as the news about the Undercity exodus had finally reached them. That was all thanks to Guardsman Gaddison– now Sergeant Gaddison, head of intelligence, Betaal supposed.

Gaddison had made it back to the fort before Betaal; in that time, she had assembled the entirety of the garrison for the sake of announcing that there had recently been an attack on Zora’s Domain and that the traitors responsible were being sheltered on Mercay Island.

As a result, once Betaal found herself at the heavily guarded gate, her own guardsmen initially mistook her for a hostile from Mercay Island. Thankfully, however, she made it inside the fort without any further trouble, after they realized who she was.

The guardsmen responsible for stopping her probably wanted to feed themselves to the Calamity from the embarrassment they were feeling.

Betaal went straight to her tent, upon her return. She dearly hoped that nothing had been tampered with in her short absence, but nevertheless, she was prepared for the worst.

With a gentle motion, she pushed back the tent flap and entered the canvas-enclosed space that had been her home for months. Just inside, a dear, familiar face was seated at the desk where Betaal handled paperwork, reports and duty rosters.

Corporal Dunma– she’d been placed in charge while both Betaal and Gaddison were away. She wasn’t alone in her duties any longer, but she appeared to still be critically backed up in regards to work needing to be done. There was a wall of paperwork stacked atop the desk and Dunma was bent over a document of some kind, her forehead held in her palm while her writing hand dutifully scratched something out.

“Already took my tent over, eh?” Betaal muttered, the rough sound of her voice somewhat humorless despite her attempt to joke. “Geez, you sure didn’t mourn my absence for long, huh?”

The violet Zora’s head snapped up upon hearing Betaal’s familiar, raspy voice and her golden eyes went wide in surprise and disbelief. Dunma’s body chased the line of her gaze with haste; she shot up from the desk in such a hurry, the chair clattered backward, then she rushed in the direction of the woman standing in the doorway.

“Betaal!” she cried, her palms cupping the other woman’s face. Before even allowing the blue Zora
to utter a single word, Dunma bent down to kiss her face, nuzzling her forehead against Betaal’s.

“Betaal, I was so worried about you,” Dunma stated, the words coming out quiet and tremulous. The violet Zora’s cheeks were chapped and her eyes were red from tears; even so close, Betaal could already see as much. Carefully, the Sergeant drew the other woman into an embrace, holding her tightly, in reassurance as well as relief.

“The Guard Captain dismissed the complaint,” Betaal choked out. The reality of it had hardly registered yet in her own mind. There was so much wrong in the whole of their world at this very moment; the Undercity exodus, the subsequent arrests, the food shortage, the Waterblight– yet they had been spared. “He didn’t even take any issue with the relationship.”

“What?” Dunma said with an excited gasp, backing off slightly, just so that she could properly look the other woman in the face and see that she wasn’t lying. Betaal’s one golden eye was shining and her pretty lips held a bittersweet smile, a smile that said without words, ‘everything is okay.’

“I can hardly believe it,” Dunma stated, quiet, breathless, her chest deeply rising and falling, her eyes staring into space while one hand raised to be pressed against the rounded crest of her brow. Her doe-eyed gaze turned glassy with sudden tears of relief. “I had already written out a letter to my grandfather, asking him to request the aid of an Apostle serving under Dinraal for your sake, to contest any disciplinary action taken against you. Betaal– I’m so sorry, this whole damn thing was my fault.”

“It’s not your fault,” Betaal said without pause. Maybe Dunma held some of the responsibility, yet suffered none of the consequences, but that hardly mattered. Betaal was the elder in this situation, the superior, and the one with the most to lose. This was on her.

Letting out a sigh, the Sergeant shrugged off the bag of items from back home that she had slung over one shoulder, setting it aside. “Can we talk about that, though?” she asked, her voice remarkably steady, despite how very unsteady she was feeling.

“Of course,” Dunma replied. Her eyes were cast downward, looking at how her webbed fingers laced together and her thumbs fiddled. She then gestured toward the bed and said, “Let’s sit.”

Betaal nodded and followed the younger woman to the mattress toward the back of her tent. They seated themselves side by side at the edge, with a small gap of space between them. That small space felt like leagues more distance than it was.

“Dunma,” Betaal spoke gently, “of all the things that scared me throughout this entire ordeal, my greatest fear was always that.. maybe Gaddison was right. Maybe this relationship really was harmful for you. I know I’ve said this all before, but it hasn’t left my mind.”

Dunma nodded as the Undercity woman talked. Just as she mentioned, Betaal had said all of this before, but the younger woman had yet to find the right words to remedy these concerns. Perhaps the more she resisted, the surer Betaal grew that these worries were legitimate. Maybe they were and that couldn’t be denied, but there was also a chance that all of this was an over-simplification of something much more complex.

“Respectfully, I disagree,” Dunma responded, speaking slowly and carefully. “I feel that you’re the only person who treated me normally and allowed me to move on with my life after what happened. Did our relationship distract me from my grief? Yes, somewhat. But the grief that I feel isn’t something that a secret romance could ever just.. cover up. Dealing with it isn’t a fast process, but it isn’t something that I’m capable of ignoring or blocking out, either.”
The violet Zora paused, taking a breath and trying to gather her numerous, branching thoughts. “Only now, after some time coping, am I able to think more clearly about what happened on the night we took the fort. I genuinely believe that I have you to thank for that. You helped me get through the hardest part of my life to date. So I’ll never see this thing between us—whether it’s mentorship, friendship or a romantic relationship—as a negative.”

Once Dunma finished, she slowly turned her head in the other woman’s direction, to gauge Betaal’s reaction. The blue Zora had a soft smile on her face and her one eye was shining with tears that had wet half of her face while she had listened. Dunma let out a quiet laugh, nudging Betaal with her elbow. “You’re such a sap,” she muttered, in jest.

The older woman laughed over the accusation, wiping at her cheek and sniffling. She leaned toward Dunma, her shoulder bumping against her side. A calm sigh came from Betaal and she cleared her throat in order to speak up. “I’ll trust that you’re bright enough to judge whether or not something is healthy for you from now on. Even so, now that we have the option of treating this thing like a normal relationship, I think it would be best if we proceed with care and be mindful that it remains healthy, for both of us.”

“I agree. Knowing that there’s no more fear of repercussions, it’s already so much lighter,” Dunma breathed with a nod. She still had a soft smile on her pale lips as her eyes studied Betaal’s face. “So.. apart from the reason you were sent back to Zora’s Domain, how was it? Is it as bad back home as Gaddison made it sound?”

“It’s.. pretty bad, yeah,” Betaal uttered with a shrug. From the look of the Uppercity, one would hardly guess that anything was wrong at all. The walkways were dry, but maintained, and damaged areas of the city were blocked off in a natural-looking manner. The worst of it was the Undercity—the empty homes, the poisoned water. It was an eerie ghost of the home Betaal knew, growing up.

But Dunma probably wouldn’t understand how or why that was troubling, so Betaal moved on, something positive springing suddenly to mind while she recalled her Basilica visit the day prior.

“Oh, I did bring back a gift from home for you.” Betaal bounced to her feet, retrieving the previously discarded sling bag. She fussed inside the innermost pouch, sifting through the items contained within and easily finding the one she was searching for. She strode back over to where Dunma was waiting and proudly placed the gift in the violet Zora’s hands.

Dunma blinked in confusion, her fingers tightening around the familiar item, feeling its lovely, leather binding against her scales. “It’s my book,” she stated, though it came out audibly as a question.

“Yeah,” Betaal said, a grin spread so wide across her features that it rounded her cheeks and allowed her sharp mouthful of teeth to brightly shine. She gestured excitedly at the other Zora, saying, “Open it up and look inside the cover.”

Dunma did not question it, she simply obeyed. Just inside, on the plain, white space before the title page, there was a message penned in an unfamiliar handwriting and blazing, red ink. Dunma’s heart began to skip before she’d even properly processed the words, and she swallowed nervously, then read the text aloud.

“Dunma,” she started, her eyes drifting up to Betaal and catching another glimpse of her gleeful grin before returning to the page, “I’m so sorry that the last installment of The Cursed Girl series has taken so long to complete. I’ve heard that the relationship between General Kita and Lorelei is very personal to you, and that it would mean a lot to you for them to finally have an ending. I want to assure you that the ending is on the way—that’s my personal promise to you. Hang in there a little
while longer, because it also means a lot to me that I get everything just right. Kita and Lorelei
deserve only my very best, after all. Thank you for all of your love and your patience."

Dunma paused, her eyes lingering on the final word; it wasn’t a word really, but three capital letters
joined together to create a signature that the young woman had to tenderly brush with her fingertip,
just to be sure that it was real.


“I know someone who knows someone,” Betaal hurriedly answered, shrugging her shoulders and
swatting one hand. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? It’s nothing?” Dunma jumped to her feet, turning to face Betaal; she needed to look her in
the eye, because she couldn’t believe that she was being serious right now. “The Red Herring
doesn’t even accept fanmail, they’re so secretive. I would know, I’ve been trying to find a way since
before my second growth spurt,” she mumbled, shoulders slumping a bit in mild embarrassment.
“How in the void did you even communicate with them in order to get an autograph?”

“I said already– I know someone who knows someone,” Betaal answered, not meeting Dunma’s
gaze with her own. A nervous laugh came from her, but she flicked her hand in a dismissive gesture
once more. “Don’t think too hard about it. The important thing is that you like it. You do, right?”

Betaal upturned her one-eyed gaze, her cheeks still colored with a nervous flush as she peered
cautiously up at Dunma. The younger woman wore a warm expression, and a smile that widened
while the book in her arms was hugged tightly against her chest.

“You just brought me something that seemingly nobody else could have acquired,” she answered,
“and it’s also something that means the world to me. Thank you so much, Betaal.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello friends. I know that this chapter is very short. It was meant to include the LS
Festival as well, but I didn’t quite get it finished in time. As a result, another new chapter
should be ready by this weekend, and it is most likely going to be a big one. :)

Thanks for reading, everyone.
You can also follow me on social media for more content!

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Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

The Lightning Striker Festival had come to Zora’s Domain, bringing with it food and fellowship enough to unite a disjointed people. Even a festival, however, could not amend the much, much deeper problems that the Zora people were facing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When the first Lightning Striker Eel swam upstream to spawn, that was always considered to be the final day of autumn in Zora’s Domain. The Zora people ushered in winter on the banks of the Zora River, where their warriors proved their mettle by the light of the setting sun, taking on the mighty eels.

People young and old crowded the river shore from Zora’s Domain, clear to the Bank of Wishes. The scent of smoke was already in the air, from the grills being warmed back home, ready for the tender meat of the seasonal quarry. It was a sweet smell, fragrant with the burning leaves of mighty thistle and the roasted fruit which would be used to glaze the barbequed meat.

As always, the young Prince and his Knight kicked off the event, as the first warriors in the water to face off against the eels. They performed as flawlessly as they had days prior, when they captured one of the Lightning Strikers to test it for the Waterblight. Today, however, their victory was celebrated by the cheers of gathered crowds and the rhythmic pounding of congratulatory drums. The joyous outcry filled the surrounding canyons, reverberating all around them, until the clamor could be felt on their scales.

Sidon and Brivere parted ways peacefully, following their team effort; the Knight had a previous engagement and the Prince was required to host the entire hunt. Ranks of Goddess Knights and Knights of the Royal Order, even warriors from the city guard each took their turn slaying the dangerous prey, until there were reed rafts piled high with golden-scaled eels and the promise of full bellies for tonight in Zora’s Domain.

The hunt dragged on as the twilight waned into evening. Winters were particularly dark in the canyon shroud, so the crowds lining the river lit tiny lanterns on the march back home. Sidon was a regal sight in his winter garb; heavy violet material that twisted around his neck and draped over his shoulders, accented by jingling silverscale adornments.

He led the march back to the city, trailing behind him a bustling crowd of people, all singing and drumming together, creating a joyful white noise that filled the air. They formed a meandering flow of tiny, blue lights that stretched as far as he could see and around the bend. The lanterns reflected off the rushing, black water, illuminating the winter shadow as the night began to grow foggy with mist rising up from the river.

Every other Zora was helping to haul the rafts which were overflowing with food. It was a group effort, one that everyone happily lent a hand with, like the festival air had a maddening, pleasant effect that turned them all charitable. Sidon couldn’t help but think, on nights like these, one could almost be fooled into believing that his people actually cared about each other.
When they made it back to Zora’s Domain from the hunt, the party crowd fully occupied the city square, which was beautifully decorated in tones of metallic gold, and lit by lanterns and giant fire pits where the eels would be cooked. There were actually some tourists to be seen; Hylians, Gorons, Gerudo, Sheikah. That struck the Prince as quite the surprise, but he walked all the more tall, giving each and every guest a charming smile.

The city guard was out in force, if only to maintain order and prevent any further incident, such as the one that occurred while Sidon was still asleep. The Prince couldn’t help but notice that the Guard Captain’s Lieutenant was closely tailing him, even giving the Prince a little nod and a wink when Sidon caught him staring.

“It’s quite a festival, my lord,” the Guard Lieutenant called over the noise of the crowd as he came to stand at the Prince’s side. “You really pulled it off.”

