A Mipha-focused Breath of the Wild Novelization. 
Link wakes up in a mysterious chamber with no recollection of his purpose or his past life. 
As he fights to restore a ruined kingdom and rescue princess Zelda, he begins to recover the 
lost memories of a tragic past and to piece together the true nature of his relationship with a 
certain red-finned zora girl. 
[Mostly canon-compliant, AU as of DLC 2 release.]


He knew neither time, nor reason, nor purpose. Only the roaring disquiet and the chilling bleakness of eternity remained with him. He was nothing. He had always been nothing. Always would be nothing.

A fragmented shard of a thought would occasionally cross his mind, disappearing as quickly as it came:

Flowing blonde hair. A flurry of blue feathers, prideful and arrogant.

A swirling vortex of dark purple malice. A pair of vibrant yellow eyes, full of life and love.

All back to pure nothingness. It would always return to nothingness.

Then suddenly, a light. Like the tip of a sword piercing through the darkness, begging him for his focus.

Muffled noises began to echo through his dulled hearing.

“...”

A muted voice. He tried to make sense of it, failed.

Silence.

And then again, indistinct and faint:

“...Open your eyes...”

The light in front of him began to grow, slowly enveloping him. His world was aglow with its yellow brilliance. Its presence was foreign to him...and yet... somehow familiar. Just like this voice that seemed to call to him from such a lonely, distant place...

“...Open your eyes...”

The sound was a bit clearer now. The vibrant yellow light shimmered and shone, then gave way to blue glow. It was a blur at first, then it quickly focused.

He could see.

And he could hear just as well now, quite clearly.

“Open your eyes,” the voice said.

“Wake up, Link.”

That was his name. Link. The realization of this seemed to greet him, warmly, like a long-lost friend.
As his sight and his hearing returned, so too did his sense of touch. His skin was warm, then suddenly cool as a strange fluid that had completely enveloped him now drained away. The cold air that took its place was biting to him at first, even in its mildness. He sat up, his blue eyes scanned the area... Unfamiliarity greeted him.

Link was sitting in a tub-like structure that was covered in strange etched symbols, brown in color. Similar markings adorned the walls of the large chamber housing this bizarre structure. A blue glow was ever-present in the room, enhancing its mystery.

He groped at his face with his hands, ran his fingers through his shoulder-length hair. It was already tied up in a small ponytail behind his head.

He tested his motor functions, moved his arms and legs. All working.

Link found himself calmly exiting the tub, his body moving on its own with some automatic sense of duty. As his eyes further adjusted to the light in the room, he noticed a short pedestal in the distance.

He walked towards it, carefully touching its surface. Its top glowed with the same mysterious blue light as the tub he had woken up in, and at his touch, the top of the pedestal began to move. The center elevated itself, and a small rectangular object spun around within it to sit up and face him. A glowing eye adorned this object’s back, staring at him. Beckoning him.

The familiar female voice from before spoke to him again, louder and clearer than before.

“This... is a Sheikah Slate. Take it,” the voice said. “It will help guide you after your long slumber.”

So he’d been sleeping, he noted. His name was Link, and he had been sleeping.

Two mysteries solved, yet several million more to go.

Aside from his minor recognition of this voice, he had absolutely no real reason to trust it. Regardless, he immediately grabbed the rectangular object with both hands, lifting it from its place. It was a small slate that hummed and glowed in his hands. The orange handle on its left side was warm to the touch. The slate whirred to life instantly as he stared intently at it. He had never seen such a strange device before, and yet it too seemed oddly familiar to him.

The pedestal that once housed this odd slate seemed to recognize its absence, resetting itself back to its original position. A nearby door began to open, pulling itself up and out of the way like a great stone curtain. Link walked through the doorway, still holding the slate in his left hand.

He looked around this new room. More strange markings and glowing blue torches lined its walls. In the center of the room stood several large wooden boxes, and a small chest. Link couldn’t quite place why, but he felt a compelling desire to open the chest to see what was inside. Within it, he found an old pair of pants and a worn-out shirt. There was also a set of boots and belts at the bottom.

Simply seeing these clothes sparked a strange recognition within him. Link looked down at himself, tilted his head, and shrugged; he was naked, save for a pair of skintight blue shorts. Despite feeling quite natural in his bare state, he put the clothing on anyway. Moreso out of a sense of expectation rather than of desire. The pants and shirt were comfortable enough, but they were a bit small for him - and threadbare in some places. Still, the pants had several belts with hooks attached, which made for quite a convenient place for him to carry this new slate with him.

Where he would carry it, however, he hadn’t a single clue.

He stepped into the boots, also comfortable, and began to walk towards what he assumed was
another door. This one was much larger, however. Strange patterns criss-crossed its surface and a large eye symbol protruded from its center. Another small pedestal sat next to the door, except this one glowed orange instead of blue. A small blue circle was at the center of it.

That familiar voice chimed in his ear, yet again.

"Hold the Sheikah Slate up to the pedestal. That will show you the way."

Link did as he was told. He examined the strange slate, still humming and glowing… It seemed to have a mind of its own. He held the device up to the pedestal. The second he did so, that small blue circle in its center exploded in a wave of blue light. The orange glowing etchings in the pedestal changed to the same blue color as its center, and the doorway opened itself up in a manner similar to the previous. A light suddenly erupted from the doorway. It wasn't quite as brilliant as the earlier light he first knew. But its radiance warmed his skin, and its brightness caused him to squint as he stepped into it. He stared far off in the distance, at its source. The ache of despair and sorrow he felt was slowly fading, replaced with a growing sense of wonder and curiosity.

“Link…”

The voice that spoke to him now sounded expectational, hopeful.

“You are the light - our light - that must shine upon Hyrule once again.” A strong feeling of responsibility and courage began to flood into Link’s heart.

“Now go.”

Link nodded in response. With a newfound sense of purpose in his gait, he stepped forward into the light, the warmth, the welcoming breath of open air.

Out of the cold darkness… and into the wild unknown.

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**Chapter 1 - Strangers**

“I BEG YOUR PARDON!” the old man shouted.

Link was startled, dropping the baked apple he had picked up off the ground nearby.

He’d previously exited a large cave - one that housed the resurrection shrine he had apparently been sleeping in for some time now - before finding himself on a hilltop overlooking a sprawling, unfamiliar landscape full of trees and shrubbery. Large mountains loomed in the distance, framing in the picturesque view.

This angry old man had been squatted near a fire nearby, and he had appeared to be the only living soul for miles. Link had decided to visit with this mysterious man… although he was beginning to regret that particular decision.

“I do believe that is my baked apple!” the old man continued ranting. “You can’t just go about taking whatever you please!”
Link stared for a bit, unsure if this guy was serious or not. He decided to explain himself to him in an effort to defuse the situation.

“I...was only trying to pick it up for you.” he said, flatly. He was surprised by the confidence his voice carried. “No need to shout...”

Without thinking Link had firmly placed his hands on his hips as he spoke, thumbs tucked in his belt. Old habits returning perhaps?

A grin of recognition spread across the strange man’s face.

“Hohoho!” His laugh was jolly and full of mirth. “Forgive me - I could not resist pulling your leg!”

Link eased up a bit at this. The old man looked harmless enough. He was portly, a bit short, and probably old - if his large white beard was a reliable indicator for his age. Dressed plainly, he sported a red hooded cloak and a pair of worn brown pants with matching gloves. In his hand he held a walking cane, a strange canister dangling from its top. Whatever memories Link once possessed were long gone of course, but he found it an encouraging sign that he was at least able to recognize some unfamiliar things rather quickly.

“Please help yourself” the old man said. “An apple and an open flame make for a succulent treat.”

Link humbly obliged, picking the apple up again, dusting it off, and consuming it quickly. He hadn’t realized earlier, in his confused state of sensory overload, but he was absolutely famished. The old man chuckled a bit at his loud chewing, but Link ignored this. Table manners were pretty far down on his priority list at this point anyway.

“It is a bit strange to see another soul in these parts…” the old man said.

Link squatted down by the fire and tilted his head towards the old man, still chewing.

“Who are you?” Link blurted out, his mouth still full of chewed bits of baked apple. Being plainspoken came naturally to him he supposed.

“Me?” replied the old man. “I’ll spare you my life story. I’m just an old fool who has lived here, alone, for quite some time now.” The look of mild sorrow that crossed the old man’s face as he said this was enough to stop Link from inquiring further. For now.

“What brings a bright-eyed young man like you to a place like this?” the man asked, changing the subject.

Link had the distinct feeling that this man knew quite a bit more than he was letting on. But if he was at all familiar with Link and who he was, he certainly did a good job of hiding it. Link decided to dodge the question; especially since he had no real answer for him anyway.

“Where are we?” Link asked bluntly.

“Answering a question with a question!” the old man mused. “Fair enough. As I cannot imagine our meeting to be a simple coincidence... I shall tell you.”

He definitely knew more than he was letting on. But Link decided to play along, if only to glean as much precious information as he could from this stranger.

The old man explained to Link that they were currently on the Great Plateau, and that it was the birthplace of the entire kingdom of Hyrule. The name “Hyrule” seemed vaguely familiar to Link, and he recalled the mysterious voice from earlier using that same name. But he failed to dredge up any
memories of such a place.

The old man then gestured to a nearby construct a short ways away. It was a massive dilapidated temple; one which time had clearly been mistreating.

“That temple there… Long ago, it was the site of many sacred ceremonies,” he explained. “Ever since the decline of the kingdom 100 years ago, it has sat abandoned, in a state of decay. A forgotten entity. A mere ghost of its former self.”

The old man said nothing more about it. He just sat down in silence, turning to face the fire again. Link continued to stare at the temple. Nature had long began the process of reclaiming it, with greenery taking over its decayed walls. There was a certain intrigue about the temple, and a curiosity grew within him that he just needed to satiate. The old man offered Link a few more baked apples, which he gladly accepted. But otherwise, nothing more was said.

The message was clear: if Link wanted answers to questions about his past and purpose, exploring this ancient temple could be a start. It wasn’t like he had anything else to do at any rate. He stood up, dusted himself off, and began to make his way across the short distance to the temple.

“Thanks for the tip” he called back to the old man.

No response.

Link shrugged, and kept walking. Along the way he picked up a large tool… an axe, he recognized, which was wedged in an old tree stump. Familiarity came upon him as he wielded the tool in his hands. He swung it around, testing its weight. For chopping down trees, he realized. …Among other things.

He also found a pond nearby, with an old-looking metallic object stuck in a rock in its center. For reasons unknown, Link felt compelled to retrieve it. He quickly disrobed, and dove straight into the pond with perfect form. He found that he felt perfectly at home in the water, his body moving gracefully and naturally through it as he kicked his way to the rock in the center of the pond. For a split second, memories flashed before his eyes:

Shimmering scales in many colors. Finned and flailing limbs. Jets of cool water.

…Those haunting, beautiful yellow eyes again.

The visions left as quickly as they came. And before he even knew it, he had already cleared the short distance across the pond. One thing he must have been in his previous life, clearly, was a great swimmer. Link wondered what other skills he had yet to dig up from the past.

From the large rock in the center of the pond he retrieved the metallic object: an old rusted broadsword. He strapped this weapon, along with his new axe, to his back using the belts he’d also found in the chest back in the cave. Fully dressed again, he resumed his walk towards the mysterious temple.

Link’s mind swirled with thoughts and questions. Hyrule was apparently once a magnificent kingdom, now totally ruined...by what? When he had stood on the overlook earlier, just after leaving the cave, he had noticed another large structure looming in the distance. A castle? Hyrule castle? He felt he’d have to make his way there soon if he wanted more answers.

He also wondered just how long this “slumber” of his had lasted. And if perhaps he used to live in this now-declined kingdom himself at one time. If this were the case...that meant he’d been sleeping for 100 years!
Link shook the thought from his head. *Baby steps, Link. Baby steps.* It was too much to consider. Besides, he’d finally arrived at the ruined temple. It was even bigger and even more imposing up close. And is it on cue, that mysterious female voice from earlier called out to him again.

"Link...head to the point marked on the map in your Sheikah Slate."

The slate! He’d completely forgotten all about it. That was no good. No use trying to remember things if he was already forgetting what he was learning...

He quickly pulled out the slate, tapping through its glowing face. Sure enough, a bluish-black square with a glowing yellow dot appeared. *A map? Okay...*

The dot seemed to spin across the slate’s face depending on the direction Link aimed the back of the slate. It was a neat trick, and Link found some bizarre but pointless entertainment with poking and rotating the interactive device. As he played around with this new discovery, a snarl from behind him suddenly caught his attention. He spun quickly, his senses on high alert.

The source of the noise was an angry and odd-looking creature, standing upright. A bit shorter than him. It had glowing blue and purple eyes, and was solid red in color. Its large ears and snout made it look almost comical and non-threatening - except it also brandished a large spiked club. Caked with something...red.

Ah, *blood. Lovely.*

If the visual cues weren't enough, Link could also immediately sense the hostile intent of this weird snarling beast. He slowly hooked his Sheikah Slate back on his waist, carefully keeping his eyes on the creature for its inevitable attack. Sure enough, it began to charge towards him in fury.

An old instinct suddenly kicked in, long forgotten with age but nevertheless sharp. Link drew the rusted broadsword from his back and took a firm stance against this creature. A wide grin automatically spread across his face.

It was time to fight.

And somehow, in his heart, Link was absolutely certain that he was going to win.