Sidon shook his head, unconvinced but smiling nonetheless. “It was nothing, really. A minimal effort on my part.”

“But a maximum payoff,” the Lieutenant blithely stated, with a shrug that rattled his armor. “Just look at how many people are happy and fed tonight, all thanks to your minimal effort.”

“Hmm, you’re quite right.” Sidon nodded his head. He wanted to be satisfied, truly, but he also didn’t want to fool himself into thinking that saving a little festival was enough, or even close to it. Much, much more was required of him. He spared the armored Zora another glance, bending himself a bit lower to make certain that his voice carried. “Wherever is the Guard Captain? Not that you aren’t perfectly capable, but I was hoping to see him.”

“Oh, Bazz?” the Lieutenant laughed. “As soon as he heard that there was Sheikah Rice Wine being sold at the festival, he decided that this was going to be his well-deserved night off.”

“I see,” Sidon said with a smile, straightening and looking over the crowd once more. There were people still drumming who had been joined by other Zoras with bells and tiny symbols. There was even a Sheikah who was happily piss drunk, playing some kind of stringed instrument in a crowd of much taller Zoras, while a much less drunk Gerudo woman danced in the nearby firelight. All of this was chorused by festival chatter and the hiss of meat being thrown over the open flames, sizzling and dripping with juices that made the fires reach upward.

“I think I’m all partied out, if you can believe it,” the Prince stated pleasantly, settling his shining, golden gaze on the armored man at his side. “You’re free to guard me in front of the palace, if it suits you.”

The palace stairs were swarming with Knights of the Royal Order, the ones who served under the First Knight and Sidon’s father; the Prince doubted they had readied themselves with any real reason behind it, other than as a show of force while there were outsiders in the city. The Guard Lieutenant must have felt a bit unnecessary, because he stopped short and allowed Sidon a fair bit of space.

In front of the palace and out of the crowd, the air was much colder. Sidon’s breath created little, foggy puffs and he bundled his arms to conserve warmth before the chill left him a drowsy mess. He had never really been a fan of winter nor the sleepy haze it brought to Zora’s Domain, but this year he was going to make an exception. The rain would wash his world clean of the Waterblight, so long as they could find the source.

A tremor of the walkways announced the approach of the King, effectively interrupting Sidon’s thoughts. He turned to regard his father, dipping his head before the colossal Zora in quiet respect. In turn, the other man let out a soft chuckle at his son’s formality. Even Dorephan’s gentle laughter was
a warm, booming sound that made the rest of the festival seem like a distant din.

“Sidon— have you eaten yet, my son?” he asked. It wasn’t quite a question so much as a demand, because he extended a giant hand down to the smaller Zora, offering him a plate of eel steak with sweet glaze. It was so tiny to be balanced so perfectly in Dorephan’s huge claws and Sidon smiled as he took the plate from his father's hand.

“No, I hadn’t,” he answered. Normally, he wasn’t fond of eel meat; it was so soft that it felt less than solid, but Sidon knew better than to be finicky at a time like this. Furthermore, he had very vivid memories of his father finding ways to trick a much sillier, much younger version of him into eating things that he didn’t like, so he didn’t wish to test his luck. “Thank you, Father.”

“You have a troubled look on your face,” the King stated with a dismal ‘hmph’ that belied his otherwise warm expression. “It’s such a rare sight, for our troubles to steal away your bright smile. I know they are numerous and severe when that happens.”

“I want to believe that everything will be fine. ‘Have faith.’ That’s always what I say,” Sidon spoke, his tone openly laden with concern, but not so much that he appeared completely weak and directionless. It was just enough to bare a shred of vulnerability before a man who knew these exact worries with even greater clarity. Sidon let out a tiny scoff, poking the food with his utensil and eating a small bite. Once he’d swallowed, he continued, “I believe in our people, Father, I do. But I’m beginning to think that my blind faith was just naivety by more righteous phrasing.”

“You believe that things are falling apart, because times are hard.” Dorephan stood straight, crossing his arms over his big, barrel chest. “You think that this is a storm that our people cannot weather, is that so?”

“Maybe some of our people,” Sidon replied with thinly veiled bitterness; he was beginning to sound very much like his Hylian lover, in Link’s absence. The Prince heaved a sigh, his head drooping forward. “..but clearly not all.”

“Hmm,” Dorephan hummed with a nod, painfully neutral in a way that Sidon couldn’t comprehend. “In my experience, Sidon, especially when it comes to our people, change is never painless, nor easy. We Zora can be, for a lack of a better word, stubborn.”

Sidon took another bite from the eel steak, teeth razor sharp against a crisp bit of sweet, smokey meat; in all likelihood, hunger was dampening his mood further. As he chewed, he let out a little snort of laughter, shaking his head and flicking his tail from side to side. Stubborn was a damn understatement when it came to describing the Zora people. He upturned his head, gazing in thought at the lofty height which his father stood at. Dorephan had a stern look on his features.

“It’s comfortable when everything stays the same,” Dorephan went on, meeting his son’s eye. “But when times begin to change, the good is always hard fought for. You can still have faith in our peoples’ ability to find what’s right and make it through the dark times, as long as you’re there fighting for that result alongside them. That’s our job as leaders, before everything else.”

Sidon couldn’t tell if his father was speaking of his own rule during the Sheikah genocide and the Calamity, or if he was speaking of the rule of his mother before him: the giant Zora queen who held the throne for six hundred years, ruling with a iron fist. Sidon could only imagine that she was a lot to measure up to, both figuratively and literally.

“Even from my position, I feel helpless,” Sidon spat. Thinking on it now, he could understand how his grandmother’s overwhelming authoritarian rule had made everything.. simpler. Not right, but simpler.
“Because you are only one person,” Dorephan breathed, nodding his head in dismal agreement. “Even a prince is only one person; even a king.”

That easily, a matter of contention was drawn up from beneath the surface in Sidon’s warring psyche. “The Hylian Champion is one person, yet he is expected not to feel helpless on his own,” he asserted, sharp teeth gleaming with the snarl on his features. His anger burst from him like a flash flood, then dried away just as easily as he remembered all that his beloved Champion was doing for his people.

“He seems to me as though he could move mountains with his own two hands, even on days when he doesn’t want to,” the Prince spoke much more gently, shifting his gaze to peer wistfully across the festival crowd; his people, Uppercity and Undercity, had come together to share in the merriment. He wondered what his wayward Champion was doing right now. He was going to regret missing a festival centered around seasonal food.

Sidon breathed a sigh, taking another couple of bites from his plate. Something inside him felt soft all of a sudden. “..Link traveled to Kakariko Village and acquired food relief from the Sheikah people, as thanks to us for our aid against raiders in Hateno Village,” he explained, his words shining with sudden pride. “He is, right now, somewhere in Eldin Province, speaking to the Goron tribe on our behalf, in the hopes of acquiring luminous stone so that we can finally make repairs to our domain. How is he so strong, Father? I wish I knew.”

Dorephan just chuckled like his son was a naive child for even needing to ask. “It’s because he cares about you that he goes so far.”

“He loves our people,” Sidon stated.

“He loves you.”

There was nothing Sidon could say to contest that fact. His head dropped forward again, his eyes blindly staring at the half eel steak remaining on his plate. He offered a little nod of agreement.

Dorephan reached out to press one fingertip to his son’s shoulder, applying a gentle, reassuring pressure. “Enjoy the small victories for now, my son,” he said, voice warm and hopeful. With his other hand, he gestured at the city square and the numerous people smiling and dancing around the ever poised statue of Mipha. “You single-handedly saved this festival. These people are fed and happy and together because of your efforts.”

“Yes, Father,” Sidon answered with another gentle nod of his head. He didn’t wish to be ungrateful, but as his eyes went to the hovering image of his dear sister, he couldn’t choke down the growing certainty of his own insufficiency.

Dorephan took his leave soon after, leaving Sidon with a terrible, lonely emptiness to accompany his assortment of doubts. Being alone with his own thoughts was terrible, and yet, more than ever, he had nobody else to turn to.

He wondered when Link would return. He would have very much appreciated his company on a night such as this. Sidon had to bitterly laugh at himself for his own angst; only he could be surrounded by people yet feel completely isolated.

He had to ask himself—did he not also love his own people as much as the Hylian Champion did? Was his love not potent enough to save them? Or was it simply as he’d always suspected, he wasn’t good enough.
Maybe not.

Even so, he had to be. He had to fight for his people and he had to fight for his love, his love who was fighting so hard for him.

On another side of Zora’s Domain, in a courtyard where the nobles had gathered for the sake of enjoying the festivities without mingling with the commoners, Estuu was in the company of his new acquaintance and employee, Isthio.

Isthio was adorned in even finer silks and jewels than Estuu was used to seeing him in, and by Isthio’s insistence, Estuu was himself dressed in expensive, Zora tailoring: draping fabric and shining silverscale. He still carried a shoulder bag for important items, but Isthio had offered him one to match his current ensemble.

They stood together, socializing with their fellow nobles, all of which held glasses of imported sake in hand. Isthio acted as a mouthpiece for Estuu while scores of aristocrats greeted the new Prince of Drinks. These people were all smiles and laughter, as though they cared about Estuu, as though they’d conveniently forgotten about his whore mother and his merciless bowmanship, and every other bit of gossip he’d garnered over the years.

It was all very... pretentious. And while the resentful part of Estuu despised the fake behavior and how clearly biased these people were in how they placed their favor, another part of him was secretly enjoying the sudden praise and adoration, even if it was patently false. Actually, that was probably also the resentful part of him, too.

“The imported drinks were a glaring success,” Isthio cooed as he and Estuu began toward a quieter part of the courtyard for Estuu to have a short break away from everything. The older Zora let out a proud chuckle, tipping his head back as he did and jingling his ornate adornments. “It feels wonderful to have business back on track. Now if our incompetent City Guard could finally take care of this Waterblight, life could go back to normal.”

“Mmm,” Estuu hummed, nodding his head and swirling the liquid in his own glass. Apparently age restrictions didn’t really apply to people at his station, but he mostly carried the drink around as an accessory. He had tried the sake but it tasted awful. Even so, the new Prince of Drink couldn’t properly make his debut without, well, a drink.

The boy perched himself atop one of the low-hanging garden walls, between a sweeping curtain of evergreen ivy. He could still see the crowds below, bouncing to the sound of drums in the Domain square. It had yet to thin to a more comfortable level, but Estuu’s desire to brave the noise for the sake of playing some of the festival games was growing. He was getting ever so slightly bored with basking in the laughable admiration of his fellow nobles.

Without a word, Estuu outstretched his one arm to Isthio, handing the glass off to the other man in disinterest. He let out a peep, then gestured toward the square, pointedly indicating a table below, where other young Zoras were chiseling fish-shaped charms out of thin, stone tablets.

Isthio laughed it off, nodding in understanding. “Right. I’m sorry, young sir;’’ he stated in his feathery purr of a voice, “I forget that you’re still a child at the end of the day. Well, have no fear, I can easily cover for you.”

“Nyehh.” The young Zora made a sound, playfully poking his tongue between his lips at Isthio before scurrying off.

Estuu found his way down the spiral walkways to the main level with ease. He wove his way...
through the crowd, perusing the games available to be played; many of them, however, would inevitably require the use of two hands.

He paused wistfully to watch others participate in a target shooting trial. There were Zoras of roughly his own age, then some others who were still youthful by Zora terms but had reached their full, adult height. One young Zora man with blue scales and a brown, leather cuirass was in the lead. He had a young Sheikah man at his side who’s score was nearly enough to catch up, and Estuu could see from where he stood that they were exchanging some sort of playful banter, but he couldn’t make any of it out over the noise.

When the contest was finished, the blue Zora took the prize, but he quickly handed it off to his companion, planting a surprise kiss on the young Sheikah man’s cheek. Both of them laughed as they ventured off and disappeared into the festival crowd. Estuu watched until they were out of sight, his head cocked to one side in vague curiosity.

It took a bit more exploration on Estuu’s part before he discovered a game that he could still participate in: a kite racing game that would involve swimming and pulling a kite that was crafted to look like a big, golden eel.

Estuu was given the chord to his own kite as he lined up at the grassy, river bank to join in the next round. He held tight with his one hand, twisting the line around his fist a few times while he waited for the signal to begin the race.

That very signal soon came– the sharp ping of a bell rang out and all of the Zoras at the starting place dove into the water, paddling hard through the bubbly froth of their initial decent. They had to start strong in order to get their kites aloft; if the kites crashed, they’d be disqualified.

Estuu hadn’t foreseen how much more difficult swimming would be with even just the drag from something as seemingly light as a kite, but while the golden creature danced in the wind above him, the boy fought to keep pushing forward.

In desperation, Estuu grabbed the chord in his teeth and rolled onto his back. For some reason, he’d always been better at swimming belly-up. He continued to kick with all of his might, paddling with his one hand, catching up to the pack, bypassing some of the other Zoras, all while watching his eel squirm and dart past the other kites, dancing freely against the black sky.

Estuu dipped underwater then darted back toward the surface in a flying leap, water splashing around him in droplets while he dove for the finish line. At nearly the very same time, another small, copper-scaled girl with a speckled topfin burst from the depths, rolling onto land and over the finish line.