Chapter End Notes

Updating this note since nobody wants to read an unscalable wall of pointless text. Basically this is a Mipha x Link-focused novelization of *Breath of the Wild.* Expect way more dialogue, way more memories, and loads of insanity, violence, sadness, and humor. Hope you enjoy this stupid journey with me, you fellow red-finned fish loving fools, you.

See you in Chapter 2: Raising Towers.
Well that was a waste of time…

Link walked away from the temple, feeling somewhat annoyed at that old man. He hadn’t exactly been expecting some great revelation about the world or about his past or anything. But he was hoping he would at least be leaving with a bit more clarity.

Instead, there was nothing there. Well... nothing except for some imposing but derelict machinery, a large and smiling statue of a woman, and a chest. There were also some red pots strewn about the building, which Link had compulsively tossed around for fun. From out of the chest he had picked up an odd wooden weapon with a string attached - a bow - but he otherwise gained very little at all in the way of answers from this brief excursion at the temple.

In fact, he left with even more questions.

The ancient, rusted machinery he saw was scattered everywhere. Overgrowth and dirt caked the surface of most of the units. They appeared to have sat there for many decades, in various states of disrepair. Most of them were incomplete. Meanwhile, the whole units he did see had given him a pretty good idea of what these large machines must have been like. Before time did its work on them, that is. He could imagine their flailing skeletal limbs propelling them about like some bizarre, wild mechanical alien creatures. He could visualize rotating one-eyed heads, humming and glowing. Scanning.

From the way they were posed, it even looked like these things had been attacking the temple. The temple itself was indeed impressive, even in its decayed state. It also appeared to have been of great importance - if the careful architecture and build quality were anything to judge it by.

But these things had been destroying it for some reason.

Why? What was their purpose?

Were these a part of this...apparent calamity of sorts, that had ruined the kingdom?

And why, pray tell, did the ornate markings they bore match both his slate and the shrine he had woken up in?

His mind swirled with possibilities, and Link knew he’d just be wasting time fiddling about there any longer. Even if the old man had implied that he’d find answers there. But he also wasn’t about to return to the old man either... certainly not in his current state of irritation. That was only asking for trouble, he knew. He pulled his Sheikah Slate out again and began to make his way towards the glowing yellow dot on that map...grid...thing. Just as the voice had told him to do earlier.

I’m trusting a disembodied voice over a kind old man… Link thought to himself. I’m not crazy or anything, nope. Not at all.

Ah well. At least he wasn’t running around naked and setting fire to everything.

Yet.
Link chuckled at the thought, and continued his walk towards his next destination. He passed a few ruins on the way, fighting a few more of the same strange red monsters from earlier. These he dispatched just as easily as the previous. They also dropped a few new weapons; shafts of wood with pointed tips.

*Arrows, for my bow,* he recognized.

One of the creatures had even dropped a special holster to carry them. He strapped this around his waist along with the rest of his equipment, then continued on his way. The ruins he passed through appeared to be the remnants of a once-bustling town. The cracked remains of a... fountain sat in the center of it all.

Link felt a bit of strange nostalgia as he wandered through the ruined marketplace, and he found he could actually visualize the excited crowds of people, milling about ignorantly and senselessly. A profound feeling of sorrow briefly crossed his heart. Had he known some of the people that lived in this once-thriving city? Were they all wiped out by those machines?

*More questions.*

He was positively sick of questions.

He quickly moved on, now jogging in the direction of the waypoint on his slate. He could only run in brief spurts at first, as his stamina couldn't seem to keep up with his will.

This frustrated him.

He supposed that his strength and vigor had deprecatated significantly during his long sleep - assuming he was in good shape in the first place at all. He’d have to remedy that soon. Train himself. Torture himself.

*Might as well start now.*

He launched into an all-out sprint, ignoring the creaks in his joints and the burn in his lungs as they gasped for air. He was growing impatient - with the old man, with the world. But mostly with himself and his lack of memory. His lack of ability.

*His limitations. Ugh.*

Before long, he’d stumbled upon a large collection of rocks, sitting atop a small hill. He stopped to look around.

Link was puzzled. *This is it?* He pulled out the slate. He was clearly standing right on the yellow point marked on the map.

*Guess I’m here...*

He made his way to the top of the rocks, still out of breath. Peering inside, he saw an ornate pedestal - similar to the one he’d found inside the shrine he’d awoken in. There was a perfect rectangle in the shape of his slate in the center of it. Directly pointed at the pedestal was a large spire, aiming straight down from a spherical structure propped above. An eye symbol with a single tear adorned the surface of the structure. Link noticed that it matched the symbol on the front of his Sheikah Slate.

He had a feeling he’d be seeing this symbol quite often.

Still breathing heavily, he climbed down from the rocks and placed the slate into the pedestal. The
slate spun around, the face of the pedestal rotated, and it locked into place with a flash of orange light.

'Sheikah tower activated' read the words on the slate. 'Please watch for falling rocks.'

*Uh oh.*

The large eye symbol above suddenly erupted in a glow of blue light.

And then a low rumble…

The ground began to shake violently, knocking Link flat on his rear.

*Oh no.*

BOOOOOOM! The platform he was standing on suddenly erupted from the ground. The world was exploding around him. He could feel himself ascending, higher and higher, barely noticing the frantic chirping of birds and the shrieks of animals nearby. Large chunks of broken rock were flying all over the place, but mercifully missed striking him. He repeatedly tried to regain his footing, failed. Finally, he just closed his eyes in resignation and sighed heavily.

Just like with everything else he’d experienced so far, he was merely just going along for the ride at this point.

The platform’s ascent continued on for a minute or so, but it felt like an eternity to Link.

Then finally, there was silence. The rumbling, shaking chaos had ceased, all was quiet. Peace had settled in again.

Link laid there, speechless. Blue light emanated around him like great plumes of rising steam, before disappearing as quickly as it came. Realizing that whatever insane process he’d initiated was complete, Link slowly picked himself up. He carefully glanced around, brushing small rocks, dust, and debris off his clothes and hair. He glanced at the screen of his slate. 'Great Plateau Tower,' it read.

And a tower it most certainly was. It loomed over the landscape around him, giving him an amazing look at the world’s scenery. The view he’d seen upon exiting the cave earlier absolutely paled in comparison to this. Rolling hills, sprawling mountains, even an ocean far in the distance. The view was captivating, mesmerizing - so much so, that he hardly noticed the multitude of strange glowing blue symbols now descending from the spire above the pedestal housing his slate.

'Distilling local information…'

What?

PLOP. The symbols had converged into a single point on the spire’s tip, dropping onto his slate like a large bead of water. A flash of the eye symbol appeared on the screen, and the blue and black grid lines he’d used as his “map” earlier now gave way to a variety of colors, brown, blue, tan...he could make out what appeared to be small lakes and forests. The unmistakable lines of old buildings and ruins…

Link smiled, grabbing the Sheikah Slate from the pedestal to get a closer look. *Now this… this is what I call a map.* Satisfied, Link placed the slate back on his hip and turned to leave.
“Remember…”

That mysterious female voice again, muffled.

“Try… try to remember…”

*Remember? That's all I've been trying to do since I woke up…*

But this gave Link pause. The voice was different now. It seemed to come from a specific direction, rather than just filling his ears with sound as it had before. He turned towards the source - the castle he’d seen earlier. It was much clearer from his vantage point up on the tower now. A huge light emanated from the castle’s central tower - glowing the same yellow glow as the light he’d seen back in the shrine.

“You have been asleep for the past 100 years,” the voice said.

*Guess I was right about that…* Link thought to himself, though the confirmation of this did little to ease his mind. The ground shook again, violently, and he braced himself for the tower to start moving again - except it wasn’t the tower this time. It was coming from the castle.

“The beast…” the voice continued. “When the beast regains its true power, this world will face its end.”

Only now did Link notice the enormous spires protruding from around the castle, glowing purple and red. Contained within them…a great swirling vortex of pure hatred and malice. The same one he’d seen over and over during his century-long slumber. And there, in its midst, appeared its source: a gigantic swine-like face with evil yellow eyes at its end...circling the castle. A great roar emanated from this massive, near-amorphous creature as plumes of purple ash and smoke erupted from behind it.

The beast.

Perhaps he was just being obvious...but Link was really quite certain that this was the source of all the problems in this world. Just seeing this… thing filled him with an inexplicable anger and rage.

“How then…you must hurry, Link.” the voice cried.

“…Before it’s too late.”

The yellow light, cutting through the malice, suddenly increased in size. It blinded him - like a small sun - before fading into darkness, the purple glowing plumes of malice disappearing along with it. The experience left Link shaking. Not in fear, no, but in sheer fury. He felt himself suppressing the urge to charge after this thing immediately. So he took a deep breath, calmed himself. Deep down, he knew that immediately charging after it would be rash anyway. His mind was still a blank slate after all. Flying in blind would be suicide.

And besides all that…he had yet another problem:

How, exactly, was he going to get off this ridiculous tower?

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Link collapsed on the ground, exhausted, but triumphant. He’d finally found a way down from the Plateau Tower. Platforms jutted out in a spiral pattern along its sides, and he’d been able to alternate jumping and climbing down the many, many feet that separated him from the surface he desired to return to.
But between his sprinting excursion and this downward climbing workout, Link was already pretty exhausted for the day.

_Curse this weak body..._ he thought to himself as he rested. _Curse it all._

Link eventually caught his breath, coughed a bit, sat up. He wondered if that old man from earlier was still around. He was desperately in need of something to drink...and to eat...

“**HOOOO!!!**”

_Right on schedule..._

Link immediately recognized the gruff voice of the old man.

..._but where was he?_ Link glanced around, confused.

“**HO!**” It came from above him.

..._What._

The old man was gliding down towards Link, clutching a large winglike structure of cloth and wood above him. He soared down, landing gently - a bit too gently, considering his weight - right next to where Link sat.

“My my…” said the old man. “It would seem we have quite the enigma here.”

Link laughed incredulously.

“You’re telling me!” he said. “How in the world did you-”

“This tower and others just like it—” the old man interrupted, “—have erupted across the land, one after another.” The old man groped at his beard inquisitively. “It is almost as though...a long-dormant power has awoken quite suddenly!” he gave Link a mischievous look as he said this.

Link sighed. He knew it was useless to press the old man for questions. He decided to just cut to the chase instead. “I...heard a voice at the top of the tower.” he informed him.

The old man’s eyebrows perked up. “Well now! A voice, you say?” he asked. “And did you happen to recognize this mysterious voice?”

Link fought the urge to lie to the man. He was still a bit peeved about the pointless little temple “adventure” he’d been sent on earlier. But he knew that it was in his nature to be honest. He just couldn’t help it.

“I...think I did?” he said. “The voice was vaguely familiar. But only somewhat.” he shrugged, pulled himself onto his feet, dusted himself off. His hands found their place on the front of his hips again. _Old habits..._

“Does that mean anything to you?” Link asked.

_So much for not asking questions..._

The old man turned away and, with his walking stick, pointed in the direction of the castle in the distance. “I assume you caught sight of that atrocity enshrouding the castle.” he said.

_Blatantly changing the subject. Excellent._ Link sighed again - except loudly this time, so the old man
could hear it. This went ignored.

“That...is Calamity Ganon.” he said. A hint of contempt was evident in his voice as he said it. “One hundred years ago that vile entity brought the kingdom of Hyrule to ruin.”

In that moment, Link knew that his life - both past, and future - were bound to this calamity. Something clearly had happened to him one hundred years ago to have brought him to where he was now…and this stranger most certainly knew what that something was. The old man continued: “It appeared suddenly and destroyed everything in its path. So many innocent lives were lost in its wake. For a century, the very symbol of our kingdom, Hyrule Castle, has managed to contain that evil. But just barely…” he crossed his arms, shook his head. “It festers there, building strength to once again unleash its blight upon the land. I...fear that moment is fast approaching.” he turned to face Link again.

“I must ask you, courageous one… do you intend to make your way to the castle?”

Link nodded without hesitation.

“...I had a feeling you did. Mind you, there are steep cliffs all along this isolated plateau. With your current stamina levels...you’d surely fall to your death if you attempted to climb down.”

Link couldn’t argue with that. He’d barely made it off that stupid tower earlier. Couldn’t even imagine trying to scale down the enormous plateau walls. Although a sick side of him really wanted to try.

“That said!” the old man continued, “if you had a paraglider like mine...well. It would be another story entirely.”

Hand it over then! Link wanted to say. But he wisely stayed his tongue. He was blunt - but not that blunt.

The old man seemed to pick up on what Link wanted to say. “...Ah, I’m sure you’re wondering if I will lend you this one,” he said.

Link nodded. But he knew what was coming. It wouldn’t be that easy. Couldn’t be that easy. Not when he was dealing with this increasingly crafty old stranger.

“Oh!” the man chuckled. “Well, you must know that nothing truly comes free in this world…”

There it was. The bargain.

“Come, let me show you something.” The old man lead Link to top of a large stone nearby. As they reached the top he pointed in the direction of a glowing coned structure in the distance. “You see that structure there?” he said. “The one with the strange orange light? It began to glow at the exact moment those two towers rose up from the ground.”

For all Link knew, this guy had been gorging himself on cooked apples by his little fire when all this craziness went down. How had he seen all this?

...Of course he’d seen all this. This was no ordinary old man. He’d known that much all along. And it frustrated Link to be completely at the man’s mercy, exasperated him to have all these feelings inside with no memories at all to bind them. To feel nostalgic for places and people he didn’t know.
“If you ask me,” said the man, “such a place as that shrine might house a nice treasure...wouldn’t you agree?”

Link said nothing.