“That one is going to be difficult to call,” an elderly, red Zora called aloud, tilting his head and stroking his chin in thought. Estuu recognized the old man; an Apostle by the name of Kapson. He seemed to really enjoy festivals and events such as these, because he always volunteered as a judge.

But the old man wasn’t the only Zora that was familiar to Estuu. He sharply spun on heel to regard the girl who had crossed the finish line next to him. She was an Undercity girl around his age, with shiny, copper scales, and she was looking at him as intently as he was staring at her.

“Hey, it’s you!” she called out abruptly, pointing at him like he was some kind of vulgar abomination. He let out an offended squawk and stuck his tongue out at her.

“Now, now, you two,” Kapson sighed when he came over with the prize: a shiny, gold ribbon, “getting into a brawl with one another won’t prove anything. As for the winner– I’m going to have
to say, it was young Estuu here.”

“Estuu?” the Undercity girl repeated. “Oh! So that’s your name! You never told me what it was before!”

He nodded to the Undercity girl in confirmation; her name was Neydri, as Estuu recalled. She also had an older sister by the name of Zala, who appeared from the crowd soon after Neydri completed the race. The older of the two took her sister by the hand, but Neydri didn’t allow herself to be pulled away yet, now that she’d run into her weird friend from the Uppercity.

Kapson pinned the ribbon to Estuu’s garment and the boy gave it a reverent gaze. It was very pretty, but Estuu had the distinct feeling that Kapson had unintentionally misjudged the finish. Estuu leapt from the water first, but Neydri’s exit had been much more graceful, so she was the one who actually landed and crossed the finish line first.

He had it all in his mind, running in slow motion; she had definitely won the race.

With a deep breath, Estuu unpinned the ribbon from his own garment and sauntered over to offer it to Neydri, instead. She was wearing a cute, braided necklace made from some kind of gold material, so the ribbon matched it nicely.

“Your friend’s sense of generosity strikes again,” Zala said with a nervous smile. She prodded her sister in the back, saying, “Thank him.”

“No, he just happens to know the same thing that I know,” Neydri brightly chirped with a grin, her fingers fiddling happily with the ribbon, “–that I actually won the race.”

Estuu nodded his head, albeit weakly and with a little grumble. He fell in at Neydri’s side as the two sisters went on to explore the rest of the festival events. Neydri talked a mile a minute, filling Estuu in on all of her other festival game exploits, completely unprompted and utterly unhindered by his silence.

Estuu gathered his bag up while they left the area, eventually digging out his notepad in order to present the sisters with his most burning question.

‘Where have you two been?’ he scribbled, holding the pad out for the sisters to read. Neydri was too busy chattering and staring proudly at her ribbon to notice, but Zala glanced rather nervously at the paper, squinting her eyes before averting her gaze entirely.

Maybe his writing was still too sloppy? Isthio could understand it because he was used to reading every other Zora’s pathetic cucco scratch.

So instead, Estuu tucked the notepad away and reverted back to his usual method of trying to gesture until he got his point across. When he had both sisters’ attention, the scarlet boy pointed to them, then shrugged his shoulders, tilting his head in a curious way.

“Oh!” Neydri bounced on her toes like this was a game. “You wanna know our names?”

Estuu shook his head, his forefins swinging as he did. Of course he didn’t want to know their names; he remembered them!

“Umm,” Neydri hummed, poking her tongue between her lips in thought. “You don’t remember where we live?”

Again, Estuu shook his head. He remembered exactly where they lived.
“You want to know how old we are!” the young girl exclaimed like she’d figured it out, then she went about explaining the answer, even though Estuu was still vehemently shaking his head. “Well, I’m thirty two, but I’m tall for my thirties and Zala is almost fifty, but it’s funny because she’s short for her age.”

This wasn’t working.

“Maybe he tried to come and visit us, like you asked him to the last time you saw him,” Zala suggested in a very calm tone. “And if that’s the case, perhaps he didn’t know where we were. Also– I’m forty six, not ‘almost fifty.’”

Estuu pointed to Zala and nodded in a vigorous way, letting out an exasperated puff as he did.

“Ohhh,” Neydri hummed, nodding her head like all this was very sensible and obvious. Then, without missing a beat, she provided a very frank and calmly spoken answer. “We were kidnapped by an evil Apostle.”

Estuu’s head turned so quickly in reply that he nearly swatted himself in the face with his own forefins. He didn’t meet his friend’s eye, but he was quietly blinking in confusion and concern as though he’d totally misheard what Neydri said.

And while Neydri didn’t notice her quiet friend’s plight, Zala was already clearing her throat in order to help clarify.

“You know how the people of the Undercity were all being held in containment within the Basilica? Well, a few days later, a vile Apostle woman went from home to home with a band of Goddess Knights and they took all of the Undercity children from their homes, including us.” Zala explained, a dull, tired look in her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders in a half-hearted way, letting out a sigh. “Most of them were placed with other merchant class families in the Uppercity. We were eventually set free, on account of me being old enough to care for us.”

Estuu was certain that he recalled the vile, Apostle woman in question, as he’d had the misfortune of running into her. He remembered her pallid, sandy skin and her bleak, black eyes, boring into him and forcing him to meet her stare.

“They called it ‘crisis rehoming,’” Neydri commented in that overly honest, up-front way that she tended to. “But we all knew what we really were. Free servants.”

“That’s enough, Neydri,” Zala said, giving her mouthy little sister a warning nudge. “Let’s just enjoy the festival.”

In practically a fit, Estuu tore his notepad out of his bag again, his hand furiously moving as he scratched out a note. He tried very hard to make the lines and curves of each letter neat, for readability’s sake, but it was a difficult task with how passionate he was all of a sudden.

When he finished, he presented his note to the sisters, trying to give them a determined expression. He probably just looked angry.

‘Come and stay with me. I can feed you both and keep you safe,’ the note read.

For a second time, Zala just stared at the paper like she was unsure what to do or say. Her gaze drifted quickly away and she forced a smile to her face, but said nothing at all. It was Neydri who, after an odd silence, looked at Estuu’s note and exclaimed, “Oh are those words? I wonder what they say!”
Zala’s hand immediately went to her face, to shroud it beneath her palm in embarrassment. A deep sigh came from her, then she let her hand drop aside when she turned her head to face Estuu. “I’m sorry, young one, I’m afraid that we aren’t literate,” she said with audible shame and resentment, perhaps even with mild annoyance that this silly, upperclass boy had taken his own education for granted by presuming that they had been given the same opportunities.

Estuu was flabbergasted. Zala was older than him and Neydri was close to his age. Why couldn’t they read?

This brought up old dilemmas in the boy’s mind. Even at his young age, he’d learned unspoken lessons from the people around him that Undercity Zoras were unintelligent, quick to anger, and weak of discipline and morality.

Zala and Neydri, however, were living proof that most of those things were untrue, and even without the ability to read, they didn’t seem unintelligent by Estuu’s measure. They weren’t that, nor emotionally unsound, nor morally defunct.

Estuu thought back to his lessons in the Basilica, lessons that had been postponed until the end of the Water Blight. He remembered with ease the Apostles who tutored him and the other young Zoras who attended; they were all Uppercity nobles.

That’s when everything clicked in Estuu’s mind— they couldn’t read because they weren’t taught. And they weren’t taught, because their lives were valued less than those of people at higher stations. And in order to maintain the pervasive illusion of superiority for those from the upperclass, the Undercity people had to be forcefully made to fit all the stereotypes.

If not, everyone would be able to clearly see that it was all a farce.

Estuu let out another frustrated huff, shoving his notepad into his bag. He gestured for his friends to follow him, in the hopes that he could lead them to his home. They likely wouldn’t get the picture that he was inviting them to stay, but they didn’t have to. Estuu could ask Isthio or Brivere to read his note and explain.

He hoped that his friends would agree.

Elsewhere, two unlikely companions had found a place tucked aside to enjoy the festival. Brivere had away’d to the Basilica after his earlier hunt, in order to carry Kree topside, as it was his opinion that she could use the entertainment. They decided to watch the event from aloft, loitering for hours in one of the overhead, stone gazebos that hovered above the main square, all while they consumed far too many drinks.

Brivere wasn’t sure if Kree was aware, but this was the exact, same place where they had gone to watch the funeral for the fallen Goddess Knights, as well. The view certainly couldn’t be denied. All of the events were perfectly visible to them, without any necessity to mingle with the impassible crowd.

“So his advice on the matter was for me to ‘select an unofficial team from the available candidates in order to see what they’re capable of.’” Brivere was explaining the most recent Royal Order business, while Kree listened with interest. He turned up his glass, his sharp fingerscales clicking against the ceramic, and he finished the last of his drink with only the faintest wrinkle of his features. “And that’s why I have to go tomorrow to cut one of the newest recruits loose. She’s going to be quite disappointed to learn that her promotion was impermanent.”

“Hm,” Kree hummed, adjusting herself atop the ledge, “she’ll be disappointed, but.. considering that
every Knight from our previous team was killed in the line of duty, it’s for the best. If she isn’t ready, she could die.”

“I worry that I might have judged her too harshly for her ‘first mission jitters,’” Brivere commented with a dull sigh, leaning against the rail and letting his head fall into his palm. Was he so different on his first mission? Perhaps not as visibly. “Nonetheless, I’m grateful for your advice.”

“Not a problem,” Kree chuckled, still adjusting herself where she was seated and wobbling slightly. “I’m always happy to give people my opinions. I’m practically a professional at having opinions.”

Brivere raised his head in order to give the other Zora a critical stare. How many drinks had Kree consumed already? Five? Six? He let out a sigh as he straightened, only barely resisting the urge to hold onto Kree, for safety’s sake.

“Don’t get so inebriated that you fall from that ledge,” he warned her. He was grateful that she didn’t know him quite well enough to recognize that he’d taken the same disciplinary tone that he often took with his mischievous sibling.

As though in challenge, Kree leaned back and let out a bubble of laughter, her one hand gripping a nearby column, the only thing keeping her in place. “You’re the one who got flushed after two drinks,” she hissed in that mean, joking way that she did, another chuckle sputtering from her as she raised her glass to her lips. “Worry about yourself, lightweight.”

“Hnn,” Brivere groaned, opting to remain silent, otherwise. He supposed that playful derision was at least a step above hateful derision. Also, if anything, the Hylian Champion had hardened the golden Zora against such behavior.

Brivere’s resistence wasn’t suitable to Kree’s desire to be a thorn in his side, however. She elbowed him in the gills, a grin on her face that dimpled her white cheeks. “How are you made of ten tons of muscle, but you can’t hold your damn liquor?” she teased.

“It must be inexperience,” he concluded, unperturbed.

Predictably, Kree laughed again, apparently unaware of the soft flush on her own face- that offered Brivere some secret satisfaction. Then, when the woman quieted, her expression turned suddenly soft and pensive; she didn’t keep the reason to herself for long.

“Strata was a lightweight, too. I could always outdrink him,” Kree stated, with a nostalgic warmth to her voice that the drink had likely brought on. She chuckled and it was a coarse, sad sound that she quickly drowned beneath another hearty swig from her glass. “He tried to make bullshit excuses about his mother finding out, or not wanting to be hungover for training the next day, but.. it was always nonsense.”

“Were the two of you friends or rivals?” Brivere asked, trying to be gentle in how he proceeded, while also keeping it light. The last thing he wanted to be was the person who clammed up the moment somebody else showed an ounce of vulnerability. Unfortunately, though, he wasn’t exactly an expert and lacked emotional intelligence. “Your relationship sounds almost unpleasant in some ways.”

Kree hardly noticed the other Zora’s awkwardness, and in fact seemed almost eager to talk more about it. “Nah, friends are just like that sometimes,” she happily asserted, shrugging her shoulders. “They ride each others’ asses over nothing, because they love each other.”

“It doesn’t sound like love to me,” Brivere said with a little smile. He brushed one of his long
forefins over his shoulder, trying to think back to what it had been like to be friends with Prince Sidon. He doubted that he could hold that particular example to the same standard because his relationship with Sidon had always had undertones of formality. In the end, he shrugged, swirling the liquid in his glass with an idle motion of his hand. “..I suppose I’m not the best judge.”

There was a pause. Kree didn’t say anything at all in reply and the silence dragged on until Brivere turned his sharp, golden gaze in her direction, in questioning. When he did, she met his gaze, something in her features imploring, something else distant and resigned.

“..You still haven’t decided your answer, have you?” she asked, her voice bitterly empty.

It caught Brivere by surprise. Maybe that was her intention.

“No, I haven’t,” he answered honestly, his gaze shifting to watch the joyful crowds below them. He considered his words for another moment, then went on. “A lot of things seem very uncertain to me at the moment. Even small steps in new directions feel like blind leaps. I’m not used to feeling so unprepared for...” he trailed off.

Brivere brought one hand to the crest of his brow, his palm applying gentle pressure and his eyes squeezing shut. A blinding pain had erupted there from out of nowhere, and nothing in his knowledge indicated that these drinks should’ve caused such a thing. Not until tomorrow morning, in any case.

“..unprepared for everything,” he finished his previously hovering statement.

Kree spared Brivere a glance, looking him over, then she returned her gaze to the movement of the crowd below. “Well, it seems like that’s a common response to my proposals, anyway.” She let out a little scoff. “Nobody else has accepted yet, either.”