“Treasure for the paraglider...a fair exchange I believe. I shall wait for your successful retrieval.” The old man took a seat right there on the rock.

Link stared for a bit, took a deep breath, and stepped off the rock towards the shrine.

He didn’t grumble or pout or anything. He was dead-set on getting this done, on finally leaving this cursed plateau. Gathering up his power. And eventually obliterating whatever that thing was that had destroyed this land. His land. If that meant he had to be an errand boy for this stranger, then so be it. He’d play the game for now. He was sure the guy meant well anyway, even if his methods were a bit...condescending. Cryptic.

Irritating?

All of the above.

No matter. He had no choice but to trust him. But if the old man was leading him on yet another fool’s errand, well... Link was going to have a bit more than a bone or two to pick with him-

GROOOOWWLLLLL. His stomach suddenly unleashed a horribly inhuman roar, breaking his contemplative state. And only now did Link actually pout at his situation.

Because worst of all, he was still savagely hungry.

Chapter End Notes

Next is Chapter 3: Off the Table
(finally lol)
Three down... one more to go. Finally.

As Link had suspected, there was much, much more to this little bargain he had with the old man after all. He hadn’t wanted just a single treasure from only one of these shrines...

He wanted four of them.

The old man had Link running positively ragged across the plateau, encountering hostile creatures at nearly every turn. This ranged from more of those easily killable red monsters - bokoblins as the old man called them - to packs of wild wolves on a snowy mountaintop. Even had to fight off skeletal undead versions of those bokoblins too. These stupid things ensured that he could never even once settle down for a brief rest when the sun set. They seemed to spawn endlessly from the ground in constant waves during the night...

He’d also encountered a few more husks of the same ancient machinery he’d seen at the Temple of Time before...

Except these units had been functioning.

A few missed blasts of supercharged energy, aimed directly at him, had completely melted the stone walls behind him. This was enough to force Link to simply avoid fighting these immobile machines altogether. He wasn’t an idiot after all. Stubbornly bold and courageous, perhaps.

But not an idiot.

He hadn’t apparently survived 100+ years just to get vaporized by ancient crippled automatons. Favoring stealth instead, he had crept past them and through the ruins they were housed in so he could reach the shrine that was located there. He had retrieved the treasure that was inside, then sneaked out the same way he had arrived.

Meanwhile, that old man had strangely been spotted all over the plateau. Seemed to always be one step ahead of wherever Link was trying to get to. And with each encounter, he’d frustratingly change the main objective on him.

“I need two treasures. Did I not say?” he’d told Link after the first shrine trial.

No. You didn’t say.

“Oh I’m terribly sorry, I actually meant four. The final treasure can be found on that snowy frostbitten mountaintop there. Did I not mention?”

No! You did not!

So here he now found himself in the midst of a mountaintop snowstorm... waist-deep in snow... exhausted and sleepy. The wind was biting against any exposed skin. The ends of his hair were frozen solid, he couldn’t feel his toes... or his hands really. Wasn't even completely certain he still had a face.
Still, he stubbornly made his way to what would be the very last shrine, according to the old man. Really, Link had no more reason to trust any further assurances from that codger at this point. But he trudged along...

It had been two long and painful days since his awakening into this forsaken world. He hardly had a single moment to himself. Being persistently on the move at least had the benefit of tortuously training and conditioning Link for his likely trials ahead. Still, he felt as if he were pretty much eternally looking for a good spot to stop and catch his breath, all while being forced to move on to each next objective immediately.

_Torture and training... Be careful what you wish for._

On the bright side, he had a full belly now. Learning to hunt and cook quickly solved _that_ problem for him. A seemingly bottomless rucksack - gifted to him by the old man - now contained about twelve or thirteen carefully roasted hunks of steak. Delicious. Therapy for his stomach, warmth for the soul.

Now he just had to do something about his massive sleep deprivation issue… _Another century of sleep, perhaps?_

_Ha!_

He continued to slosh his way through the ever-thickening snow, clad in a warm doublet also lent to him by the old man for this final excursion. For all his grievances against him, Link was thankful that the mysterious old stranger was at least freely giving him the basics of what he needed to get by. And he’d thanked him each time.

“Your retrieval of the treasures is all the thanks I need,” the man had replied.

_Right...we will see about that._

Link ascended a small hill, breathing into his hands in a vain effort to keep them warm.

_Must be close, _he thought. _I've explored just about every inch of this damned mountain..._

He reached the top of the hill, and with weary, tired eyes he peered through the snow and fog...and finally saw the welcoming orange glow of the last shrine.

_YES._

Stamina suddenly renewed, Link sprinted towards the shrine. It was perched precariously atop a small but steep hill which he would have to climb. Without hesitation, he jumped onto the rock face and began to scurry his way up. He ignored the sharp signals of pain that his bloody, frostbitten fingers shot towards his brain.

If there’d been only one thing he’d discovered about himself over the last couple of days, it was that he had a superbly high tolerance for pain. He did hope that he wouldn’t have to test the limits of that anytime soon, however.

After a short climb, he arrived. He examined the shrine immediately but there were no surprises to be found here. Its entrance was designed exactly like the last three shrines: an ornately-sculpted brown and orange-glowing cone with a pedestal nearby. Scanning his slate on the pedestal’s sensor would allow him access, so he did just that. The orange glow emanating between the stone etchings on the shrine’s surface changed to blue. The several interlocking bars of stone serving as doors folded themselves inward, giving him access to the platform that would send him into the depths of the
shrine. Link stepped on the platform, took a moment to gather his thoughts as it descended. Reaching into his bag he pulled out a large chunk of meat and began gnawing on it absently.

He wondered what new toy he’d find in this particular shrine. Within each of the previous shrines he had retrieved far more than just mere treasure, after all. Housed in each one were pedestals that upgraded his Sheikah Slate with new “runes,” which were mystical applications that gave it some interesting world-bending capabilities:

In the first shrine, he’d found magnesis - a rune for his slate that allowed him to move large metallic objects at ease.

Next was the bombs, which at a single touch of the slate’s screen produced glowing blue explosives. Seemingly from thin air. The pyromaniac inside of him had a field day with these, blowing up enemies he encountered left and right once he’d left the shrine.

And then there was stasis, which allowed him to hold both small and large objects in place. He discovered that kinetic energy was stored in anything targeted with stasis, and he had spent more than just a few minutes of his time beating and launching massive boulders all across the Great Plateau. This provided him with a few precious moments of eased tension, as indicated by the childlike giggles each successful launch produced from him.

If the old man had seen this, he’d surely have scolded him for wasting time. Not that Link cared. There was only one person on that plateau wasting another’s time…

*And that person most certainly isn’t me,* he’d thought.

Link stepped off the platform and into the shrine. As expected, the ghostly voice of this shrine’s Sheikah monk greeted him.

"To you who sets foot in this shrine... I am Keh Namut. In the name of the Goddess Hylia, I offer this trial." The words echoed through the shrine’s interior.

Link scanned his Sheikah Slate in a nearby pedestal.

"Sheikah Slate authenticated" it read "Distilling rune."

He found it no mere coincidence that these monks shared the 'Sheikah' moniker with his strange device. This ancient tribe, or race, or whatever it was, clearly had a huge hand in shaping the world he found himself in. He’d be interested in digging up more information about them, if he could ever manage the time… *between boulder-launching, and fighting back calamities and such.*

The pedestal finished condensing the information onto his slate, again ‘dropping’ it on with yet another loud PLOP.

The word 'cryonis' appeared on his screen. 'Create a pillar of ice from a water surface.'

*Ah, just what I need right now. More ice.* He was still shivering from his frigid trek up the mountain.

The trials he faced in this particular shrine were designed around this new application, just like the others were for their respective runes. Curiously, Link found that each trial also seemed like it was geared to train him *specifically.* But perhaps he was being too self-important for thinking that.

*I’m not even remotely worth all of this preparation... can’t even run ten feet without wanting to die,* he thought, as he used his new cryonis rune to build another large tower of ice out of the water in front of him.
Nevertheless...I have to admit. These runes are quite awesome.

Within these shrines, Link had encountered several of what he recognized as miniaturized versions of the great mechanical beasts that had tried to kill him in the ruins before. These units, however, seemed designed to train rather than annihilate. As a result, Link had loads of fun toying with them.

And it was no different in this shrine. He turned the corner after lifting a closed gate up out of the water with an ice block, and he saw another one of these little guardian robots patrolling the corridor ahead. It had yet to spot him, however. Link crept through the shallow water, slowly, then climbed on top of the little machine and sat atop its head. Knowing something was amiss, the half-domed head of the robot began to spin around wildly, and Link held on tight for the ride. He admittedly felt a bit of guilt in doing this, knowing that there were greater priorities. But he had a feeling that - in the past - it would have been typical of him to combat stress and tragedy with comedy.

When he’d had his fill of this wild spinning entertainment, Link pulled one of his arrows from the pouch on his back and jammed it straight into the single glowing eye of the machine. He jumped off and turned around in time to see the doomed robot fizzle with energy, then explode in a shower of sparks. After collecting the parts it left behind, which he was certain would come in handy later, he started to make his way towards the end of the shrine.

But before leaving the room, he noticed a small glowing chest sitting on the wall in the chamber. His compulsive nature would not allow him to leave without collecting every single little treasure that he could find in each of these shrines. So he used a cryonis ice block to elevate himself high enough to look inside.

And he was glad he did. Inside, he found an old weapon - a spear! - that felt instantly comfortable in his hands. Ignoring the fact that it should not at all be possible for such a long pole to be housed inside this chest, he tested the spear out, jabbed at the air in front of him...

This felt good.

He jumped down from the wall, and suddenly felt compelled to sprint down the corridor, stabbing the spear ahead of him with one arm then spinning back onto his feet in a seamless motion. The move came naturally to him. Far too naturally for him really, causing him to wonder just how good his spearsmanship had been in his past life.

He stood there for a minute... gripped the spear more tightly in his hands, examined it...he began to drift away as if in a dream.

His mind swirled with intense nostalgia as visions started flashing in his eyes...

He was younger... much younger.

A large metallic spear was clutched in his small hands. Cold to the touch.

He saw another pair of red hands, warm and friendly, guiding his arms and his movements as he propelled the spear forward repeatedly.

Before long, the hands let go, and he continued lunging the spear into the air in front of him on his own. Comfortably, and confidently.

“Very good form, Link!” a soft, serene voice said behind him.

The sound of it warmed his heart. Link smiled, turned around.
The female voice belonged to someone a little bit taller than him, red in color, a totally different species...but he couldn’t make out the face. It was a blur to him. All he could recognize was...

...A pair of bright yellow eyes.

Link gasped as the dream broke. He realized he’d been holding his breath the whole time. This was by far the most vivid vision yet.

It wasn’t much...but it was something. He hoped this was just a harbinger of more memories still to come. He strapped his new favored weapon to his back and proceeded to complete the remaining trials within the shrine - nothing that required too much critical thinking. A simple matter of balancing a large see-saw with an ice block underneath, and he had made his way to the Sheikah monk of this shrine.

Like all the others, this one appeared to have been mumified or sealed away ages ago. He was encased in a transparent blue cube of energy, likely preserving and protecting the body of the monk for the duration of his time there. Also like the previous ones, Link wasn’t entirely sure if this one was alive or not…

He touched the barrier, and it exploded all around the room in a shower of blue sparks.

"Your resourcefulness in overcoming this trial speaks to the promise of a hero..." the monk’s voice echoed through the chamber. The monk then gifted Link with the treasure of each shrine - a purple orb with a faint yellow glow emanating from the interior. On its surface was a symbol - a yellow pair of wings. Link still had no idea what the crazy old man wanted with these strange little items...but he had a feeling he'd be finding that out rather shortly.

His duty fulfilled, the monk slowly dematerialized and floated away in a flurry of greenish-blue particles of light.

“May the goddess be with you…” the voice trailed off.

“And you as well…” Link said automatically.

__________________________________________________________________________

Link emerged from the shrine.

*And that’s a wrap!* He thought, excitedly. Now he just needed to track down that old-

“OHO!”

*Never mind.*

The voice was, of course, coming from the old man who was yet again descending gracefully on his paraglider right towards Link.

"With this," the man said as he landed, "you have now acquired all of the Spirit Orbs from the shrines on this plateau."

“How did you-” Link began. “...Never mind.”

"Oho ho!” the old man exclaimed. “Extraordinary. That means it is now time to tell you everything."

*Yes. Finally.*

"But first..." he grinned and began to turn. And suddenly Link realized that yet another stupid little
game of his was likely coming. Maybe it was the fatigue, or the cold, or a combination of it, but something snapped in Link’s brain.

“NO!” he shouted. “No ‘but first’! No more games, no more anything!”

The old man raised an eyebrow.

“Excuse me Link, but-”

“I’ve had it with you!” Link said. “There’s always a catch. Always. And for what? Is that how you get your sick entertainment? Jerking me around like a toy? Just be up-front with me. That’s all I ask!”

The old man tried to keep his poise.

“I see. Link, listen to me. I understand your frustration, but-”

“No more.” Link said flatly. "I am tired, I am cold, I am sleep-deprived...and you know what? I can pretty much handle all that. No problem.

But you.

All you’ve done since I got here is lie and deceive and manipulate me for kicks... all while hiding behind that big bushy beard of yours! ...if that’s even a real beard!”

The old man was taken aback at that one.

Link wasn’t being serious, of course. The beard was most certainly real.

But he wasn’t about to miss an opportunity to give the old man a taste of his own silly medicine. Link was seeing red, and he had a point to prove: he was not getting jerked around by this guy anymore. He could endure just about anything this world would throw at him - but one thing he knew he absolutely couldn’t stand...was flaky people.

“Oho ho…” the old man laughed, nervously at first, before suddenly exploding in a fit of joyful laughter. This carried on for several seconds.

“After so many years…” he eventually said, through tears of joy, “I finally get to see the true Link, once hidden behind a silent, stoic mask. Snarky, bold, impatient, straight-forward...and I daresay quite funny indeed! Hohoho...”

Link wasn’t at all sure what the old man meant by that. But he finally started to calm down.

“A century ago you would not have even dared to utter such words to me.” the old man explained. “My, my, how tragedy changes our perspectives...how quickly our fickle wealth and social status will disappear with failure.” He grinned at Link. “I assure you that I am not offended, young one. Quite the contrary, I am pleased... Pleased to know that amnesia has torn down the great walls that once contained your raw emotion.” The old man pointed at Link’s Sheikah Slate.

“Look at your map. I want you to meet me at the place where two lines drawn between each of the four shrines would intersect-”

Link raised an eyebrow at him.

The old man coughed.

“Er…the Temple of Time, that is. Meet me there,” he explained, smiling.
Link grinned, and the old man simply disappeared from right there in front of him.

*Now that's more like it, Link thought.*

*No more cryptic instructions. No more secrets.*

---

That old temple statue came in handy after all.

Link was ascending the tall ladder to the top of the Temple of Time, having taken a brief stop to pray at what he now identified as the statue of the ancient goddess Hylia.

“Time has stolen your health and vigor from you, oh courageous one,” an ethereal voice had said as he prayed. “I can offer you restorative power, in exchange for the symbols of your courage you have attained within the shrines.”

So that’s what these orbs were.

He felt instantly energized after praying, so much so that he was practically hopping up this ladder to where the old man was waiting.

*I traded away the treasures he wanted ...*Link thought. *Oops.*

But he knew deep down that this was what the old man had intended for him in the first place…

Night had settled in during Link’s long trek off of the mountain and towards the Temple of Time. Fortunately, there was just enough light from the bright moon to see his way around the rooftop. The old man was in a destroyed room towards the front part of the temple roof. He smiled as Link arrived.

"Now then... The time has come to show you who I truly am," he said.

“I...was King Rhoam Bosphoramus Hyrule. The last leader of this once-great kingdom.”

A brilliant flash of light, and the old man had disappeared…

In his place, clad in regal clothing, was the ghost of the old man. He was suspended above the ground, surrounded by bright blue-green flames that danced in the darkness.

"The Great Calamity was merciless..." he began. "It devastated everything in its path, lo, a century ago. It was then that my life was taken away from me. I have remained here, in spirit form, since that time."

Link wanted to say something, but he found himself utterly speechless at this revelation. He’d already suspected that the old man, Rhoam, had some connection to the kingdom.

But he was the king?

*Whoa.*

“I must apologize for leaving you in the dark for so long.” continued Rhoam. “But I did not find it wise to overwhelm you while your memory was still fragile. I thought it best to assume a temporary form for the time being.” He turned slowly, and floated towards the shattered window facing Hyrule castle in the distance.

“Forgive me.” Rhoam paused for a few seconds, then glanced back at Link.
"I believe you are now ready....ready to hear what happened 100 years ago."

Link nodded, and the same nostalgic feeling he’d felt multiple times before began to settle into his heart. His vision narrowed, melted… to the scene of a great castle. Hyrule castle. The great beast was swirling around it.

The voice of King Rhoam cut across the scene in front of him.

“You must learn the history of the demon king… in order to truly understand. He was born into this kingdom, but over time was transformed into the raw, horrifying malice you see before you.”

The scene of the vision changed again. A tall, dark-skinned man with sharp features and a large nose stood before him...hair red and wild like a roaring flame…

This was the demon king.

_He then morphed into a raging monster, a massive horned pig. The face vaguely resembled the swirling mass of malice around the castle…_

“Stories of Ganon were passed from generation to generation in the form of legends and fairy tales,” Rhoam said. “But there was also...a prophecy. ‘The signs of a resurrection of Calamity Ganon are clear, and the power to oppose it lies dormant beneath the ground.’”

_The vision changed to a large rock wall, with several men and women chipping away at the stone with large tools._

“We decided to heed the prophecy and began excavating large areas of land. We discovered several ancient relics made by our distant ancestors.”

_The rock wall suddenly exploded in a shower of boulders and dust. The face of an enormous beastlike machine emerged._

“These relics, the Divine Beasts, were giant machines piloted by warriors.”

_A group of men surrounded a husk of one of the ruined energy-blasting guardian robots that had been scattered around the Temple of Time._

“We also found the Guardians, an army of mechanical soldiers who fought autonomously. This coincided with legends oft-repeated in our land... We learned of a princess with a sacred power, and her appointed knight, chosen by the sword that seals the darkness.”

_Back to Ganon, the demon king... a green-clad figure emerged into Link’s view, fighting off Ganon. At his side, a beautiful blond-haired woman clad in white robes. Link could feel time rushing past within the vision, the figures changing as it did: different faces, heights, eye colors, clothing,...but the demon king remained the same in each iteration._

_As did the result: its demise at the hands of these two._

“It was they who sealed Ganon away using the power of these ancient relics.”

_Another scene change… to what appeared to be the latest incarnation of these two heroes. Their faces were obscured from view, and only their silhouettes could be seen._

“One hundred years ago, there was a princess set to inherit a sacred power and a skilled knight at her side. It was clear that we must follow our ancestors’ path.”
The king didn’t even need to finish. Link could tell that the male figure in this vision was, in fact, him. And this woman? Must surely have been the voice that was coming from the castle. The princess.

“We selected four skilled individuals from across Hyrule and tasked them with the duty of piloting the Divine Beasts.”

Four individuals now stood in front of the princess… with Link himself in the middle.

“With the princess as their commander, we dubbed these pilots Champions. A name that would solidify their unique bond. The princess, her appointed knight, and the rest of the Champions were on the brink of sealing away Ganon…”

Link suspected what was coming next.

“But nay…Ganon was cunning, and he responded with a plan beyond our imagining.”

Back to the castle, massive dark clouds floated above as the malice swirled and spun around it, thunder, lightning, rumbling…like a great earthquake. And a mighty bloodcurdling roar from the beast… from the demon king, which shook the entire world at its very foundation. Balls of dark energy erupted from the castle, possessing the guardians being cleaned and examined by workers at the castle. Some of the energy also began possessing each of the divine beasts. The blue light emanating from their interior changed from blue to purple, dark with malice.

“He appeared from deep below Hyrule Castle, seized control of the Guardians and the divine beasts. And turned them against us. The champions lost their lives. Those residing in the castle as well.”

Back to the castle, where swarms of possessed guardians wreaked epic destruction upon the populace of the castle town. Buildings were on fire as superheated energy blasted its way from the singular eye atop each guardian’s head. They marched quickly through on their mechanical tentacled legs, trampling citizens underfoot.

Link cringed at the screams of pain and agony that emanated from inside the buildings, as people were vaporized left and right by the corrupted guardians.

“The appointed knight, gravely wounded, collapsed while defending the princess. And thus the kingdom of Hyrule was devastated absolutely by Calamity Ganon.”

“However…the princess survived…

...to face Ganon alone.”

The princess now stood in front of the ruined Hyrule Castle. “Link…” the female voice from earlier…the princess… “Link, you are our final hope. The fate of Hyrule rests with you!” Her cry was desperate, longing.

The great beast, swirling above, turned its attention to the princess. He could see its face quite clearly now, demonic, bestial. A mere shell of the demon king’s visage he’d seen before. As the princess held her hand in the air, a bright glow emanating from it, the beast suddenly dove in to consume her, and-

The vision ended. Link was back in the room at the temple of time, Rhoam floating in front of him again. He was breathing heavily. The vision was so vivid, so real, that it was like he had actually been there. And he realized with absolute certainty now….that he had.
“That princess was my own daughter. My dear Zelda,” said Rhoam, his voice full of sadness and regret.

“And I believe that you’ve come to realize...that you were the chosen knight who fought bravely at her side. Until the end.” He turned to face Link directly. “You were immediately taken to the Shrine of Resurrection. Here you now stand, revitalized, 100 years later.”

“Well,” Link said, breaking his silence, “that solves the biggest mystery of all for me. I wondered where all these awesome scars had come from…” his lighthearted sarcasm helped ease the dark mood, and even Rhoam found himself smiling.

“And I also presume,” Link continued “…that the words of guidance I have been hearing since I woke up have been coming from Zelda herself?”

Rhoam nodded. “You are just as sharp in the mind as your appetite is deep…” he mused. “Even now, as she works to restrain Ganon from within Hyrule Castle, she calls out for your help. But her power will soon be exhausted. Once that happens, Ganon will freely regenerate himself and nothing will stop him from consuming our land.” his mood suddenly turned serious. “Link, I have absolutely no right to ask this of you, as a king who failed to protect his own kingdom.” his hands curled into fists. “But I am powerless here. You must save her...my daughter. And do whatever it takes to annihilate Ganon.” He turned again to face the broken window. “Somehow, Ganon has maintained control over all four divine beasts. Freeing them from his grasp - as well as the souls of the champions within - will be paramount to your success. As will figuring out a way to deal with the dozens of guardians surrounding Hyrule Castle…”

Link clasped his hands together. “Right...so... I probably shouldn't charge head-on into the castle and try to slaughter Ganon with a tree branch and a couple of arrows then, right?”

The king chuckled. “While I do not doubt your abilities… and as much as I would admittedly enjoy seeing your success in doing so… I must say that your best bet would be to instead head east towards Kakariko Village.” Rhoam pointed out towards a distant mountain, one that gave the appearance of having been split right in half. “There, you will find the elder, Impa. She can tell you more about the path that lies ahead. We may be running out of time… but I do believe Zelda can hold out for a little longer. At least long enough for you to get enough strength back to sufficiently seal Calamity Ganon away for good.”

He turned to face Link once again. “Head towards the peaks, then follow the road north. It will take you straight to where you need to go.”

Link nodded. He was ready.

“Oh!” the king said suddenly. “And before you go on another tirade against me…”

"Oh right..." Link said. "...sorry about-"

Rhoam waved away Link's apology. The paraglider he'd been using before suddenly materialized before them, “...I must at least prove to you that I am a man of my word!”

Link grabbed the paraglider, which collapsed immediately into a small rod that fit comfortably into his rucksack.

“And I think that’s it.” said Rhoam. “Save Hyrule, Link. Save the kingdom. And please-” He paused for a second…”please tell Zelda...how much I love her.”

Rhoam began to disappear.
“Oh and one more thing” he said, as his existence continued to fade away, “do send my warmest regards to King Dorephan. And should fortune favor you, to your... friend, Lady Mipha.”

Wait, who?

Rhoam flashed a grim smile, before finally disappearing for good.

Silence.

The old man - the king - was gone.

And of course he’d used the opportunity to be cryptic towards Link, just one more time…

He sighed. There was a lot to take in. He’d have to process it all later. He emptied his rucksack right there on the floor, careful to toss out anything he no longer needed. In a chest nearby, he found a much-sturdier bow than the cracked one he’d found during his first trip to the temple. He wondered if the king had left it there for him.

He gathered all of his things, strapped them onto his back, and turned to face the open countryside again. The split peaks towered in the distance. He’d be heading there next.

Link felt a pang of sadness as he prepared to leave the plateau. Reminders of a once-thriving civilization had been all over this place. Knowing of his failure to protect these people only made him feel even more sick on the inside. He sincerely hoped the rest of the world wasn’t like this…he wasn’t sure his heart could take it.

Link unfolded the paraglider in his hands, then jumped straight off the top of the temple without looking back. He began to cut through the air like a bird as he flew above the incredibly high walls of the plateau and towards the open wildlands below. As he gracefully soared through the low clouds above Hyrule field, he chuckled silently to himself.

*I told the former ruler of the mighty, great nation of Hyrule… the most powerful man in the entire world for his time... that his beard was fake.*

If he’d had any friends left in this world to recount this story too, then they would surely be laughing about that one forever.

Chapter End Notes

There was a time when I thought this chapter was long. Haha

Next is Chapter 4: Best Way to Travel.
The sun was slowly rising above the great plains of the former Kingdom of Hyrule. As dawn broke, Link found himself roused awake by the gentle warmth of sunlight on his face. He sat up, stretched his arms, yawned...

He was sitting atop an ancient vertical stone pillar situated a mile or two outside the Great Plateau. Link had figured it was the only safe place he could sleep for the moment, high above the ground. He’d built a fire at the top and quickly passed into a deep sleep - one that could only have been rivaled by his previous century-long slumber.

With his Sheikah Slate’s convenient scope function, he scanned the horizon to get his bearings. He spotted a long stone structure - a bridge - crossing a river nearby. It was part of the main road he intended to travel, straight towards the twin peaks he saw in the distance. He’d have to make his way there next.

Link strapped on his gear, whipped out his glider, and began to soar in the direction of the bridge.

As he did so, he spotted movement on it. A monster?

...No...

It was a person!

Link grew excited. This was the first person he’d seen since his awakening three days prior, apart from the old man. But Rhoam had been merely a spirit… this person was alive! He landed gracefully at the foot of the bridge, and sprinted straight towards this new unknown individual...

“GAH!” The figure on the bridge drew his spear as Link approached him, aiming it directly at him. “Get back, you monster!” Link held his hands up in the air.

“Relax. I’m friendly.”