Even after the Zora woman finished speaking, the silence dragged on. Again, she offered the golden Zora a concerned glance. He was bent against the rail with his head in his hand, his chest expanding and contracting in deep, steady breaths.

“Alright, Brivere, if you’re trying to change the subject, you’re really overselling it,” she half-groaned with a breathy laugh. Her accusation did not change his behavior, however, nor did he reply. “Brivere, come on. You can’t be that drunk.”

For an extended moment, Brivere remained completely unresponsive, until eventually he faltered, his grip against the rail not enough to brace him when he slid to his knees, hands holding onto the nearest solid surface as though his life depended on it.

A nightmarish assortment of images was racing through his agony-striken mind; Prince Sidon, teeth bared and trident raised in deadly combat, a rushing blur of movement, weapons clanking and scraping together, a beastly, gurgling roar that Brivere could feel painfully shaking him. The blue sky turned dark and color rinsed away from his world as a lightning arrow crackled in a monster’s grasp. The bowstring was drawn tight, the arrow flew, and all breath was stolen from the Prince, so that not even a yelp of pain escaped when the arrow pierced his chest.

The awful truth of it was over and done, an inevitability now and soon to come.

Brivere could feel his heart turning heavy and sinking, loss blinding him to everything while the reality of it rinsed over his trembling frame. Words unsaid, bonds not mended, futures stolen. The most delicate and impermanent thing in all their cruel world– life, itself– ceased.

Prince Sidon. No longer could these words be used to address a man, but merely to invoke a memory.
riddled with pain and painted over with glossier phrasing; heroic, selfless, noble, courageous.

Empty words. Just like his name. Just like his memory. Just like his existence. Just like the hearts of those who had loved him.

“S-Sidon,” Brivere mumbled, voice pitched low and barely escaping. His eyes were open, his pupils wide dots that turned his eyes black, but he couldn’t see the present reality directly before him. He couldn’t see the Zora woman who’d clambered, in a start, down from her seat and to the ground to pick him up. He couldn’t hear her voice calling to him, nor feel her hands shaking him and softly slapping his cheeks to bring him back from whatever terrible place he’d gone away to.

“No, no, no–” he mumbled, shaking his head.

“Hey, hey, Brivere, calm down!” Kree hissed, her hands braced against his shoulders. His entire body was quaking beneath her palms and she watched as his eyes turned glassy, only for crimson tears to trace his cheeks. “...sweet merciful Hylia, you’re bleeding.”

At last, Brivere stilled, resurfacing from his vision with a breath, like some kind of mammal after a deep dive. His eyes moved back and forth in disoriented confusion and his expression went blank as rapidly as he seized his every visible weakness and concealed them somewhere far from the light.

A young couple who had hidden from sight outside of the gazebo for the sake of kissing in secret now stood on the threshold, looking on to see this man on the ground with blood streaking his face. Brivere failed to notice them, but Kree did not. She turned and snapped the words, “There’s nothing to see here, so stop gawking!”

“Is.. he okay?” one of them shyly asked, backing off a few paces, even so.

Brivere raised a shaky hand to his face, swiping the backside across his cheeks and smearing his wrist with blood. He stared down at it with confusion, but not without some keen familiarity. This wasn’t the first time that this had occurred.

“What is happening to me?” he whispered, addressing himself first and foremost and posing a question that belied the growing fear that he did, in fact, know precisely.

“Is this the Water Blight?” Kree asked with some amount of fearful hesitation. For a few moments she looked on Brivere like he was something that could infect her with the slightest touch. Then, swallowing down her trepidation, she tore the winter shawl that had been draped around her and proceeded to wipe the red stains from Brivere’s cheeks.

“No.. this is something else,” he answered with certainty, trying to brush Kree’s attention aside.

“Stop struggling,” she hissed while Brivere continued to turn his head and push her hands away.

“You don’t have to–”

“Do you want to look like a crazy person? Because that’s what you look like.”

“I can handle it myself.”

“Or you could shut up and let me do it,” she insisted, all but crawling on top of him in order to assert herself. The scowl she was wearing was from frustration on top of worry, but thankfully the stubborn Knight stilled, though it was probably because he was afraid of accidentally knocking a legless girl onto her back. Kree was happy enough to use that to her advantage and his disadvantage.
“There, tough guy. Now you’re good,” she stated with a huff once she finished. Brivere’s cheeks were still somewhat pink from the stain or perhaps the friction, but he appeared natural, rather than horrifying, and that was the ultimate goal. “We should get you home so you can rest.”

Brivere chuckled, then without nearly enough thought, he blurted the words, “You’re going to get me home, then?”

Kree motioned like she was fully intent on slapping this audacious bastard in the face, but stopped short. “Shut it, asshole,” she hissed, her pale lips curling to show her sharp teeth as she spoke.

“I thought you said that friends were meant to ‘ride each other’s asses,’” Brivere idly observed, giving no indication of whether the underlying suggestion of friendship was intentional or not. He reached for the railing, fumbling slightly before his eventual success, then he pulled himself back to his feet.

Kree remained on the ground, lamenting their spilt drinks for a few seconds longer, before she, too, pulled herself back up to the railing in order to match Brivere’s height.

“I’m okay,” the golden Zora said, as though he had any evidence to back that flimsy statement. A dull pain lingered behind his eyes and his stomach was twisting with all new anxiety, but there was comfort to be found in willful dishonesty. “Whatever it was, it’s over now.”

At the very same time, outside of Zora’s Domain, another hapless soul was suffering from a similar, unexplainable lapse. The young, Undercity guardsman, Tetra, was on duty patrolling the upper perimeters, when a terrible pain lashed her from the calcified cartilage of her skull, to the thrashing spine of her tail.

The pain knocked her off her feet and her heavy armor dragged her the rest of the way down. Her fingerscales scraped at the masonry stone beneath her palms and her knees trembled beneath her, with hardly enough strength left to keep her that much upright.

And yet, all of it was lost to her so quickly with a bright flash of fire behind her eyes that stole her sight and guided it elsewhere. The river water was rising, dyed ruby dark with blood. Smoke had turned the sky black, leaving the sun a weak, silver glow overhead as the flames eagerly outstretched their burning death veils over all of Zora’s Domain.

Scores of lifeless Undercity people hung like shadows, silhouetted by the fires of warfare, their bodies dangling forgotten by the ropes which had choked the life from them. Among them, Tetra’s mother, Moira, was kicking in desperation as she dangled, taking her very last, fighting breath before falling deathly still.

And though she was deaf to her own cries, Tetra shrieked in horror, her voice a crying wail for mercy, her body paralyzed beneath the terrible visions that she seemingly couldn’t pull herself from, nor will to pass.

“Tetra? What’s going on?” a fellow Undercity guardsman called from his own post, startled by the sound of screaming. He took his spear tightly in hand on his way to aid the other, his webbed feet pattering against the stone while he rushed around the corner, only to find Tetra collapsed beneath the dim flicker of a torch’s firelight. Her body was twisted and writhing, her expression pinched in agony.

“Tetra!” he shouted again, hurrying to her side. He went down to his knees and dragged her body close. It was difficult to see in the dim light, but her eyes were wide and far away, her cheeks marked with blood like old war paint.
“Tetra, hey!” He shook her gently as he repeated her name again and again, one hand tucked behind her head to support it. “Come back to me, Tetra,” he pleaded. “Come on, please.”

The silver-scaled woman shuddered in the other Zora’s arms, blinking and turning quiet enough that it was much more deeply concerning. A moment later, she choked out the words, “I’m fine, Geon,” and sat herself upright. “I’m okay.”

And yet, despite her claims, a sob wracked her body, rinsing the red stains from her cheeks with fresh tears. She did everything in her power to stifle her own cries, wrapping her arms around herself and biting her own tongue, but her chest clenched and she gulped in panic that she couldn’t overcome.

“You’re not okay! What is this?” Geon prodded, one hand on Tetra’s shoulder. He dipped his head down low to look her in the face, but she didn’t meet his gaze, instead focusing on the soft pattern of blots along his gray tail. It was a strangely relaxing pattern, just not relaxing enough to calm her.

“Hey, come on, let’s get you to the infirmary,” he said, in his usual soft, slow voice. He could see with ease that Tetra was sick. He was afraid, however, that it might not have been the kind of sick that they had the ability to treat.

Tetra shook her head, resisting Geon’s attempts to help her to her feet. “S-Something is coming,” she muttered, her eyes peering into his at last as another fresh wave of tears wet her cheeks. She was sure of this, she knew this to be true, she felt the inevitably of it burning in her veins like it had already come to pass.

Her body was trembling from fear, and that, in turn, frightened Geon all the more, because he didn’t know Tetra to be a particularly fearful or meek person. He knew her to be boisterous, aggressively brave and as spirited a soldier as the Fort Sergeant who had trained them.

“Something bad is coming,” she repeated, her voice clenched tight.

“Whatever it is, we’ll handle it when it gets here,” he said, trying to force a smile to his face as hard as he was trying to fake being completely unperturbed. He let out a little laugh; it was a half-hearted, sleepy sound, despite that he was wide awake. “Then it’ll be sorry, right?”

Tetra swallowed, choking back her tears for the moment and taking a breath. She reached one hand to tug at one of Geon’s whiskers. “How are you so brave?”

“Because I’m an idiot, remember?” he replied, winking and gently folding her hand between his. “Come on, I’ll help you up.”

On the other side of the Lanayru Wetlands, a couple of Sheikah sighted a band of armored Zoras, waiting where the wetland shallows met an overgrown section of the road ahead. The dim light from the lanterns at the front of the wagon shimmered on the silver of the Zora’s armor; if it hadn’t, the two Sheikah driving the wagon may not have noticed them at all.

The man driving the cart halted the oxen with a shouted command, then he climbed down from the cart to address the waiting Zoras. The younger of the pair slid out on the other side, walking around to check on the draft animals.

“Is this the emergency food, meant for the Zora people?” one of the Zora warriors asked as she strode forward to greet the old, Sheikah man who had been driving the cart. She dipped her head to him, silver scales gleaming coppery in the lamplight.

The old Sheikah’s jaw was working, just the same as his oxen, and he turned his head to spit before
he replied. “It is,” he answered plainly. His eyes were dark under the wrinkled folds of his weathered skin and his bushy, white brows.

The armored Zora who had stepped forward smiled politely and nodded her head. “We were sent out to meet you,” she explained. “The path is dangerous ahead. It’s safer to transport the goods by water from here. We can take care of it.”

The younger of the Sheikah men peered over from where he stood, elegant hands stroking one of the ox’s big ears while his piercing, red eyes looked on in quiet, diligent observation. The old man nodded his head and turned to walk back over to the cart, then the two of them exchanged some hushed talk among themselves before the elder returned to where the leader of the Zora band was waiting.

“Alright,” he said, gesturing to the cart. The other man was already walking around to the backside of the wagon in order to unload the goods, and a few of the Zora warriors joined him without further question.

“Thank you,” the leader of the Zora band stated with gentle sincerity, bowing again to the Sheikah elder. He seemed preoccupied, neck twisted, head turned around to observe the fact that all of these Zora were little taller than him. Even despite his wandering attention, the silver-scaled woman continued, “The Zora people and our King Dorephan thank you. Be sure to send your Chief, Impa, our fondest gratitude.”

“We owe the Zora people an even greater debt,” he replied, withdrawn but sincere. He bowed softly, his fist going straight to his obviously stiff lower back. “We only hope that this supply is sufficient enough to express our appreciation. If not, be sure to let your King know that we are allies to the Zora people. You need only call on us, and we will answer however we can.”

“Thank you, my friend,” the leader of the Zora group said with a smile.

The Sheikah elder made his way back to the cart in order to get off of his feet, while the silver scaled Zora leader joined the rest of her team and the young man in unloading the supplies, transferring them to a raft that they had prepared in advance. The work took the better part of an hour, but soon the pair of Sheikah and their cart were stamping off into the distant darkness.

Once they were far, far out of earshot, the silver scaled Zora woman breathed a relieved sigh and regarded one of her soldiers, uttering the words, “It was just as you said.”

The Zora soldier in question smiled, handing off the final basket of foodstuffs to one of their fellows. As they did, their armor and scales melted away with a flash of blue static, leaving behind a phantom dressed in red and gray, with a face hidden behind a mask emblazoned with the inverted Eye of Truth.

“I’m glad that my intel could be of assistance, miss Moira,” they replied.

Chapter End Notes

PHEW-- here is the new chapter, as promised. This was actually meant to be a part of the last chapter, but I’m sure you can see why it was difficult to finish in time, haha! Did you all enjoy it? I do hope it was exciting. :)
If you enjoy my stories, please come follow me on social media! There's lots more content and I really enjoy interacting with you all. :)  

TWITTER
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Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

The people of Zora's Domain were clearly divided, and as a result, Betaal was being torn in two directions. Why did it feel like everything was riding on her, yet she had nobodies trust? Well, except for that of one, curious Sheikah..

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The festive, carefree mood of the previous evening was shattered come morning by the news that their emergency food supplies had been stolen while en route. The guardsmen of Fort Boko had been stuck waiting at the drop-off location for hours, only to eventually return empty-handed.

It took less than an hour for sentry reports to clarify the details of the situation and for the news to make it back to Zora’s Domain. It took an even shorter period for the Guard Captain to make his way downstream to the fort.

Bazz hadn’t exactly been hoping for another chance to moderate the tension between Gaddison and Fort Sergent Betaal so soon, but nevertheless, crisis had made it necessary. The Zora man rubbed gentle circles at the space beneath his forefins, letting out a tired sigh as he did.

“This is going to make an already delicate situation that much more dire,” he said, his voice a dull rumble inside the canvas walls of Sergent Betaal’s tent. “We need to take decisive action today and also report this to higher authorities before it gets completely out of hand.”

“It’s already out of hand,” Gaddison snapped, her tone hard and fierce. She pounded one fist into her open palm when she spoke. “We need to march our guardsman down to Mercay Island today and arrest every Undercity Zora being offered refuge there. We should have done this days ago, before it escalated to this.”

“And what of the other Mercay Islanders who will be provoked by this aggressive action?” Betaal asked, turning her single eye in Gaddison’s direction. She had her arms folded over her chest, then she moved her shoulders in a shrug. “Mercay Island is on the fast track to becoming to real, Hyrulean town. Failure to treat this matter delicately could lead to resentment that goes far beyond the Lanayru Wetlands.”

“Whether they like it or not, this territory has been annexed. The Lanayru Wetlands is officially part of the Zorana Sovereign,” Gaddison replied. “If the Mercay Islanders want to interfere and provoke further conflict, they are no less subject to our laws than the Undercity defectors.”

“Of course, that brings up another loophole in the legality of this entire matter,” Betaal said. She glanced between Gaddison and the Guard Captain; Bazz appeared to be listening intently and even the pastel-scaled Zora was mildly intrigued. “If the Mercay Island settlement is technically part of the Zorana Sovereign, then the Undercity people living there didn’t actually break the outdated laws about emigrating to Hyrulean territory.”

“But they did conspire with violent extremists, who attacked our city and attempted to assassinate the
heir to the throne,” Gaddison blurted in rebuttal, shaking her head and flicking her tail, while giving Betaal a visible look of disdain.

Bazz cleared his throat, then softly spoke up. While both of these women were seemingly set on winning this battle of wits and morals, he had to keep procedure in mind. “It goes without saying—this matter is complex and it is out of our hands,” he explained. “How this will be handled is no longer our call to make and therefore, we cannot take any hasty, extreme actions ourselves.”

“So what then?” Gaddison hissed, her righteous fury a blazing flame that could hardly be contained. “We leave this in the hands of our indecisive bureaucracy? And how much longer will it drag on as a result? How much more harm will be done?”

“We could cause equal harm in our haste,” Betaal stated, her words coming out on a bitter sigh. Her one eye was downcast, her own spirit tired and torn. She unfurled her crossed arms and returned her gaze to look upon her superior as she offered a suggestion. “Perhaps it would be more prudent to make an attempt at dialogue. It’s not too heavy-handed and it will give our ‘indecisive bureaucracy’ more information to go on.”

“And you expect that to work?” Gaddison purred, her tone dripping with condescension and doubt. “With how they resent us?”

Betaal bit at her lip, gaze faltering; Gaddison’s comment sent her mind straight to thoughts of Dahlia, Dahlia who harbored resentment enough against the Uppercity and the City Guard that she ultimately turned against an old friend and fellow Undercity Zora.

“I don’t expect anything,” Betaal answered after a moment of thought, “but it stands to do less harm, and has some potential for good, even if it’s a longshot.”

“I agree,” Bazz said, gesturing to Betaal, who immediately straightened under his regard. “Sergeant Betaal, can you carry out this mission personally? Go to Mercay Island and speak to the defectors. Warn them that if they don’t surrender the stolen goods, there is sure to be consequences.”

It sounded much more like a threat than an attempt at diplomacy, but nevertheless, it was something. “Yes, sir,” Betaal agreed. “I’ll gather a company of guardsman right away.”

“I suppose we’re done here, then?” Gaddison said, her tone oddly flat all of a sudden. She slowly strode toward the tent flap and brushed it aside, turning to glance back at Bazz before she excused herself. “I’m feeling ill. If you have further need of me, I’ll be in the infirmary.”

The Guard Captain’s head swiftly turned in Gaddison’s direction at her statement, his face softly furrowed in concern. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” she answered, flicking one hand dismissively. “Just fine.”

Despite how warmly the soldiers of Fort Boko had welcomed the people of Mercay Island into their stronghold, when those same soldiers marched down to Mercay Island, the welcome they received was not nearly as warm.

Betaal and a handful of fully-armored guardsmen were surely a sight with some intimidation factor, though the Sergeant had opted to take only a small company to the island for the sole purpose of avoiding the appearance of force. Growing up, the sight of Zora warriors invoked in her a feeling of pride and safety. It reminded her of her father, and all of the other brave Undercity Zoras who became warriors in a time of crisis.
She knew that not everyone shared those same views, however. In the minds of many others, the
guard armor was a symbol of terror and control. So when Mercay Island sentries drew weapons on
her and her guardsmen, she remained calm and explained the purpose of their visit.

She was forced to re-explain several times, but eventually she was granted an audience with a couple
of the Undercity defectors, as well as an old Rito who proposed that he’d be present to act as a
moderator. She recognized him as the same Rito who wielded bomb arrows and aided them in the
second battle for the fort, on the night of the last Blood Moon.

Unexpectedly, Dahlia also made an appearance. Betaal had presumed that the other woman would
ship back to Zora’s Domain when her contract with the crown expired. Apparently, she took the
liberty of defecting, instead, while she was already present in the Lanayru Wetlands.

It was around one of the numerous cook fires that the group met, and almost by irony or even just
plain mockery, there was a hearty stew thickening over the embers and several speared fish gently
grilling in the glow of the heat.

Betaal’s one, yellow eye lingered there, on the flaunted food supply, before she at last brought her
gaze upward to meet that of the other Zoras before her.

“We are well aware that the emergency food supplies en route to Zora’s Domain were stolen by the
Undercity defectors being sheltered here, on Mercay Island,” she began. “The stolen food must be
returned to its rightful owners. There isn’t even any reason driving this attempted embargo, other
than malice. We all know that food here in the wetlands in plentiful, whereas back home it’s tainted
and supplies are dwindling.”

The elderly Rito clear his throat, the flesh of his neck visibly moving beneath bald patches in his
black plumage. “I’m obliged to point out that embargos are traditionally enacted to penalize an
independent state for a variety of reasons, be it political, military or social.” He wasn’t old enough to
remember the embargo imposed upon the people of Kakariko by the Hyrulean state, as that occurred
some two hundred years ago, but he was a well-read man and therefor aware that it had happened.

He tilted his head, swaying his big beak gently from side to side, his feathers fluffing as he spoke,
“The social injustices in Zora’s Domain suffered by these ‘Undercity’ people would constitute a
legitimate cause for such an embargo.”

Betaal couldn’t help but chuckle. In all of her years, she never thought she’d see the day that a Rito
would attempt to explain the hardships of being an Undercity Zora to her. Her red fins flared slightly,
showing her bright colors, and she replied, “I’m more than aware of the social injustices.”

“The people back home are making due,” one of the Undercity women stated, with strong, calm
silver eyes to match her silvery scales. She was the image of what one imagined when they imagined
an Undercity Zora; plain and unassuming. In the light of the sun, however, her scales held a blue
sheen. “They only ever lacked the proper supply to feed us and we aren’t there any longer,” Moira
asserted.

“You look very familiar to me,” Betaal uttered, her one eye narrowing slightly. “What is your
name?” she asked the other Undercity woman.

“Tonta,” she lied. The Rito at her side didn’t blink for an instant at her deception, though young
Vasai tilted her head ever so slightly. Moira only hoped that the Sergeant failed to notice.

Betaal was busy trying to discern why she found the other woman familiar. She came up with
nothing, so she moved on. “Tonta,” she addressed the other, “I’ve just recently seen the situation
back home. Without the people of the Undercity, the food supply is growing tighter and tighter, so your suggestion that they’re making due is, unfortunately, untrue.”

“And whose fault is that? They refused to feed us, and we left!” young Vasai snapped, full of rage and bitterness. Her tail flicked from side to side as she spoke, and she gestured in an animated way, silver scales gleaming in the light. “Now they can’t feed themselves. They treated us like we were garbage, when in fact we were the most important members of their so-called society. I say, let them reap what they’ve sown.”

“There are still Undercity people back home to consider,” Betaal asserted. “They were declared a threat and placed into containment thanks to this whole rebellion. Their children were taken from them and forced into foster care. They’ve only just recently been set free and they are still hungry. Without the relief food, rest assured, they will be the ones who starve.”

“So we should take pity on the Uppercities, just because they would starve our people otherwise?” Vasai snapped back, scoffing and shaking her head at Betaal. Dahlia said nothing at all, but crossed her arms and nodded her head in agreement. Moira reached out to place one hand on Vasai’s shoulder, calming her.

“The Zoras here on Mercay Island made up nearly half of the population of Zora’s Domain,” Moira stated, her voice even and reasonable. She held eye contact with the Sergeant across from her and continued, “It would be sensible for us to maintain our own fair share, while offering half of the supplies to the people of Zora’s Domain.”

Betaal sighed and softly shook her head. Her red forefins swayed against her cheeks. “This is unacceptable,” she stated. “Your people here don’t need the food. You aren’t facing a crisis. This is all for the sake of pride and pointless principle.”

Moira chuckled quietly, nodding her head. “Perhaps it is,” she replied, “but the people of the Undercity have been denied pride of our own and control of our own principles for as long as we’ve existed. It’s time we were allowed that much. Half is our offer.”

“She may be an Undercity,” Dahlia commented, breaking her silence. She tilted her head in Moira’s direction, exchanging glances. “...but she’s their dog, now. She doesn’t care whether or not we’re granted things like pride or self-determined principles.”

Moira didn’t reply to Dahlia’s statement, but Vasai scoffed and shook her head, while giving Betaal a look of full-on disdain.

“I believe that is your answer, cousin,” the Rito addressed Betaal. “Their offer is half.”

Betaal knew that this was unwise. She shook her head in silence, unable to find the right words to communicate the feeling of dread this situation brought on. Her goal here was not winning for the sake of the Uppercity people of Zora’s Domain, but rather finding a way to avoid inciting their wrath.

Gaddison was now Betaal’s equal in terms of authority downstream and left up to her, she would put down this whole rebellion with force. The Guard Captain was only reasonably neutral to avoid stepping on the toes of the people above him, but even his words had been to the effect of, ‘ask them to surrender of their own volition, or consequences will be inevitable.’

Betaal couldn’t sugar-coat reality. In a resigned, solemn tone, she said, “I will carry your offer to the appropriate authorities, but I personally can’t make any promises that it won’t be answered with force rather than acceptance.”
Vasai’s black-ringed eyes shined with rage and Dahlia offered an unsurprised shake of her head. It was Moira who replied, her words coming quick and easy, like she’d been waiting all her life to utter them. “That’s fine,” she stated. “If that’s what they decide, then they should know that it won’t be like it was back home. The people of the Undercity won’t roll over to the threat of violence any longer. We will stand.”

Betaal gave the woman a nod and a bittersweet smile that absolutely didn’t meet her one-eye gaze. “I truly wish you all the best.”

Aimless, nomadic folks and shallow-rooted travelers were not an unfamiliar sight on Mercay Island. In fact, most of the varied lot who had come to settle there had arrived in just such a manner. So when a small band of Hylians of horseback came riding through, nobody questioned it. The sentries watched but nothing more and other Mercay Islanders perhaps spared the riders a glance, but little else.

The group brought their horses to a stop near a watering trough and the animals immediately began to drink while their riders dismounted. One of them wandered off in search of supplies, as all manner of items were offered by local vendors, from food to weaponry.

Another stood in the company of two fellows, quietly taking stock of the settlement. His eyes wandered across the buildings; small homes fashioned from lumber and stone, tables and carts that were used to create commerce, and innumerable tents in messy lines, set up by the various travelers, from the temporary, to the permanent.

“This is the last place Swift’s group reported from before we lost contact with them,” one of the riders spoke at last, placing his hand on the neck of his horse and giving him a pat.

Close enough to be within earshot, there was a tall, stone oven that was currently in use by a Sheikah resident. They were standing at the door of the oven, basking in the heat it produced while waiting diligently for their bread to finish cooking. However, they spared the nearby Hylian strangers an innocuous glance, as though they were acknowledging their unfamiliar presence or perhaps idly listening.

The man who had been speaking seemingly felt the Sheikah’s eyes on him, and he turned to meet the other’s glance. Quickly, the Sheikah’s gaze was averted and they set back to work on their baking, instead.

The Sheikah opened the oven door, waiting for the initial burst of heat to diminish before they reached inside to pull out a full tray of baked goods. They took care, using old scraps of cloth to hold the hot tray as they carefully set it aside on a nearby prep table. While the Sheikah was busy with their work, the Hylian riders slowly drifted over on the dirt trail that ran through town.

Then, when the Sheikah turned in the direction of the oven to shut the door, the Hylians approached from behind. The one who had met the Sheikah’s gaze before now outstretched his hand to comb his fingers through the unsuspecting Sheikah’s shortly cropped, white locks.