The man squinted, then dropped his guard. “Oh! Oh… sorry. You startled me. I wasn’t expecting anyone around here so early in the morning…”

Link put his hands on his waist and grinned widely. “...And had I truly been a monster… do you honestly think that I’d actually ‘get back’ just because you told me to?”

The man shrugged. “Point taken.” He put his spear away. “Pleased to meet you!” he said. “The name’s Brigo. I patrol this bridge….o.” He stuck his hand out towards Link.

Link just stared at his hand for a second.

“Er….” Brigo began, “Sorry, that was a pretty bad pun.” his hand retracted slightly.

Link’s face remained stoic for a second, then broke into a smile. Recognizing Brigo’s gesture, he firmly grasped the young man’s hand and shook it violently. “On the contrary,” Link said, “I thought that was pretty funny.”

Brigo returned his smile, now fully disarmed. “Right…sorry. I’ve been out here alone, talking to
myself for a while. Guess that’s made me a bit socially awkward…”

He turned towards the river. A guardian husk sat on a small island nearby. He gestured towards it. “Having these things out and about doesn’t help either. They keep me on edge.” He crossed his arms. “Between those patrolling more frequently, and those weird towers and buildings suddenly popping out of the ground…that’s gotta be a sure sign…. that the end is near right?”

Link shrugged. This guy seemed pretty paranoid, best not to mess with him too much. If he could help it.

“It’s certainly crazy….,” he offered.

“Glad you agree.” Brigo said.

"You said they were... patrolling?"

Brigo seemed mildly shocked at Link’s lack of knowledge. “You heard the old stories about Hyrule?” he asked. "Those guardians are pretty messed up…”

Link decided to play dumb. “I’m pretty ignorant of both historical and current events I must admit… care to fill me in?” he said.

“Sure...” Brigo gave Link a primer on the legends of ancient Hyrule, and the guardians' role in bringing about its demise.

"...and would you believe that those colossal things can run? One of them chased me down and tried to kill me! I had to duck into a nearby forest just to get away…”

“This one here chased you?” Link asked, pointing at the guardian husk in the river.

“No, it was a different one...a bit closer to the castle but before the forest up north.”

This piqued Link’s curiosity. He’d seen nothing but ruined or half-functioning guardians in-person so far…the old man’s vision didn’t count. He turned and faced the riverside north of the bridge.

“I’m gonna go see it.” He said, flatly.

“What?!?”

Link hadn’t gone for a nice swim in a while, and he figured the cool water would refresh him...fully-clothed and all. He hopped onto the cracked wall and took a loose diving pose.

Brigo’s jaw dropped. “Those things will vaporize you instantly if you’re not careful! Are you insane?!” he shouted.

Link nodded.

“Wait a minute! Please, think about what you're doing! There are too many enjoyable things in the world to gamble with your life like that-”

Link dove into the river below with perfect form. As he cut through the water towards the shoreline, he was confident that he had nothing to fear.

“OY!” Brigo called after him. “If that thing spots you and sets you on fire or something, don’t say I didn’t warn you……!”
Sure, sure, I’m pretty careful...just a peek and I’ll be out of there, Link thought.

Link was on fire.

He ripped his ruined tunic off himself and tossed it aside in a single motion, sprinting as fast as humanly possible down the steep hill. An active guardian robot quickly followed suit, armored tentacles flailing wildly and threatening to trample Link underfoot.

Link pressed a button on the screen of his Sheikah Slate as he ran, dropped a bomb right in the path of the guardian, detonated it...as expected, it did absolutely nothing.

Except, perhaps, agitate it even further. It charged its laser then sent a sharp blast of super heated plasma right past Link. It vaporized a nearby tree.

Now shirtless, he kept running, down, down, straight towards the river nearby. He planned to dive in, and just hope to swim deep enough down to avoid the guardian’s lasers-

NEIGH!

What in the world was that? Definitely not the guardian...

Link dared to turn around, and saw a group of strange-looking animals - horses - running straight towards him and ahead of the charging guardian. They were quite fast on their feet, and appeared to be outrunning the robot quite easily...

Link made a quick decision. He waited for one of these horses to catch up to him, just as the guardian began to charge yet another blast that would surely melt him.

He caught sight of one of the horse’s heads in his periphery, and immediately dove onto its back, pulling its hair sharply to the right as the guardian sent another blast right past him. It struck one of the other horses in the group, incinerating it instantaneously. Panicking, Link kicked his heels into the ribs of his new steed. It neighed loudly, increasing in speed. The move came automatically to him but Link had no time to ponder what kind of experience with horses he’d had in his past life. He just wanted to get the heck out of there as quickly as possible.

He continued to ride in a zig-zag pattern for a few moments, and soon found that he’d finally gotten himself out of the guardian’s line of sight. It scanned the horizon a few times, its head spinning wildly, then it turned itself around and headed back to the top of the hill where Link had initially spotted it. After staring a bit to be absolutely certain he was no longer being chased, he pulled back on the horse’s hair, stopping it.

Link finally collapsed straight to the ground, and the horse followed suit. Both were panting heavily. He sat up and examined himself for injuries. No harm done, aside from a scorch mark on his shoulder from where the guardian had grazed him with its initial blast. Unfortunately, the flames had destroyed his only shirt. The fire had also melted the belts on his chest, so his melee weapons were now gone too. He had zero intention of going back to retrieve them.

He checked his waist. Sheikah slate….check.

Bow and arrows….check.
That last one was the most crucial. So long as he still had all his cooked steaks, he was perfectly happy.

He caught his breath, stood up, dusted himself off. His new steed also stood up with him. Link found himself brushing the horse’s neck in an effort to soothe it.

“Good horse, that’s right… it’s okay…” the horse turned its head and nibbled at Link’s hair. He decided to take the time to examine it for injuries as well.

It was a beautiful specimen, solid black in color all the way down to its mane and tail. If the pace of their dramatic escape was any indication, it - *she* - was quite a fast little beast.

*Well... that’s one way to get around.*

Once he’d confirmed that the horse was in good shape, he hopped on her back. Between their successful escape from the guardian and Link’s soothing efforts, he’d earned her trust for now.

The horse began to gallop along the main road. Smiling, Link examined his surroundings. They were still on the river, but it had been a half-day’s walk just to get to where this guardian was; and he found he could no longer see the twin peaks that marked his next destination.

Link sighed loudly.

He was lost.

And yet his smile remained... something about this freedom put him at ease.

*I’ve been completely lost from the moment I woke up in this world anyway. This is nothing.*

The horse kept galloping along the main road, and Link continued soothing her every few minutes to ensure she wouldn’t suddenly buck him off without notice. She was a bit of a wild one.

He could certainly relate to that.

After about half an hour of riding, they came across a bridge. And on this bridge... was a bokoblin. He could recognize that bright-red colored monster anywhere.

But this one... was standing above something... someone.

A woman. And she wasn’t moving.

Fearing the worst, Link prodded his horse’s ribs and picked up speed straight towards the bridge. The bokoblin hadn’t spotted him yet, offering Link a chance at a sneak attack. He’d lost his spear and axe in the earlier chaos, so he grabbed his bow and nocked an arrow. As he got close to the creature, he jumped straight off his horse’s back, took aim -

-and shot the creature straight in the back of the head. Instant death.

The bokoblin fell to the side and off the bridge, right into the waters below. Link landed on the bridge next to the unmoving girl and knelt beside her. His new horse - *should probably name her later* he thought - also walked up to him to check out the situation. Link examined the downed stranger then breathed a sigh of relief. She was only unconscious. Just a head injury. He turned her over and pulled a canteen out from one his waist pouches, another gift from the old man back at the plateau.
The cool water he poured on the girl’s face roused her awake. Clutching her head, she slowly stood up, turned to face Link…

And started berating him.

“OH, lookie here. It’s the guy who stood by and watched me get attacked by monsters!”

What…?!

“Some help you are!” she said. I could have died!”

Link was shocked at her audacity. He started to explain what happened, and how he’d only just arrived there after the attack had occurred...

“A likely story!” she said, before he could finish. “You’re just a selfish inconsiderate stupid little-”

“WRONG.” Link said with conviction. The girl instantly shut up. His voice was powerful, confident. Loud. This surprised him, but he kept on.

“I’m not about to sit here and get chewed out by some petulant, ungrateful stranger! I literally just saved your life!”

The girl quietly stared at Link for a while, fuming, then stuck her chin straight into the air and started to walk away. “I could have handled myself anyway! You...you... exhibitionist!” She turned and stuck her tongue out at Link, then sprinted in the direction he’d just come from.

Link stared after her.

Exhibitionist? What was the talking about-

He looked down.

...Oh.

The fire caused by the guardian’s blast had apparently scorched off half of his pants as well. He had hardly noticed earlier. Link shrugged. He tore the tattered remains of his pants off and tossed them into the river. Now shirtless and trouserless, he mounted his horse again and continued his ride.

He didn’t really care that much. After all, he was much more comfortable in his underwear in the first place.

It was mid-afternoon now, the sun was still quite high.

Continuing his ride up the main road, Link noticed some fellow horseback travelers up ahead, riding towards him. As they approached, they didn’t seem to care much about Link’s mostly-naked state...

“Hello there.” Link greeted them, as they all stopped their horses in the middle of the road.

“Hello…” came the hesitant reply from one of the travelers.
It was only then that Link noticed that they were both clutching their arms, injured. They had bandages on their faces, braced arms…
“What happened to you two?” Link asked.

The pair stared at each other, grimly, then looked back at Link.

“It was…” began one of them… “a Zora’s fault.”

Link tilted his head in curiosity. “So... you were attacked by something?”

The traveler shook his head. “Sorry, that’s... inaccurate…” He coughed, painfully. “What I meant to say was, it was a Zora that got us into this mess.”

Link stared blankly. The travelers began to realize that he had no clue of what they were trying to say.

“You... do know who the Zora are, right?” one of them asked.

“Nope.” Link said, curtly.

“Right, well…” One of the travelers kicked his horse and began to ride away. The other followed suit.

“You must have been living in a cave or something, buddy. They’re an old aquatic race. Live up the river in the mountains ahead.”

Link turned around as their horses trotted past him.

“What do they look like?” he asked.

“You’ll know them when you see them...” the traveler said. “Some are green, some are black. Whatever. All I’ll say...is if a red Zora asks you to go with him to Zora’s domain…”

Red!

“...Don’t do it.”

The travelers accelerated their horses and rode away. Link stared after them as they made their way over a hill and out of sight. His mind swirled with possibility. Green skin, black skin, but also red varieties...

... a different race from Hylians...they can speak...

It was a longshot, he admitted. But perhaps he’d get some answers about his weird memories. Link paused for a second, then kicked himself mentally.

Should have asked them about how to find that village Rhoam told me to go to...

Oh well. He’d forgotten its name anyway.

His ride continued for a long while...rolling plains eventually gave way to wet marshlands as they traveled in the direction from which the travelers came. The marshy landscape didn’t seem to stop his horse - now dubbed Inferno, in honor of their fiery escape from before - from galloping steadily through the shallow water. As the sun bore down on the two, Link found the splashes of water refreshing on his skin.

They rode northeast, and soon Link saw a large yellow-glowing structure looming on a mountain in the distance. Another Sheikah tower. He’d head that way to get his bearings-

-or at least, after I find my way through this... Link thought, as he pulled back on Inferno’s mane.
She stopped quickly and reeled back on her hind legs, whinnying loudly. They were at the top of a hill, peering at yet another river down below - except this river contained what appeared to be a massive pier-like base rising out from the waters. He hopped off Inferno’s back, reached into his rucksack, produced an apple. He brushed her mane as she ate it from his hand. When she’d had her fill, Link pulled out his Sheikah Slate, turned on the scope function, and examined this fort that separated him from his likely destination.

Constructed mostly out of wood and adorned with enormous bones from some gigantic slain creatures, it was quite imposing to say the least. Strange new monsters patrolled it, green in color. They vaguely resembled the lizards he’d seen scurrying about during his trek to the guardian earlier that day. Except these were bipedal, huge, and probably hostile.

*Unless...these are the Zora?* He thought. He noticed a few of them slithering through the water... *An aquatic race...some of them were green. Just like the traveler said.*

They’re... quite a bit uglier than I expected.

He decided he was hardly one to judge though.

Link tied Inferno to a nearby tree, leaving her with a nice pile of apples to munch on. He marched down to the riverbank, swam through the water, and climbed up the stairs towards what appeared to be the entrance. As he made his way out of the water, he spotted one of these strange creatures squatted ahead, facing away from him. It was worth a shot.

“Hello!” Link called out. “Are you perhaps...Zora?”

The creature turned to face Link - and in that moment, he knew he’d made a grave error. It was even uglier up-close. Its enormous bugged out eyes swirled into a single point, each one looking around separately from each other. An enormous horn protruded from the creature’s forehead. It appeared incapable of speech, instead rasping at him as it took a step and lunged toward him, attacking with the metal spear it wielded.

Link was starting to wish he hadn’t lost his weapons earlier. *I should really just go back to bed... start the day over again...*

He dove quickly to his right as the lizard-creature whiffed the air near Link with the tip of its spear. He briefly considered using his bow to counter-attack, but he had only about two arrows... *Just enough to defeat Ganon, heh.*

He turned his full attention to the still-charging monster. It spit out a few massive globs of spit- *Gross!* -which Link dodged with ease. It also attempted to stab at Link with its spear again. Link figured he was going to have to try and disarm this creature if he wanted to defeat it. He prepared for it to jab the spear at him again, but it seemed to learn from its failures and ceased its attack. This time, the creature snarled at Link, hopping backwards on the platform they were standing on. Its mouth suddenly shot open and its tongue stabbed out, quick as a flash.