“White hair. Must be a Sheikah,” he said, his voice low and rough, absent of anything that could even be mistaken for innocent friendliness.

The Sheikah immediately spun around to face the man in reply to the unexpected touch, their back pressed to the stone of the oven, their deep crimson eyes roaming quickly over the Hylian’s leather armor and the weathered weapons sheathed at his hip. The Sheikah’s sight then darted upward, to
the piercing hazel green of the Hylian man’s eyes and the half-smile that he wore like a Maraudo wolf’s snarl.

“But are you a Sheikah or a Yiga?” he growled through his smiling teeth.

Another one of them hovered at the speaking man’s flank, while yet another meandered toward the tray of baked goods, curious fingers probing about like he was welcome to do so. The Sheikah glanced between the Hylians, then back to the one standing much too close, a nervous smile spreading across their lips.

“That’s a funny accusation to go around randomly making,” the Sheikah answered, chuckling under their breath. Then, with a straight face and remarkable calm, they asked, “So does that make you a Hylian or a Guardian of Hyrule?”

The man in the Sheikah’s face chuckled, the tip of his tongue tracing the edge of his teeth. His brows momentarily went up in his amusement, but the expression melted away so rapidly that it was beyond unsettling.

“We’re looking for a missing friend of ours,” he said. “Since you’re so good at looking around, you know, and watching people, maybe you’ve seen her? Short, broad woman, built a bit like a Goron. Blonde hair and real’ crooked teeth. Kinda pushy. Talks real’ fast. Goes by the name Swift.”

“Never seen her,” the Sheikah replied, not even taking a moment to think it over.

The man nodded, his head drooping a bit as he did. His smile was gone, his mouth forming a tight line, instead. With a darting movement, he put one hand around the Sheikah’s neck and slammed them back hard against the stone. His grip was tight enough to deny the Sheikah air, so that they immediately began to tug desperately at the man’s arm, to no avail.

“I don’t believe you,” he growled in the Sheikah’s face, his breath hot against their skin, the tip of his nose nearly close enough to touch theirs. As soon as his words left his mouth, he jabbed one fist hard into the Sheikah’s gut, knocking all of the air from their lungs and leaving them coughing on their knees.

“Get up,” the Hylian snarled, his nose wrinkling with undue aggression, while the Sheikah clutched at their middle, gasping to regain lost breath. He waited three seconds for the Sheikah to comply before he sharply kicked them in the ribs, leaving them flat on the ground.

“This skinny kid isn’t a Yiga,” one of them breathed with a disappointed scoff, his eyes unsympathetic while he looked down on the Sheikah. “They’re suppose to have cat-like reflexes and killer instincts.”

“Maybe it takes a little more danger to wring their true nature free,” the man who’d assaulted the Sheikah hummed, as though he was bored. One of his hands drifted toward his holstered blade, like his fingers were itching to take the weapon in hand and make use of it. Even from the ground, the Sheikah did not fail to notice.

“I have a better idea,” the Sheikah said, pushing themself upright with trembling arms. All of the Hylians’ pointed ears perked at the sound of the Sheikah’s voice. Cautiously, the Sheikah clambered back to their feet, hands raised and palms shown for the sake of making themself appear unthreatening. They took another breath, voice rough from the coughing, then they went on, “The lot of you look like you’ve been riding for days. Surely you’re all hungry, and maybe that’s where all this needless aggression is coming from?”
The Sheikah gestured to the pan of baked goods that they had just taken from the stone oven. “Maybe mighty banana loaf will help? Go on, just take it. It’s fresh.”

Again, the unimpressed one of them spoke up, “This is pointless. The kid is just a regular Sheikah,” he said, shrugging and glancing over his shoulder like greater threats were lurking elsewhere. He extended one hand to prod at the Sheikah, causing them to flinch at the contact. “They’ve got the stink of toothless, Sheikah farmer all over them.”

“I’m not convinced,” the more aggressive Hylian growled, finally taking what appeared to be a large hunting knife in hand from its leather sheath. His ears were pinned back as he shoved the blade into the Sheikah’s face, so that the sharp point delicately dimpled the skin of the their cheek. “I hear that the Yiga bleed black because they have the Calamity in their veins. Why don’t we see what color you bleed, then, hm?”

“Is there some kind of problem here?” A strong, gruff voice interrupted the exchange. The Hylians each glanced back to see a newly arrived Zora standing a few feet from them, clad in shining, silver armor, and with her spear drawn and poised at her side. Her one, yellow eye was narrowed in a glare that moved slowly, and with intent, across each of their faces.

“Who’s the fish?” growled the man with the knife. He wasn’t immediately perturbed, but he was distracted enough by the Zora’s arrival that he drew his weapon out of the Sheikah’s face, holding it instead like he meant to wield it against this newly arrived enemy.

“From the armor, I’d say she’s some kind of Zora soldier,” one of the other Hylian’s muttered, looking the Zora woman up and down.

“There’s no problem that we can’t deal with on our own,” the man with the knife spoke loudly, aggressively, flicking his other hand in a dismissive gesture.

The Zora woman did not budge. With assertive calm, she declared, “If there’s no problem, then move along.”

“This isn’t worth it, let’s just go,” mumbled one of the Hylians to the man with his knife drawn. He let out a sigh, running a hand through his dirty, matted hair, before reaching out to take one of the banana loaves, apparently placated by the Sheikah’s offer. “We’ve got more important matters to deal with.”

“Right,” the aggressive Hylian hummed, sheathing his blade. He, too, grabbed up one of the loaves and took a hearty bite from it as he skulked away, followed by yet another Hylian man, who also took a loaf in hand.

With the Hylian thugs cleared out, the Sheikah released a deep sigh of relief that had been held tight in their chest until that very moment. Immediately, they brushed themself off and gave the Zora woman a grateful smile. “Sergeant,” they said coolly, greeting the other, “we meet again.”

“And just in time, it would seem,” Betaal purred with a crooked smile of her own. She returned her weapon to her back and took a few steps closer to her Sheikah acquaintance, looking over them with some concern. “Are you alright?”

“No worse for wear, thanks to you,” they cooed in that slow, sweet way that never failed to fluster the awkward Zora woman. The Sheikah— Sheik, as they had introduced themself to Betaal once before— gave the Sergeant a warm glance. “What brings you out to Mercay Island?” they asked.
Betaal’s violet flush and nervous fluster faltered all of a sudden, and she averted her gaze. Letting out a sigh, she replied, “Awful business, I’m afraid,” in a very morose tone.

“Hmm,” Sheik nodded knowingly, their brow furrowing with some sympathy. They looked over what was left of the loaves, inspecting their condition with a critical gaze. “That little rebellion, I’d presume,” they carefully went on. “Rather nasty business, indeed. But if I may inquire? Have your people decided the fate of their defectors yet?”

“I. umm,” Betaal muttered, hesitating. Eventually she shook her head, her bright red fins falling flat against her head. “Can’t say I really know.”

Again, the Sheikah replied first and foremost with a nod of understanding. “You’re Undercity, like the people who fled to our little town,” they spoke as though they really, really understood; sympathetic, careful. They looked up from their work and met Betaal’s one-eyed gaze, something secretly sincere in the quiet crimson of their eyes. “They probably don’t trust you not to be some kind of informer for the defectors. That must be a very difficult place to be in, between worlds as you are. I’m so... sorry.”

“Yeah,” Betaal breathed, bitter and tired, her own gaze faltering, her posture suddenly less straight than before. She cleared her throat, and looked back up in the direction of the friendly Sheikah, forcing a small smile for the sake of appearances. “Well, as much as you seem to understand my awkward situation, I’m also not in a very good place to be discussing it, either.”

“Oh. I apologize! I’ve always been too curious for my own good,” Sheik hurriedly blurted, suddenly looking a bit sheepish themself. Their head drooped forward and their arms folded, with one hand coming up to be pressed over their face. For a moment, they were quiet, seemingly thinking over some way to amend the situation.

When they came up with a solution, they perked like a flower after a good rain, and turned their attention back to the stone oven. Again, they opened it and safely pulled out another sheet of baked goods, which they placed on the table next to the other. With hasty hands, they wrapped one of the steaming loaves in a square of cheesecloth and offered it to Betaal.

“Here, please consider this thanks for your help,” they said with a grin, “and also for your.. friendship?”

“Oh.. I couldn’t possibly–” Betaal began to refuse, gently waving her hands to reject the offer. There was something strange and ironic about the fact that the people back home were about to fight the Undercity defectors over stolen food, and yet this kind person, who Betaal was only casually acquainted with, was offering her food for free.

“No, I insist, please,” Sheik kindly, but firmly stated, striding nearer to Betaal and gently forcing the warm loaf into her battle-callused palms. With a charming smile, they spoke in soft encouragement, “If you say no to the loaf, you’re saying no to friendship, and that would be a terrible thing to waste.”

With no other option, Betaal took hold of the loaf and nodded her head in agreement. “Thank you, Sheik of the Sheikah.”

“No, Sergeant, thank you,” Sheik purred, reaching out to pat the Zora woman’s shoulder in reassurance. “If there’s anything more I can offer to repay your kindness, don’t hesitate to ask me. I’ll be here.”

;
“I’ve reviewed your symptoms,” the fort medic was saying, his voice withdrawn but clear as he turned to face his patient, Sergeant Gaddison. He gestured to one of the linen-lined cots inside of the medical bay tent. “I’d like to feel your abdomen, if you could lie down here.”

The pastel Zora did as instructed, climbing onto the cot and lying prone while the blue-scaled medic followed, in order to examine her. The medic’s hands immediately applied pressure here and there about Gaddison’s abdomen, beneath her cartilaginous breastbone and near her gills, none of which caused any real discomfort.

She made a soft, nervous hum in her throat, her face pinched tight in both anxiety and the uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability. “Do you think that it could be the Water Blight?” she asked, honey gold eyes peering up at the medic’s face. He was composed and neutral, concentrated on his work. “...I was in Zora’s Domain for a short while,” she elaborated.

“Some of the symptoms are consistent with it,” he replied, the words despicably easy for him to speak, at least where Gaddison was concerned. She narrowed her eyes, not necessarily in anger, but in... something; some kind of turbulent emotion that she couldn’t quite define. She was having a lot of those lately.

“Did you consume unapproved food or beverages while back home?” the medic asked.

“No,” she answered truthfully.

“Did you pump any water through your gills in Zora’s Domain?” he asked.

“No,” she replied.

“Hmm. Then I would say that the likelihood is low. If your symptoms get worse, or if you experience any faintness, you should seek immediate care,” he explained. He carefully examined Gaddison’s lower abdomen. The pale patch of skin beneath the pointed crest of his brow suddenly took on an extra wrinkle of focus. “It actually feels like you have some swelling in your egg pouch. Is it possible that your eggs could be fertilized?”

Gaddison laid incredibly still. Her expression turned slack, while her gold eyes went wide and her slitted pupils swelled to great, black circles. She vacantly whispered only one word under her breath.

“...fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey friends! At this point, Coma Baby feels like the damn gift that keeps on giving, haha. This chapter was very Mercay Island/Fort Boko centered, but the next chapter will have a little bit more Sidon. :) Things are getting ever more involved, my friends. Ever. More. Involved.

Thanks for reading, everyone. Check out my social media~

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Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

It seemed that everywhere Brivere looked, he was surrounded by others making drastic decisions and expecting his approval. His young sibling had shown up with two strangers from the Undercity, and was now asking for Brivere's permission to share their home. Worse-- Prince Sidon had come up with a dangerous, foolhardy plan to prevent starvation in Zora's Domain and he was sure that he and his Knight could execute it, alone.

What was Brivere to do?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Brivere arrived home to two strangers, it was awkward to say the least. He had already somewhat accepted that his young sibling’s social standing was changing, given that Estuu was newly affluent. The cautious introduction and subsequent interrogation of the ‘Isthio’ character was plenty enough to wake Brivere up to this evolving reality.

But two strangers from the Undercity? The golden Zora failed to see how this played into what he understood about his sibling’s position, though a hastily scrawled note from Estuu provided the explanation, sort of.

“You would like for these friends of yours to stay with us?” Brivere asked, looking up from Estuu’s penned request to the boy himself and his two companions. One was a girl about Estuu’s own age, who appeared excitedly surprised, whereas the older of the two suddenly looked very much like a wide-eyed mountain doe at the end of a hunter’s bow.

Estuu vigorously nodded, bouncing happily on his toes with a terribly unpracticed grin spread across his lips. It was more like a toothy snarl, but it was the thought that counted and Brivere was somewhat relieved to see his brother happy; he’d been so listless ever since his accident.

Brivere was also as perplexed as it was possible to be. When had Estuu met these people? For what purpose? How was it that Brivere was only meeting them now? He had several questions and even more concerns. Estuu’s bizarre independent streak definitely needed to be reined in a bit, but Brivere was more glad than anything.

It was good that his brother was making this effort to show care for others and it was an equal wonder that social isolation and stigma hadn’t rendered Estuu permanently maladapted.

Before Brivere finished thinking things over, however, the elder of the two girls cleared her throat to speak up. Her round pupils had shrunken to small, black dots in her nervousness, and her gaze fell elsewhere as she addressed the brothers. “Oh, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we could possibly stay here,” she said, shaking her head.

Brivere’s eyes met hers, even though she wasn’t looking back. She wore small furrows of concern
and shame on her face, but there was also an urge for her to hide those emotions, to weather her situation with bravery, dignity. This was likely only readily apparent to Brivere, himself, as a mirror to his own behavior.

“Estuu indicated in his note that.. the two of you don’t have much in the way of food,” Brivere stated. He was sympathetic, of course, but he masked much of it to avoid causing his guests embarrassment. He gestured, instead, to the still excitedly bouncing Estuu. “He seems very willing to provide what you’re lacking. If this is his wish, I will permit it. We don’t have much, but we have enough to share, especially with Estuu’s friends.”

“I wouldn’t refuse this kind child’s offers of food, but I don’t think it’s necessary for us to stay,” Zala stated, with a humble smile forced to her face. Her hands were tightly folded.

“..I believe Estuu is concerned about potential commodification of his magic, should too many people learn that he is capable of cleansing food of the Water Blight,” Brivere explained, to bring clarity to Estuu’s reasoning for asking them to stay. If he was seen coming and going too often with food, he risked discovery, which would inconvenience him and render him unable to help anyone. “These are desperate times. I can see why he’d want to safeguard that information.”

Brivere could also see exactly how his brother would come to such a conclusion, and his gaze flickered to the boy, softening ever so slightly. Estuu had spent nearly his entire life being hated, yet tolerated for the use others could get out of him.

“Come on, Zala!” the younger sister called a little too loudly, jumping up and down while she tugged at her sister’s arm. “You could save our rupees instead of paying the boarding costs for our home!”

To save the young woman the possibility of feeling like a burden, Brivere added with a nonchalant shrug of his broad shoulders, “..or, if it makes you feel better, you could make your boarding payments to Estuu, but it certainly isn’t a requirement.”

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but I don’t think it’s in our best interest to depend on the charity of a stranger.” Zala’s eyes drifted upward, to connect to Brivere’s own, a shine of pure silver against his glistening gold. She gently shook her head from side to side, her tail flicking softly down her back. “That stands to leave us even more vulnerable, I’m afraid.”

Brivere gave the young woman, Zala, another glance of consideration. His eyes went between the Undercity sisters, ending on Zala again. Something in him was reaching out for her, betraying his usual instinct to keep everything vulnerable inside himself.

“.I don’t mean to pry, but you seem quite young,” he stated with clear caution in his tone. He noticed right away how her eyes widened in surprise and distrust, despite the softness in his voice. “Where are your parents? Your family?”

With subtle shifts, the Zora woman’s expression changed from fear to bitterness and even resentment. In was plain in the soft wrinkle beneath her crested brow, the narrowing of her dark lids and the tightness of her lips as her eyes averted.

“Our mother and father both died in a mining accident,” she stated bluntly, unconsciously clutching more tightly at her sister’s tiny hand.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Brivere breathed, his own eyes downcast. “So you’ve reared your younger sibling alone– when you’re so young yourself,” he observed aloud, each word subtly lined with his own emotional turmoil. He could certainly empathize with such a situation. It was exactly his own, after all.
“That’s a difficult thing to do, I would know,” he said to Zala, as though to provide a reassurance, to communicate in other phrasing, ‘you’re not alone.’ He straightened and took a small step closer to the sisters, a soft smile on his face as he did. “Please, there is room here.”

Zala fixed the golden Zora with a reserved gaze of her own. There was something at play here that he could not acknowledge because he was unaware of it, and that was the fact that he had long ago betrayed Zala’s trust, without even knowing it.

She knew few Zoras from the Uppercity and had even failed to identity Estuu as the lone, famed healer, upon first meeting him. However, Brivere’s face was one that she recognized, one that she’d detested since a time when both of her parents were still alive and Neydri was much, much younger.

She remembered him to be the warrior who, without a shred of honor, struck down the Undercity’s champion in the Prince’s tourney, and with it, all of the hopes and dreams of the entire Undercity. There was even speak that he had cheated to make certain he would prevail and Zala had no difficulty believing it. How like an Uppercity Zora, after all: to give themselves an unfair advantage, then proclaim to be innately superior.

With bold and righteous contempt, Zala spoke up, “..you might’ve reared your sibling alone, but that is where our similarities end, trust me.” An Uppercity Zora, even one who’d struggled, still had a hundred more advantages in life than she. The comparison was weak at best, and offensive at worst. “I’m happy to survive by my own means, thank you.”

“Zala..” Neydri whined at her sister’s side. She could see that Zala was angry, but she didn’t understand why. At the sound of the younger girl’s voice, though, Zala peered down at her.

“Neydri, you may stay and visit, if you like,” Zala said, patting her sister’s head. “Sleeping over for a few nights can’t hurt anything, if your hosts would permit it, that is.”

“Certainly,” Brivere nodded. He let out a quiet sigh, looking to Estuu and seeing that the boy’s bouncing had ceased. He was now watching in a calculating brand of confusion. Brivere could read the questioning clear, even on his brother’s blank face; what just happened? What went wrong?

“Neydri, was it?” the golden Zora asked, looking at the young girl who Estuu had apparently befriended. “You may visit as long as you like– or as long as your sister allows it, as it were.”

“Okay..” the girl answered, kicking her webbed toes in unspoken disappointment at her sister’s reaction. Neydri hugged at Zala’s side, as though clinginess might prompt a reassessment on her sister’s part.

The elder sister went through a complicated goodbye, issuing a list of commands to Neydri: she was to be respectful to her hosts, not to get into any trouble, not to get Estuu into any trouble, not to break anything that didn’t belong to her, not to be rude or obnoxious, and so on to the point that Estuu, at least, began to tune out while Neydri agreed to everything in an annoyed, whiny tone of voice.

Yet before Zala could even take her leave, the unannounced arrival of another Knight donned in armor nearly had her ready to revoke her sister’s permission to visit, altogether. Zala gaped with wide eyes and silence marked by dread at the armored Zora who was suddenly in Brivere’s doorway.

Brivere, however, recognized the other Knight to be one of his newly appointed underlings and gestured to Zala in the hopes of reassuring her. This scary, armored person wasn’t here to threaten her in any way, but simply deliver a message to Brivere.

The message was that Prince Sidon was randomly summoning him.
It was most unusual for the Prince to call upon Brivere without prior scheduling, but still not cause for panic. He agreed to answer Sidon’s summon posthaste and the messenger was soon gone as quickly as they’d appeared.

In the silence that followed, Zala quietly uttered the words, “Perhaps I will stay for a short while longer, just to make sure that Neydri is settled in.”

It was an offer to babysit, in different words.

Brivere quietly chuckled in an awkward kind of amusement, and gave Zala a nod. “Very well,” he purred. Estuu was mostly self-sufficient and needed little supervision, but Brivere was nonetheless pleased for the boy to have adults around, rather than nobody at all.

Echoing Zala slightly, Brivere looked to his brother and said, “Stay out of trouble and don’t drag your friend into any mischief, either. Understood?”

Estuu wailed at Brivere in reply, but the older sibling took it as something of an agreement, even if it was a begrudging one. In silence, the golden Zora donned his armor and left soon after.

Alone once more, the Undercity sisters explored Estuu’s home, awed by the space and beauty. He followed at their heels in silence, but interjected every now and again to point out things that he particularly enjoyed. There was a carved mural on one of the walls that he’d noticed on his first day living here. He’d gazed at it for hours, running his webbed fingers along the ridges. It was indescribably pleasing to his senses, so he hoped that his guests appreciated it as well.

Playing the part of the good host, Estuu fetched drinks for his guests while they continued their fascinated tour of his home. He opted for tea over the intoxicating, bitter liquids he was apparently now the reigning monarch of in Zora’s Domain. It wasn’t that he felt one was more appropriate than the other, but given the opportunity to cast off Zambezi’s legacy for a bit, he took it gladly.

Estuu wasn’t exactly happy to suddenly be Zambezi’s son in the glaring eye of the noble public.

After finishing up her tea, Zala was satisfied that nothing was amiss and took her leave. Neydri attempted to talk her into staying yet again, but Zala wasn’t having it. That really put an immediate damper on the mood once she was gone, which left Estuu in something of an awkward position.

It was at times like these that he was almost glad for his lost ability to verbally communicate, because he was not skilled at managing the negative emotions of others. He would almost definitely say something stupid and insensitive without even realizing it.

Quickly, he ran to start the waterfall in order to fill up his huge cistern, in the hopes that it would offer Neydri a distraction from her disappointment. That was the best Estuu had in terms of comfort: convenient distractions.

They definitely couldn’t sleep or breathe the water in the cistern, but they could still play in it. To date, Estuu had been unable to sleep in the thing, with the looming threat of the Water Blight, but he failed to see how it was sleep-appropriate, anyway. He had been used to the small, round pool of his old home, which housed him always within an arm’s reach of his older brother. As such, comforting closeness was his idea of how one was meant to sleep.

But this big, deep pool? This was for playing and little else.

While Estuu was busily setting up the veritable in-home playground, Neydri drifted over to her friend’s desk. She was sluggish and slumped, looking over the organized chaos of the work space, and flicking her fingers along the edges of this item and that. There were letters half-scrawled and
unfinished, stacks of well-loved books, and documents with unusually small print, none of which could be made sense of, where Neydri was concerned.

Estuu finally approached the pensive, young girl at his desk. He stood at the edge, looking at her with curious, golden eyes as though to say, ‘what’s on your mind?’ At least, that was her take on his mysterious silence and the way his gaze lingered near hers, while not quite meeting it.

Neydri picked up one of the letters from Estuu’s desk– his letter to Koko in Kakariko Village. She studied the words and letters with squinted eyes, like she expected this to suddenly give her the ability to understand them. When it didn’t, she let out a little sigh and said, “Estuu, can you teach me to read?”

Sensibly, Estuu considered the request, contemplating first and foremost how he would go about such a thing. It would definitely aid him in this relationship by giving him the means to communicate with Neydri, and he did remember precisely how the gift of literacy was bestowed upon him. A trained Apostle tutored him through numerous, private sessions, but he had no doubt that he could replicate the methods easily enough.

His inability to communicate properly with Neydri was sure to make the task a bit more complicated, but Estuu was confident that he could manage. So, in agreement, he nodded.

The first hurdle for them to overcome was Neydri’s boundless, untethered excitement. She could hardly sit still while Estuu slowly, carefully penned down the alphabet on a blank sheet of parchment. Her energy was soon whipped into submission, however, when she realized how much work it was going to take on her part, to understand and memorize the scarce bits of information that Estuu was able to impart. At that point, she steeled her own sense of focus, to make a very serious effort.

Estuu found a nice workaround for his lack of verbal skills. He couldn’t speak words, nor sentences in order to teach his friend, but he was perfectly capable of vocalizing the basic sounds for each character in the alphabet. He went through it several times, until at last Neydri was repeating the sounds back to him from memory.

She was a very fast learner, and that easily, her glee bubbled back to the surface, leaving her rocking happily in the chair again. Estuu flapped his tail in equal pride by her side, while they moved onto small words formed with three to four characters.

Patiently, Estuu sounded out each syllable. Neydri repeated after him, putting the syllables together to form words, speaking those words aloud and understanding. She would still need much, much more practice, but it was a good start.

While Estuu and Neydri went on with their makeshift school session, the trickling waterfall continued to fill the cistern, until it was at last brimming and crept over the edges, spreading across the floor. The moment that Estuu noticed was the very same moment that the overflow made it far enough to wet the boy’s toes.

His golden eyes shot up to see the encroaching tide slowly swallowing the floor of the room, and he let out a yelp of panic, racing over to shut off the waterfall. The task was easily accomplished, yet the boy’s startled heart was unaware, and continued to race at an unnecessary gallop, while Neydri caught onto what had happened, and let out a belly laugh at her friend’s forgetful blunder.

“The whole room is a cistern, now!” she was saying with tears of laughter in her eyes. She shot out of the desk chair and ran over, slipping a bit gracelessly on the wet stone and kicking at the water to splash Estuu.
In any case, she seemed to have forgotten about her previous disappointment, so Estuu counted that as a victory of sorts.

In rebuke for being splashed, Estuu shoved Neydri into the cistern, laughing aloud while she went under with a squeal. He dove in immediately after, if only because he needed to drain the damn thing a bit before Brivere got home and reacted to all this with a lecture that would be serious beyond the severity of Estuu’s harmless accident.

Neydri and Estuu commenced to playfully swimming together, bobbing back to the surface every few minutes to breathe. It was weird and difficult for them to remember, being that it was so outside of their instincts. Estuu was even fairly sure that any time he went up, Neydri copied him. He knew because he was doing the same whenever he saw her going to the surface.

As a species, they were built for killer precision in the water. But at times when they needed to swim like land animals, it was like they were sharing a single braincell, just to remember to breathe air. At least they were finding amusement in their hapless idiocy.

On one particular trip to the surface, Neydri paddled closer, saying, “Estuu? Remember how you healed me when I had the Water Blight?”

He didn’t exactly recall doing it, because he had healed innumerable others all while under a great deal of stress. As such, him remembering every person’s face was highly unlikely. Plus, she probably looked extremely unhealthy at the time.