*What?!!*

Link ducked, the tongue nearly grazing him. His reflexes kicked in and he grabbed the tongue with his hands tightly, pulling as hard as he could.
The creature let out a shriek of pain, attempting to pull its tongue back. Feeling incredible resistance in the tug-of-war he now found himself in, he decided to use the monster’s own strength against it. He jumped into the air, allowing the lizard to reel its tongue back in quickly - with Link still attached. Propelled at high speed, Link pulled his foot back then kicked out with all his might...

BANG. His foot struck the creature in the head with incredible force, spinning its head, and breaking its neck instantly with an absurdly loud crack.

Link relaxed briefly. He bent over to pick up the spear the creature dropped, as it disintegrated into a puff of black smoke in a manner quite similar to the other monsters he’d killed.

Well, at least I know for sure that these aren’t Zora now…

He examined the spear in his hands. It looked incredibly familiar...cold, metallic…

The same spear from the vision! So that means I've been-

As he considered this, the loud call of a horn interrupted his thoughts. He turned and saw a single green monster, bow in hand, blowing on a hornlike instrument of some kind. Likely notifying his friends of Link’s intrusion. Soon enough, dozens of similar monsters began climbing their way out of the waters around him. Others ran towards him along the pier's platforms. Link rolled his eyes at himself. Of course...

He took up a loose battle pose. The numbers would be impossibly against him in this fight. But with this new spear in hand, he still quite liked his odds.

A backflip here, a flurry of stabs there...He was having no major problems fighting back the waves of lizard monsters that attacked him. They came in droves as Link fought and stabbed and dodged his way through their base. He was roughly halfway through to the other side, having killed about fifteen of these creatures already. But it was beginning to seem like with every one he killed, another two or three took its place…

Perhaps I should consider using the slate's bombs...

Link quickly decided that there was no fun in that. And knowing his luck, he would probably just destroy the entire pier anyway.

As he prepared to jam his spear through yet another monster's face, a shriek of pain suddenly emanated from behind him. All of the creatures suddenly paused. Link spun around to see what the commotion was about.

Standing behind him was another lizard, solid-black in color. The leader, probably.

But protruding from its chest was the unmistakable tip of a sword. The creature was lifted up and into the air - and only then did Link spot the sword’s wielder: an incredibly tall, red and fish-like humanoid. This aquatic swordsman turned around, yelled out a war cry, and slammed the creature through the wooden platform and into the waters below. He glanced up and placed his sword on his shoulder, flashed a smile at Link.

Link returned the smile.

So this was a real Zora. Excellent.

It appeared that the odds were now a little more in his favor now. He nodded in thanks, then turned
around in time to see a handful more of the green monsters angrily charging his way…eager to avenge their fallen leader.

The unlikely pair made quick work of this colony of enemies. It descended into a competition of sorts, as bodies fell left and right with ease. A few minutes later, disintegrating bodies littered the floor of the pier base and Link eventually started making his way towards his new battle-buddy to thank him.

But before he could speak out to greet him, the tall red figure suddenly cried out with excitement.

“You were so incredible out there!” his joy absolutely seemed to pour out of him like a broken cistern. "It has been quite a while since I have seen such skill, such grace in combat!”

“Thanks!” Link replied. “It was nothing.” he stood fully erect, and slammed the butt end of the spear into the ground like a staff. “I could say the same about you…I appreciate the help back there.”

He looked over his new friend. This red Zora was immensely tall, at least twice Link’s height. His body was mostly humanoid in shape, with scaly red skin covering his finned arms and short legs. His front was entirely white, all the way up to his face. He wore no clothes, only metallic jewelry. From the back of his head protruded a large red tail with a caudal fin at the end; and from his forehead, a forward-facing mound shaped like the flat tip of an arrow. These distinct features made everything from his neck up resemble a large and aggressive fish.

“It was not a problem!” the Zora said. “I happened to be searching the area for Hylians...I’d hardly refrain from lending a hand to a friend!”

Link continued to examine the Zora. He could tell from the sleek and sharp design that Zora were most definitely designed ideally for water travel. But on top of it all, Link just couldn’t shake the distinct feeling of familiarity and kinship with this fellow. Meanwhile, as Link continued to stare blankly at him, the Zora realized he had yet to properly greet this new friend of his.

“Oh my, do pardon my manners!” he exclaimed, with a look of mild panic. “Allow me to introduce myself…” His hand clenched into a fist as his finned arm bent into the air in front of him in a dramatic pose. His mouth curled into a large grin. Link could see his sharp razorlike teeth, could have sworn they sparkled a little as he smiled too…

“I….am Sidon! The Zora prince!” he said excitedly.

Sidon’s optimistic attitude was positively contagious. Link curled his fist and took the same pose as Sidon.

“Well I… am Link! And I’m totally lost!”

Sidon appeared flattered by the mimicry. “Link!?! Your name is Link? What a fantastic name! But then again, I...” Sidon rubbed his chin in wonder, "Well, I cannot shake the feeling that I've heard that name somewhere before..." He paused. “At any rate, it is a strong name! A strong name for a strong Hylian!”

Link shrugged, then suddenly remembered something.

_The spear... he thought. Perhaps I should ask Sidon about it..._ He held the weapon out. “Does this look familiar to you?”

Sidon’s smile grew wider. “That, my friend, is a well-crafted Zora spear you have in your hands. Surely stolen from us by those lizalfos…”
Lizalfos... so that was what they were called. Link decided it was best not to tell Sidon that he thought they were Zora at first.

“Ah...I see. I suppose this belongs to you then.” Link made a move to return the spear to Sidon, but he shook his head.

"It is yours, you have most certainly earned it. Your spearmanship I must say... would rival even the strongest Zora! In fact, your technique is so familiar I would almost venture to guess that you have trained with Zora in the past! Surely this is the case...?"

Link shook his head. “I can honestly say that I have basically no recollection of such a thing. Or of the Zora in general. Although...”

His mind once again recalled the vision of the Zora spear in his hand, the one he’d had in the shrine the previous day. He found himself considering the red color of Sidon’s skin... his yellow eyes. But he clearly wasn’t female. Was he somehow related to the figure Link had often seen, in his collection of fragmented memories?

Sidon interrupted Link’s train of thought.

“Link, I apologize for springing this on you, but I must ask you to come to Zora’s Domain with me. We have spent a long time searching for a strong Hylian like you to assist us. My father, King Dorephan will be pleased to--”

Dorephan! Link recognized the name from his conversation with Rhoam the previous night.

Which meant-

“Who is Mipha?” Link suddenly blurted out.

Sidon’s eyes suddenly narrowed in suspicion. His smile faded.

“An outsider... should no longer have any knowledge of such a name...” he said. He suddenly drew his sword and pointed it directly at Link, who held up his hands in a defensive pose.

“You stated before that you have no recollection of the Zora...” he sounded irritated.

“...And yet here you are, spouting off my big sister’s name, and you... you...”

Sidon stopped. A flash of recognition suddenly crossed his mind. He had not really taken the time to consider this Hylian’s physical features yet.

He eased back, began to look Link up and down. Long, dirty-blonde hair in a ponytail... blue eyes... shirtless... incredible skills with the Zora spear...

And his name. ‘Link’. It couldn’t be.

Or could it?

“Were you...” Sidon began. “Are you the Hylian Champion... who fought alongside my dear sister one hundred years ago...?” he sheathed his sword at his hip, and his smile became suddenly youthful, childlike. Link recognized that face now.

“Link...” Sidon said, but his voice was fading. “Do you remember...?”
A flash of light. The sounds of rushing water.

The familiar feeling of profound nostalgia.

The scene before Link’s eyes faded away... to Sidon’s face again, but now significantly younger: A very young Zora, smiling up at him - but it was unmistakably Sidon, with those sharp, glimmering teeth. Around Link, great carved stone, adorned the walls of this cavernous valley, glowing a faint blue-turquoise color. Intricately designed, beautiful. Mountains surrounded this place at all sides. Waterfalls descended from all over the elevated and interconnected platforms around him. Link couldn’t place the reason...but it felt like home.

“Welcome to Zora’s domain!” the Zora youth said excitedly, his arms outstretched. “I...am Prince Sidon!” he struck a miniaturized version of his trademark pose.

“And this...” He turned and gestured to a figure behind him. Another red Zora, a bit older than Sidon, approached them. She had smooth, flowing features. She carried herself with a subtle trace of grace and elegance. Her shimmering yellow eyes greeted Link warmly. Unlike his previous vision, he could see her face now, quite clearly...

She was breathtakingly beautiful.

“This... is my big sister-”

“-Mipha,” she said, smiling. She nodded her head gracefully in respect.

“And it is my pleasure... to finally meet you, Link.”

Chapter End Notes

RIP, unnamed horse #2...
Thanks so much for reading.
His father was a highly respected senior of the Hylian Royal Guard. His mother, a nurse, died when he was only five years old. He hardly remembered her anymore.

Upon her sudden death, his father had returned to the bustling city of Hylia - located on the Great Plateau - and moved the small family of two to Hyrule Castle Town to raise the young boy on his own. And thus a bond between father and son was forged in the flames of grief and adversity. Nonetheless, Link grew up in the castle town a rather bright and happy child.

His father loved him dearly, and Link loved him too. He was his mentor, his savior, his Captain...his hero.

Being the son of a Hylian Captain naturally came with all the pressure and expectation you’d anticipate. But Link had never been one to shy away from the challenge. When pressed about entering the Hylian Knight Academy at the age of eight, he had responded with a hearty exclamation:

“When do I start?!”

Three years later… tragedy struck again.

And that bright young boy suddenly found himself at the entrance to a foreign place, far up the river in the eastern mountains… his eyes still red from the tears that wouldn’t cease. Dark circles persisted under his eyelids from severe lack of sleep. Dirt stains and wounds decorated his body - trophies from his travels through the wildlands of Hyrule.

“Your father… said in his will that you were to go to Zora’s domain to live for a time, in the case of his untimely demise…” his father’s colleague had told him weeks earlier. Just after the accident.

“As is protocol, you are granted an indefinite leave of absence from the Academy to grieve. You have our permission to leave at any time.”

He didn’t hesitate. Gathering what few belongings he owned and sneaking past his appointed escort, this eleven year-old boy had managed to find his way all the way across the Hylian wilds to Zora’s domain. By himself.

And all the while, with a grim smile on his face.

Here at this foreign place - at Zora’s Domain - he now found himself being greeted by two interesting, red, aquatic humanoids… Sidon, the Zora Prince; and the Princess, Lady Mipha…

“And it is my pleasure… to finally meet you, Link.” Mipha said.

Link rubbed his face for about the eighty-seventh time that day, and his eyes brightened as he saw her. But the little Hylian boy remained quiet.

A bit of an awkward silence set in between the trio. Mipha glanced away nervously as she struggled to maintain her smile.
This... is the Captain’s son? He is lot shyer than I was expecting-

“You!” Link suddenly shouted. “…you guys... look so awesome!” the young boy’s face had lit up like a cluster of luminous stones.

Mipha’s yellow eyes widened at this sudden outburst. “I, well, yes...thank you!”

Sidon fed off of Link’s enthusiasm and began to hop up and down with excitement. “I could say the same thing about you!” he said, with a high-pitched voice. “This is the first that I have ever seen of such a young Hylian! Incredible!” The two began to poke and prod each other, remarking on the interesting physical features the other possessed.

Mipha’s warm smile grew wider. Perhaps he will fit in much faster than we thought... She looked over the young Hylian. He was in rough shape, caked with dirt and debris. And he looked practically emaciated.

Why did those fools let him travel on his own? She wondered.

“Pardon me-” Mipha interrupted. The two little boys stopped jumping around and looked up at her. “-but you must be absolutely famished!”

Link looked up at her. A wide toothy grin - lots of missing teeth - spread across his face. “If you mean I’m hungry , then yes! I am always hungry! I could probably eat an octorok right now!”

They were seated in a large area deep within the interconnected complex of Zora’s Domain, right down the steps from the throne room. Every Zora there had gathered for a feast to greet their new Hylian guest. Joyfully, they all grinned and laughed as Link shoveled mounds of Hylian rice and cooked fish into his open mouth. His appetite seemed bottomless, providing a great source of entertainment for the curious Zoran people.

“Wahahahahaha!” Dorephan, the King of the Zora, laughed boisterously in approval. “You are the spitting image of your parents after all!”

Link looked up at the king, between two massive spoonfuls of rice. He nodded at him. “People always told me that I got my mother’s good looks... and my father’s great appetite,” he said, his mouth still full of half-chewed food. Mipha, seated nearby, let out a small giggle. Her mentor Muzu lightly elbowed her in disapproval.

Just across the table from the king and his children, Link had a good look at the aquatic ruler. He was enormous in size, blue in the color of his scales. Like the other Zora, he had a white underbelly that was made all the more obvious by his protruding chest and stomach that dominated his physique. Link marveled at the interesting and diverse physical features of the Zora. He continued to stare as he shoveled mountains of food into his gullet.

Sidon, ever the glutton for attention, wouldn’t let Link get away with stealing the spotlight. “If it’s a challenge you want-” he tossed his utensils away, posing dramatically. “-then it’s a challenge you shall get!” He began to shove handfuls of food into his mouth as well. Muzu buried his face into his hands with embarrassment, as Dorephan let out another hearty laugh that seemed to fill the entire massive cavern that was Zora’s Domain. It was then that the king himself took a good look at this boy, recalling the events that lead to his arrival.

When he had received a message from the Hylian Knight Academy a few weeks prior, he hadn’t hesitated in the slightest to respond with approval. He’d most certainly accept the young son of his old friend; it was the least he could have done for someone so dear to him, and for one who had
treated his young Mipha like she was his own daughter. Of course, being over a couple hundred years old, the Zora king had naturally experienced the death of countless people in his lifetime. Nevertheless, he grieved when he heard of the demise of Link’s father. The young Captain had visited Zora’s Domain countless times, entertaining the king with tales of reckless action and adventure. He was so charming that he’d even had the quiet, introverted Mipha talking incessantly with each visit. They seemed quite fond of each other.

“You would make a fine wife for my baby boy someday!” Link’s father had joked to Mipha during his previous - and final - visit.

“If he happens to turn out like you when he grows up,” she had calmly countered, “I might be better off marrying a Lizalfos.”

Dorephan smiled at the memory. Link’s presence there filled his heart with sorrow, but also with intense joy. The boy truly carried his father’s mannerisms through-and-through. He was the spitting image of a great man - in both looks, and personality. So the Zora king would honor his friend’s memory by obeying his last will, helping to navigate this boy through the sea of loss and pain in his heart. And already on Link’s first day there, Dorephan felt an affection for the charming little boy, as if he were his own son.

The meal continued well through the afternoon. Little Sidon had to be excused early, sick to his stomach from overeating. Link pumped both fists in the air in triumph, bringing the house down in raucous laughter yet again. The sun gradually set over the mountains around Zora’s Domain, the banquet hall was dispersed and broken down quickly. Dinner was over.

As the commotion died and normalcy resumed in his new home, Link found himself walking alongside a small pond near the scene of the banquet. Several Zora both young and old were floating in the deep water of the pond - fast asleep. And Link smiled. Everything about these people seemed so fascinating to him, and he made this observation abundantly known.

“I have never considered our mannerisms to be out of the ordinary…” Mipha said, walking next to him. A small, sleeping Sidon was cradled in her arms as she walked. “I suppose that is an unfortunate consequence of living a life so sheltered…” she gave a glance of disapproval to Muzu, who followed closely behind the two as they walked together. He ignored Mipha’s comment, his eyes and attention focused intently on Link to ensure he wouldn’t do something… odd.

Muzu didn’t trust him quite yet. Or any Hylians, for that matter. Why King Dorephan so easily let this strange little boy into their domain was well beyond him.

Meanwhile Link had instantaneously warmed up to Mipha, which surprised her. She was quite used to being treated like untouchable royalty by just about everyone in the domain. Yet Link seemed like he could not possibly care any less about formalities.

“So, Mipha, what do you like to do for fun?” Link offered.

Her advisor coughed behind them. “That’s Lady Mipha, young Hylian. You will address her with the respect that she-”

“Now now, pay no mind Muzu,” Mipha said. “Simply… Mipha shall do.” She had known Muzu her entire life, and she loved him of course; he was like family. He could just be a bit… overbearing at times. Besides… nobody called her by her given name on its own. She rather liked the sound of it. And Link apparently did too.

“Okay then, Mipha. Mipha! Mi. Pha. Miiiiippphhaaaaaa.” Link’s mouth was agape as he formed the
word with his mouth in exaggerated fashion. Behind them, Muzu rolled his eyes, while Mipha simply grinned back at him.

Yet again.

Really, it seemed like she couldn’t stop grinning since this strange little Hylian had arrived.

“Your name is so great!” Link continued. “A great name for a great person!”

Mipha giggled silently. “Well, I appreciate the kind words... Liiiiinnnnnnnk. And to respond to your previous question...about fun...”

Link curled his fists in anticipation, staring up bright-eyed at his new friend.

“...get some sleep. And perhaps you shall find out tomorrow just what fun means to us here.”

The frown that grew on Link’s face was both petulant and adorable. And as easily as this young Hylian had warmed up to her...

She now found that the feeling was quite mutual.

“How old are you?” Link bluntly asked Mipha, as he poked his spear into the air in front of him. It had been one week since his arrival, and Link was already eager to get back to his training. He didn’t want to pass on the opportunity to learn from his new hosts. Nearby, several other young Zora practiced their spear form under careful instruction by royal soldiers.

“That...is a complicated question.” Mipha replied. “But I suppose when measured in years, I am now forty-five years old.”

“What?!” Link froze, nearly dropping his spear. He stood up straight and faced Mipha. “But... you look like you’re just a few years older than me!”

Mipha shook her head. As a relatively isolated race, very few Hylians were aware of Zoran longevity.

“You think that’s weird?!” Sidon chimed in from nearby. He was swinging a spear around like a two-handed sword, irritating his instructor with his awful technique. “I’m fifteen!”

Link rolled his eyes and smiled. “From the way you act, I would have said you were only six!”

“Hey!” Sidon stopped to consider Link’s words. “-That’s probably true!” he dropped his spear suddenly and ran away, arms flapping like a bird. “I want to evolve into a Rito in my next life...” his voice trailed off as his exasperated instructor gave chase.

“Anyway...” Mipha turned her head and continued. “My people age incredibly slowly...in fact, I am only just entering the caudal-end of my growth stage. I have about four or five years left before my body is fully mature.”

“That’s amazing! You’re amazing!” Link said. He looked up and down at Mipha. “Well then, I’m challenging myself.” He resumed his spear practice, poking the spear in front of him again. “I want to be taller than you in six months.”

Mipha smiled. “I...do not think it quite works that way...” she said, observing Link’s form with the spear. It wasn't terrible... but-
"Here, let me show you something." She stood behind Link, grabbing his arms with her red hands. Link flinched slightly at her touch, then relaxed. Her scaly skin was much softer than he was expecting. Silky... warm... Link found himself getting flustered, but he shook it off. Holding him tightly, Mipha moved Link’s arms for him, fixing his stabbing form. “You are much too tense on the draw back-” she said. “You must roll like the tide. Relax, then thrust. Relax... thrust. Like so.” She guided Link’s motions for a bit, before releasing and allowing him to recreate the movement on his own. He gradually picked up speed with the technique and before long, he was flowing easily.

“Very good form, Link!” Mipha said, with restrained excitement. An enormous toothy grin began to spread on Link's face. He stopped temporarily and turned to face her.

“You’re brilliant!” he said, “A total genius!”

Mipha shook her head. “I merely had excellent instruction,” she said, modestly. “Nothing more.”

Link spun around and continued practicing with his corrected technique.

*He is a natural...* Mipha thought. She found herself analyzing his shirtless body, noticing the countless scrapes and gashes that were still striped down his torso. “Do those wounds... hurt?” she asked, pointing at his shoulder. Link stopped thrusting, stood up straight again. He slammed the butt end of the spear into the ground.

“Yes!” he said. “But not too bad. I’m used to it...”

“I... see. I could try healing you,” Mipha offered.

“Healing?”

“Yes,” Mipha held up her left hand and pointed to it. “It is a rare gift that I have had since childhood... although I can only tap into it in odd intervals. I often use it for our soldiers, but it is inconsistent. Let me try.” She held her hands up to one of the deeper gashes lining his shoulder. They began to glow blue, slightly. She kept them there for a few moments...

But there was no effect.

Her face flashed a mild hint of frustration, but she shook it off. “I am sorry...” she said.

“Don’t worry about it!” Link said. “Scars make me look tough! I’m sure it’ll come easy to you someday.”

Mipha sincerely hoped he was right. “Thank you.” she said. “Meanwhile... I am also a nurse.” She reached down and pulled out a set of ointment and bandages from the bag she carried.

“So for now we will just have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“Victory belongs... to Sidon! The Zora prince!” the high-pitched voice announced, proudly.

That silly pose again, that sharp-toothed grin...

This was probably the hundredth time Link had lost a swimming race against the young Zora. In fact, he always lost to basically every single Zora youth there. He pulled himself out of the lake, shook water off his head like a dog.

“Aw, don’t let him get in your head, Hylian!” a young gray-scaled Zora spoke up.
“He might be an amazing swimmer… but he’s still just a little baby trout!” she tackled Sidon, tickling him relentlessly.

Link had been living in Zora’s Domain for three months now, and he’d quickly adapted to his new life there. Every single day he challenged the other young Zora to a swimming race, and every single day he lost badly. But he hardly cared.

“Winning is a bit overrated…” he said, drying himself off with a towel that the Zora had given him. It was probably the only one they had in the entire Domain… “How can you expect to improve yourself if you’re always victorious anyway?”

Rivan, a black-colored male Zora, spoke up from the group of young Zora still floating in the water. “I agree…” he said. “Losing to you on that first day has really forced me to improve my technique…”

Link laughed. “See? And you haven’t lost to me since!”

“But he’s still the slowest one of the group!” a female voice spoke up from behind them. Link turned around.

“Hellooo Linny~!” it was Kodah. She was approaching them from the nearby dam which held back the eastern reservoir.

Kodah was a kind Zora, though a bit in-your-face. Her scales were red, similar to Mipha and Sidon. The nickname she had bestowed upon him - Linny - irritated him slightly. But nevertheless, Link enjoyed her company.

He enjoyed everyone’s company there, in fact.

“Let’s race again.” Link demanded.

“What?!” Gaddison shouted. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Yes.” Link replied. “And that’s the perfect condition to exercise in!”

“I am definitely game for this!” Kodah said. “Prepare…. for your imminent defeat, Sidon!”

“You're on!” The tiny Zora prince yelled.

They dove into the water, and the race had begun in earnest yet again.

Soon, this late afternoon full of swimming eventually gave way to yet another quiet night in the domain. Link had left early from their usual nightly meeting with King Dorephan, where he would entertain the Zora children with amazing tales of their people’s history. It was unlike Link to miss out on any part of the king’s stories, so Mipha found it necessary to check up on him. She approached the small isolated platform that served as Link’s room. The Zora had installed curtains for him, knowing that Hylians liked their privacy. But Link had refrained from ever using them. Until now.

As she came closer, she heard talking coming from the interior of the room. “Hylia… please. Take care of my dad.” Link’s quiet voice. He sounded completely shattered. “I really wish he didn’t have to go…”

Mipha wanted to reverse course, give the poor boy some space. And yet… she was curious. Link
hadn’t cried even once since he had arrived. She had wondered just how badly his father’s death had affected him.

Now she knew.

“Thank you, for blessing me with a new family.” Link continued. “Please watch over me… and all the Zora. Oh, and please tell my dad and mom that I love them.”

Mipha’s heart swelled for the young Hylian. As he finished praying, she waited a few moments and then gently called to Link. Hearing her voice, he opened the curtain. Mipha could see tears on his face, his eyes were red and blotchy.

“Hello Link.” she said calmly. “Is everything okay?”

Link rubbed his eyes. “Oh. Hi. I was crying. I really miss my dad.”

“I... understand.” she said. She made a move to sit down on his bed with him. “I know what it’s like to lose a parent. My own mother passed away when I was young.”

“Do you miss her?” Link asked.

“Every single day.”

“That’s exactly how I feel about my dad.”

Mipha wanted very badly to give the Hylian boy a comforting hug. But she refrained.

“Well Link,” she said, in an effort to console him, “the Zora believe… that death is merely a gateway to a better place—”

“Hylians believe that too!” Link said, smiling. “So I was praying to Hylia… that she’ll take care of my dad. And besides, he gets to be with my mom again! So it's not all bad.”

Mipha gently brushed Link’s sun-bleached hair out of his face - it’s getting long, she noticed. She saw a new cut on his forehead, figured he likely hit his head on something during all that endless swimming earlier. She held her hand to his forehead and it glowed that same bluish hue. This time, she managed to heal him. Or at least to seal the wound.

But the scar remained.

“Did it work?” he asked her.

“Almost.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get there.”

Mipha smiled, patting Link on the head. Her voice was a gentle whisper. “Sleep well, Link. And please cheer up. You shall see your father again, some day. I promise.”

“I know.” Link said.

“I just really wish I didn’t have to wait so long.”

It had been six months.
Link’s hair had grown to a wild mane to match his wild personality; and Mipha enjoyed taking the time to brush it for him every other day. She admitted that she found Hylian hair incredibly entertaining... far more customizable than the flexible tails that extended from the back of Zoran heads. Yet it wasn’t long before Link began wearing his hair in a large ponytail styled not quite unlike theirs...

“They’d never let us grow our hair this long, back in the academy!” he explained. He was certainly going to take advantage of his new rules-free state for as long as possible.

Over the months Link had stayed dedicated to his training, and his proficiency in swimming was growing to be quite impressive. As was his skill with the spear. Mipha was usually fairly busy with her daily personal lessons with Muzu, but she still squeezed in time every day to teach Link some new tricks with the weapon. And this day was no exception. The young boy was sprinting down the corridor ahead of Mipha, thrusting the spear out in front of him with one hand before spinning back to his feet in one smooth motion.

“That felt so good!” he cried out.

Mipha glowed with pride for her ‘student.’ “You will surely have a leg-up on your fellow knights, when you return to the academy,” she said.

Link frowned slightly. “I… yeah, I guess that’s true.” He started swinging the butt-end of his spear in a sweeping motion in front of him. “But I’m not ready to leave yet. I like it here. I want to be here for a long time.”

The feeling was mutual. Mipha strangely found herself dreading the day that Link would have to leave this place again…

“Hey!” Link suddenly perked up. His voice turned stoic, flat. “I have a proposition for you. Madam.” He gently laid his spear on the ground in front of him, and placed his hands at his sides. His head bowed slowly in Mipha’s direction, and he closed his eyes.