However, he did recall her mentioning it before, so he nodded. After, he turned around in the water and bolted, prompting her to swim after him like she’d been challenged, without words, to some sort of competition.

“Do you still do it?” she called over the sounds of splashing, swimming up on Estuu’s tail. By the sound of her tone, she was asking out of genuine curiosity, not judgement or expectation.

She zoomed past him, the force of her speed creating a little wave that lapped across Estuu’s face, leaving him sputtering and shaking his head. His expression was set in focused neutrality as he fought to catch up to her, and she laughed and paddled harder, all while he lunged to grab at her kicking legs.

Estuu found himself thinking: Neydri was such a powerful swimmer. She also was a proficient, underwater spearfisher, to the point that Estuu had been left in awe watching her. Soon enough, she’d know how to read, too. She was no different from a character straight out of The Cursed Girl books, so talented and strong.

He believed, even after only knowing her for such a short time, he’d begun to truly admire her.

At last, Neydri spun around in the water, floating belly-up and paddling backward to get a good look at Estuu. He blinked, then after realizing that she was still awaiting an answer to her previous question, he shrugged his shoulders a bit and shook his head.

He hadn’t been back to heal in the Basilica. He hated it. He physically hated using his magic. He hated being pressured all the time. He hated having to overextend himself. He hated being used by people that had always hated him.

“Ohh,” Neydri said. She was grim yet strangely detached about the whole thing, her silvery eyes wandering elsewhere in thought. Estuu wasn’t sure that she’d be able to properly grasp his perspective. He also wasn’t sure how it would sound to her, given that her life had only been saved
thanks to his own hand being forced.

After a moment, she shrugged her own shoulders, rippling the water around her as she spoke in a frank, offhand way, “I’ll bet a bunch of people are dying then, huh? Good thing I caught the Water Blight as quickly as I did, or I’d be dead, too.”

The conversation concluded on that note, and the two Zora kids went back to playing around, completely unfazed.

Estuu, however, did not stop thinking about it.

In the quiet of his spiral tower, the desperate Prince was slumped at his desk. His head was bowed into his palms and his tail draped heavy down his back, limp and lifeless.

Sunrise had come that morning with terrible, terrible news. He had seen it on Laflat’s pinched face when she delivered the first reports of the day. He had seen it in the wary, shining depths of her amber gaze as she handed him a small stack of papers before setting his meager breakfast nearby.

He hadn’t even needed to reach out with his magic to feel the growing dread within her; he could see it.

Contained within the documents delivered to the Prince was a succinct report from the Captain of the Guard, so calm yet devastating in its blunt detail, from the very first sentence: ‘The emergency supplies en route from Kakariko Village were stolen during the night by the hostile, Undercity defectors currently stationed at Mercay Island.’

There were mentions of an attempt to negotiate and bargains being made, but the ultimate decision on this matter wouldn’t fall to Sidon, alone. Moreover, the fact that it would need to be debated could only serve to stall things further, and there was no time for that.

Sidon knew better than to wait around, doing nothing else but hoping for the best. These emergency supplies had been the whole of his contingency and without them, his vault of provisional plans was cleared. He couldn’t afford to curse his fate any longer and he didn’t have energy to expend, wondering why this world was so merciless.

He had to do the only thing that made any real sense; he had to think of a new plan, and he had to do it quickly.

The Prince stood from his seat, crossing his arms over his broad chest and cupping his chin in thought. He took a deep breath, his hooked toeclaws clicking against the polished stone as he set to impatiently pacing. His golden eyes absently gazed out the wide windows which surrounded him, looking out over his kingdom. The view itself was a constant reminder- everyone in Zora’s Domain was depending on him. He could not take that lightly.

“My lord?” came the deep, steady voice that interrupted Sidon’s pacing and pondering. The Prince’s head shot up and his posture straightened, his forefins swaying near his pale cheeks as he turned his head to look upon his summoned Knight.

Brivere was there, trained upon the threshold, going no further without permission to do so. Where he stood, light from the descending corridor fell upon his shoulders, silhouetting him so that his golden scales outshone his polished armor. In his guarded features, there was an unspoken
questioning, a confusion as to why he’d been called upon, yet here he was anyway, answering that very call.

Somehow, just seeing him there ironed small bits of tension out of the Prince. Despite contention between himself and his Knight, the knowledge that their partnership remained was a comfort.

“You called me to duty,” Brivere spoke, placing one hand upon his chest and dipping his head lower, in a bow of respectful greeting. “How may I serve you?”

“Yes,” Sidon replied. For a moment he turned his head aside, looking elsewhere in a lingering sense of wariness. Very quickly, however, he steeled himself, squaring his shoulders and returning his eyes to the sight of his waiting Knight. He knew precisely what needed to be done, and he would not back down from it. “We must face the lynel. Now.”

Sidon did not even sense an emotional flinch from Brivere upon hearing what was being asked. He could see, though, the way the golden Zora’s pupils expanded and his crisp, yellow eyes widened. Brivere’s mouth opened slightly as though to reply, but the words did not come immediately. Instead, he cleared his throat and warily responded, “My lord.. you can’t possibly be serious..”

“I assure you, I am perfectly serious,” Sidon said. Indeed, everything in him was unwavering, save for the parts which were desperately afraid; not for himself, but for everyone around him. Those parts only aided in his determination.

“A food contingency has fallen through, and decisive action is now called for in order to amend the grave situation that will otherwise be the result if we do nothing,” the Prince explained. He beckoned Brivere to enter, thumbing through the papers delivered to him earlier and offering Bazz’s report to the Knight as Brivere approached.

Brivere took the parchment from the Prince’s hand and read over the grim statements penned by the Guard Captain.

“The beast is guarding a valuable area for fishing and gathering, which is uncorrupted by the Water Blight,” Sidon went on as Brivere read. “We simply must have access to that area or we’re sure to face mass starvations.”

Brivere looked slowly up from the report and craned his neck, peering upward to meet his Prince’s gaze. He had to carefully consider his words, knowing that Sidon was not likely to approve of his response. In the end, however, there was no softer way to put what needed to be said. “Not to be callus beyond your sensibilities, my lord, but is this not precisely the kind of situation that calls for the might of the numerous Knights who serve you?”

“Have enough young Knights not perished for my sake as of late?” Sidon asked sharply, his eyes narrowing before turning aside and looking elsewhere. His dark eyelids hid away the golden light of his gaze. “..It was my decision to go under the effects of the Spirit Potion. Because of that, our city was attacked, a handful of Knights and other warriors died or were gravely injured and the Undercity people defected, with half of them suffering internment, while the other half have stolen emergency food supplies that were en route. Almost certainly, forces will be sent to arrest them all. Or worse.”

Sidon rambled out his words in what seemed like a single gulp of air, wrenching the admission free from his tongue. In anybody else’s presence, he likely wouldn’t have put words to exactly how grave his peoples’ situation was. In every conceivable way, it even pained him to do so.

The Prince took a slow, deep breath, then calmly let it out as he continued. “Brivere, I simply can’t afford to put any more lives at stake for my decision. I can’t bear any more senseless death.”
Brivere allowed all that he’d just heard to sink in. He knew that there were tensions between the people of the Uppercity and those from the Undercity, but defection? Internment? Arrests? He’d scarcely caught a whisper of such news and he couldn’t be sure if it was because he’d been so absorbed in his own dilemmas, or if the truth was being kept hush-hush, to avoid fanning the flames any further.

Even so, it was not his belief that any of this should’ve been cause for brashness, nor hastiness, nor thoughtlessness.

“My lord, difficult as it may be to bear, this is your duty as a leader,” Brivere stated, hoping that his words might sway Sidon. Of course, he already knew his stubborn Prince well enough to know better. Still, all he could do was try. “You must weather the grief of your peoples’ suffering and survive in order to continue leading them. And you must live with knowing that your every decision could mean life or death for any number of others. That is the burden of wearing the crown, my lord. That is the burden of having a good heart, as a king.”

“Perhaps, Brivere,” Sidon replied with a solemn nod. He paused, forcing a small smile to his face while pounding one tight fist into the opposite palm. “This decision is foolhardy and emotionally-driven, of that I have no doubt. But I also believe that we can do this. Our combined strength will be enough, I know it.”

“It isn’t,” Brivere snapped, the sharp edges of his teeth flashing with the words. He saw, immediately, the soft recoil it produced in the other Zora man. He saw the trust waning from his Prince, and it was as noticeable as it might have been if the vivid red were to suddenly rinse away from his beautiful scales. It pained the Knight to betray Sidon with even his words, but it wasn’t his duty to coddle the Prince, nor be his friend, nor his confidant, nor the peddler of dying hopes and far-fetched dreams.

It was his duty to keep the Prince alive.

“Pardon my frankness, my lord, but we are not enough,” Brivere spoke straight, his voice clear and steady, his eyes meeting Sidon’s own. “You just awakened from a hibernation and have scarcely regained your bearings, not to mention that you haven’t had a lick of practice to sharpen up for battle.”

The Knight brought his palms together, taking a deep breath of his own and softening his tone. “Surely, you truly summoned me because you already knew, deep down, that committing to this plan would be a suicide mission. Surely, you summoned me to reaffirm that.”

“I’m afraid not,” Sidon answered. His words came out fast and decisive, with distinctive authority. “So if you’d be so kind, Brivere, I should like your assistance in donning my armor.”

“Your armor?” Brivere stole a glance at the glistening, goldenscale pieces that had long been mounted alongside Sidon’s trident and bow. A fine layer of dusk had collected upon its surface. He shook his head almost immediately, turning his attention back to the Prince. “You’ve grown since you last wore it. It can’t possibly fit properly any longer.”

“It will fit well enough, Brivere,” Sidon snapped, his tail swishing behind him in growing agitation. “Now stop being such an obstinate coward and follow my orders.”

“Sidon, you cannot do this!” the golden Zora hissed in much the same sort of tone that he’d take with Estuu, should the boy get up to something foolish. In this case, Brivere’s words were touched slightly with desperation and dread, as the strange images from his lapses flooded back to the forefront of his mind. “If you do, you’ll–”
No, no, he couldn’t just say that he’d witnessed Sidon’s death by a shock arrow in a dream. He knew that it would sound insane, or like he was making things up. And beyond that, he’d probably be asked to prove the legitimacy of such a claim, which he certainly was unable to do. Instead, he hurriedly reached for the next easiest and sane option.

“Please– the Hylian Champion, where is the Hylian Champion?” Brivere asked, bidding Sidon to offer him the option of Link’s support in this matter. “He would tell you that this is folly, just as I am telling you,” Brivere hissed his words between the sharp points of his teeth, his face softly wrinkling into a snarl. Something in him was betrayed by even the admission that his Prince trusted Link’s word over his, that his Prince heard Link’s advice and dismissed his own. It was, nevertheless, true. “...and by the Goddess, you’d actually listen to him!”

Brivere’s offense scarcely mattered, however. What mattered was standing in the way of this self-destructive Prince’s plans to get himself killed.

For the Prince, though, all he sensed from his Knight was the immense shroud of his doubt. That served to affirm Sidon’s own suffocating lack of self-confidence, and it deeply wounded him. It was not the time for self-pity, however. It was time for action.

“If you won’t follow orders, then I will do what I must without you and without the armor,” Sidon concluded, turning his back on the other Zora in his midst. He breathed a disappointed sigh, then went on. “You were right, it is my duty to protect my people and to make these difficult decisions. And this is my decision, regardless of whether you respect it or not. You’re dismissed, Brivere.”

Brivere stood in perplexed silence, gob-smacked and beyond frustrated. He couldn’t permit Sidon to go alone, but he also couldn’t stand by and do nothing, could he? There was the option of going above Sidon, taking this matter to the King and having him forbid this utter foolishness. But no– Brivere couldn’t act upon such a grave betrayal as that. He would only lose all of Sidon’s trust.

“No, wait, my lord–” the Knight made a rush decision; something he never, ever did. Before Sidon could leave the tower with naught but his trident in hand, Brivere lifted the first major component of the goldenscale armor into his grasp. Then, with a defeated breath he uttered, “Let me help you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, my dear friends. Things are getting very tense in this story, huh? How many of you think that danger will force Brivere and Sidon to finally work their shit out? And what kind of crazy stuff is Estuu going to indirectly stir up as he becomes more conscious of the troubles other people in ZD are facing? :)

Some news for you all: some of you might have noticed that there was no update last month. I'm really sorry for that. The reason for it is that I got a new job and though it was supposed to be part time, they had a LOT more hours than I thought, and it really took away from writing time. I'm off for a few months now that it's summer, (I work for a school district, lol) so I should be able to catch up on more regular updates.

I am also having a surgery this month. It MIGHT slow me down a bit, but we'll see, right? If the chapter after this one comes out seeming like someone doped up on painkillers wrote it, that might actually be the truth haha.

NOW FOR THE AWESOME NEWS, I am also working on an audiobook version of
Coma Baby, complete with different voices for the characters! I want to release a new audio chapter on a monthly basis, and it will be free to listen to on Youtube.

Thanks for all of the support you all constantly send my way, friends. I want you all to know that I love and appreciate you all! <3 Thanks so much for reading, as always~

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