“When you have some free time later... Lady Mipha...”

“Yes?”

“...Perhaps we could spend some time together?”

Mipha burst out in quiet laughter. “So formal!” she said. She walked towards Link, his head still bowed. “Well...” she took his hand, nodding her head as well. “It would be my honor, Master Link, to spend more time with you.”

Link was twelve. He had lived in Zora’s domain for an entire year.

“I’m not quite where I want to be just yet…” he said, standing up as straight as possible and measuring his height next to Mipha’s. “But at least I’m finally as tall as you!”

It was true. Link had sprouted up a full three inches since his arrival. And he had much more growth still ahead of him, if his appetite implied anything. Because if nothing else, his food consumption had somehow increased in voracity in the last few months. He had also developed quite an appetite for the stranger Zoran dishes too - especially raw fish and snails. This lack of shying away from the weirder Zoran customs also made him rather popular with the Zora children.

Especially with Kodah, Mipha noticed.
Kodah was only a little bit younger than her, but the young Zora's crush on Link was obvious. Mipha thought it strange that Kodah would often glare at her when she would stop by to personally teach Link and others during combat training. Mipha did her best to ignore this, focusing instead on fixing Link's bad habits with the spear. Not that there were all that many at this point.

Actually, Link’s spearmanship was beginning to rival even the older Zoran soldiers and instructors, due somewhat in part to her influence. So much so that Link had begun showing them some techniques that he himself had developed on his own.

His signature move? A ridiculously quick flurry of stabs that would make instant mincemeat of anything on the receiving end of it. Even Mipha herself found that she could scarcely recreate the attack. His dexterity and speed were both so incredible.

Meanwhile, Link’s proficiency with both swords and spears also made him a popular instructor for his fellow Zora. He would spend some of his time training his peers on both weapon styles. Every single day. Rivan and Gaddison were particularly eager students, but they never seemed to take too much of Link’s time if they could help it. Mipha truly respected their consideration and respectfulness.

Another student, Bazz, especially enjoyed the sword instructions Link would give. Now Bazz was the son of Captain Seggin, Mipha’s childhood mentor who had trained her in the art of combat since she was a young girl. So she found it ironic that she was now indirectly training her old mentor’s son through Link. But Seggin was a bit too preoccupied with other matters to take time to train Bazz personally. And so, Link had offered sword lessons to Bazz…

...in exchange for becoming an honorary member of his “Big Bad Bazz Brigade.” Whatever that was.

And then there was Kodah.

Kodah always seemed to make things difficult. She wasn’t actually all that interested in combat training, especially since she actually had no desire to join the Zoran Royal Guard. As a result, she was slow to learn and often forced Link to linger with her for a little bit too long.

And she was doing it right at that moment.

Mipha caught herself feeling mildly irritated for Link as she observed this. He didn’t seem to mind, however, still remaining quite eager to help and instruct. Kodah’s obvious advances didn’t bother Mipha much either. Or at least, she didn’t think they did.

Right?

Right.

She stopped thinking about it.

“I shall take my leave,” she called out to the group of Zora. “I must return to my studies…”

Link looked disappointed. “Aw, that’s no good! The Bazz Brigade was planning on meeting at the Veiled Falls this afternoon to goof around for a bit! Right Bazz?”

“That’s right!” he said. “You guys all remember the passcode, right?”

“I do!” said Rivan.
“I do as well!” said Gaddison.

“I do not…” said Kodah. “But I’m coming anyway.” She sent a death glare in Bazz’s direction.

“Um...yes, sure.” Bazz said, nervously. He knew better than to incur Kodah’s wrath. “You can be a guest member for today I suppose. And you as well, Lady Mipha. Since we seem to be letting everyone in these days.”

Mipha smirked at their silliness.

“I am sorry…” she said. “I would love to join you...perhaps if I finish early?”

“That would be great, Lady Mipha!” Kodah said.

“Yes, stop being so boring all the time!” Sidon taunted, whilst attempting to pole-vault over his instructor with his spear. “Join us!”

“Who said you could come too, you little squirt?!” Bazz demanded, but he was ignored. The others chimed in too, offering Mipha some encouragement to join them as quickly as possible.

Mipha smiled. It seemed that her friendship with Link was also breaking down some walls with some of her peers as well. “I shall do my best…” she said, as she turned and headed back to Muzu. *This will be my shortest study session of all time,* she thought happily to herself.

About half an hour later, the 'brigade' of young Zora found themselves crowded around Link below a rock wall near the Veiled Falls. He was bleeding profusely from a massive scrape on his back.

“Are you okay, Linny?!” Kodah shrieked.

Link nodded. “This…” he winced. “...is nothing.”

He stood up, dusted himself off, and looked up at the rock wall again. A small cave was situated about twenty feet above them. They had initially dared Link to attempt to make his way inside. And not one to back down from any challenge whatsoever, he had made it pretty far up initially; but a loose rock had given way in his hand, causing him to plummet several feet back down the rock face. He’d totally shredded his backside on the way down, but still seemed determined to scale the great big wall.

“You should probably stop now,” Rivan said.

“Yeah, you might hurt yourself even more…” Gaddison warned.

“If you’re not getting hurt,” he spit on the ground. “...You’re not really trying…” He latched onto the wall to try again.

Another half hour later, Mipha found herself nearly sprinting along the outer perimeter of Zora’s Domain. She had just finished studies with Muzu early, promising to do a bit of extra work the next day to make up for it. As she got closer to the Veiled Falls, however, the great big smile on her face gave way to a look of major concern - Link was lying flat on the ground in the distance.

And everyone was panicking.

Rivan spotted Mipha first. “Lady Mipha!” he called out. “It’s Link! He’s badly hurt…”

This was enough to turn her semi-sprint into a full-on sprint. She slid on her knees right up to Link as
she got close, knelt down to take a close look at him. He was staring straight up at the sky - blankly - and clutching his right arm. Mipha’s head came into his view as she bent over him, and he smiled warmly.

“You made it!” he suddenly said, through gritted teeth. “You missed the… entertainment though…” Link gestured at his arm. “It’s a good thing….that I’m ambidextrous.”

Mipha breathed a sigh of relief. Probably just a broken arm… nothing too life-threatening. Thank the Goddesses. Looking over Link’s face, it was clear to Mipha that he was in much pain. *And yet, not a single tear in his eye.* She was certain that he had probably been trying something incredibly stupid though. She sat him up and examined his swelling forearm more closely.

“What in the world were you trying to do?” she finally asked him. Her tone was of curiosity rather than one of scolding. Link rubbed the back of his head sheepishly with his good arm.

“Well…." he began, “I-

“-He tried to pole-vault up the rock wall to the cave up above!” Sidon interrupted, pointing at a long, splintered polearm nearby, “It was really a sight to behold! Very awesome!”

“Yeah, ‘til he lost his grip and flipped in the air and then fell right on his arm...” Rivan said. “…I told him not to do it.”

Mipha shook her head at Link, gently. “It’s starting to feel like I am having to heal you at every turn…” Her hands glowed blue and he winced as the bones in his shattered forearm began to reset and pull themselves back together. As she did this, Mipha briefly looked over the scared faces of all the young Zora around them. Kodah was nearby, sobbing loudly in both fear and relief. *She truly does love him,* she thought.

Really, they all do.

As a Zora leader, she should probably have been telling Link off for these daringly stupid escapades, which more often than not resulted in injuries like this. But she knew better than to attempt to correct him - knew better than to try and fix what she considered to be one of his most endearing personality traits: his blind courage.

And besides, Mipha was smiling anyway, in spite of herself. She wasn’t fully aware of what had caused it then… but her healing powers had been consistent and stable for quite some time now.

It was rainy season in Zora’s Domain, yet another year later. Link was thirteen and now quite a bit taller than Mipha - well in the clutches of puberty. And he was sure to persistently remind Mipha of his new levels of verticality every chance he got.

“Say hey there, short one!” he called out in his new teenage voice, panting as he approached Mipha. She had to admit, she loved the new way his voice sounded. *Tender, yet masculine.*

Mipha was seated by one of the sleeping ponds in Zora’s Domain, sheltered from the rain, reading a book on the history of the Royal Family of Hyrule. She closed the book and focused on Link. “Ah, look now. The giant is here,” she joked as he approached. Her face was radiant, peaceful. Her voice was calm like still waters, even in the midst of this storm. “What can I do for you, o enormous one?”

He bent over, still panting, having just finished a twelve-mile run around the perimeter of the Domain. He was absolutely soaked to the bone, shirtless as usual.
And he loved it.

“We…have…not…..been spending much time together…..lately,” he gasped. He stood up, put his hands on his hips - his usual speaking pose - and grinned. “We must remedy this… immediately!”

Mipha laughed quietly into her hand. “Must you always be so ironically formal when you do this?”

“Whatever it takes to get a laugh out of you,” he replied. “So? Want to join me?” He stared intently at her, his blue eyes and blonde hair all the more radiant against the backdrop gray of the rain.

“For what?” she asked him, staring back just as intently.

His previous claim was quite accurate. With the ever-present downpour the last few weeks, everyone in the Domain was feeling a bit slow-paced and unenergetic. Mipha had been using the opportunity to catch up on some of her studies for Muzu. Regular adventures with Link and the Bazz Brigade around the Domain had caused her to fall a bit behind on her regimen lately.

“A camping trip. It’s been a good while since our last one,” Link answered her.

Mipha raised her brow. “Really? Well, it would seem you have caught me on a good day. I am just about finished with this week’s lessons.”

“That’s great!” Link shouted. “Do you need to get permission first?”

“Oh, I do not know about that…” she glanced over across the Domain platforms to where Muzu was pacing, angrily. She looked back at Link. “I believe that I can afford to sneak out for once-”

Link’s face lit up. “Feeling a bit more adventurous! That’s what I like to hear.” He took off running again, back in the direction from where he’d come from. “Meet me at the usual spot! Five o’clock!” he called back, as he disappeared behind the curtain of rain.

Mipha shook her head. She still bore a smile that seemed to have persisted for the entire two years Link had been there. He has really grown into a very charming boy… she thought.

...And he has become quite handsome too, I must say.

Two hours later, the unlikely pair was hiking their way through the rain, up towards the top of the waterfall at Lulu Lake just northeast of Zora’s Domain. Both carried Zora spears on their backs just in case, while Mipha had left her trusty Lightscale Trident - a beautiful weapon she had possessed since she was a baby - back at the Domain. Both kept a sharp eye out as they hiked, but didn’t expect to see too many monsters in this persistent downpour.

“Tomorrow’s the day.” Link said with resolve.

Oh no. Mipha had suspected this, but-

“The day for what?” she asked anyway.

She already knew. The Lulu Lake falls were right next to Ploymus Mountain: home of the famous Shatterback Point.

“I’m going to do the dive,” he told her.

“No, you are not,” Mipha said, in a rare tone of defiance.

Link turned aside and grinned at her as he walked. “Yes. I am. Now would be the ideal time to prove
my manhood.” He held his arms out as if catching the rain that fell like daggers around them. “For more reasons than one.”

Earlier that year, Dorephan had entertained the Zora youths with old tales of how Shatterback Point had once served as an informal test of adulthood long ago. Immediately upon hearing this, Sidon had attempted the dive at least a dozen times. With varying degrees of success.

But everyone still refused to call the young Zora prince an adult.

“I’m barely starting my growth spurt,” Bazz had told Sidon. “And I don’t even consider myself an adult yet…”

“That, my friend, is because you have not yet performed this magnificent ritual that has offered absolute, definitive evidence…” he flexed his tiny biceps proudly, “of my undeniable masculinity.” The image of a one-foot tall Sidon boasting of his manliness had brought Link into hysterics…

...And yet here he was, eager to finally recreate the same initiation ritual.

He really did fit in so well, Mipha thought. The end... she sighed. She knew the real reason Link wanted to do this. King Dorephan had just received a letter - Link was to return to the Hylian Knight Academy in six months to continue his training. The dreaded moment was coming. These were the last days. And they both knew they should be making the most of them.

Mipha shook her head at Link, closed her eyes, “I already know that I cannot stop you.” her arms folded across her chest, “And so...I shall be attempting the dive alongside you instead…” she glanced out with one eye at Link, smirking as she did. The brightness of Link's own smile in that moment could have been seen for miles, even in this endless downpour of water. They would be the first people currently living in the Domain to attempt a dive off of Shatterback Point... whilst in the middle of a raging storm.

As their hike continued, familiar snarls greeted them in the distance. Lizalfos. They both drew their spears.

“I’m surprised to see them out and about in the rain…” Link observed.

“Yes… what kind of silly fools hike around on tall mountains in the middle of a downpour?” Mipha replied, producing laughter from Link.

The Lizalfos struck, but the pair was ready. The battle lasted no more than a few seconds, and before long a pair of lizard-like bodies were piled together on the ground nearby. This was hardly their first battle together in the outskirts of Zora’s Domain, but Mipha still marveled at Link’s incredible improvement in spear combat during his brief time there.

“It appears there is no more to teach you.” Mipha said. “Your spearmanship has far exceeded even mine, I must admit.”

“Don’t be modest.” Link said. “Your skills are still quite unmatched, believe me. Master.”

It was the truth, however. Link had easily grown into one of the most skilled young warriors ever seen at the Domain - and all at the ripe old age of thirteen. Nevertheless, he made an effort to stay humble about it. And Mipha greatly admired that.

Soon, after setting up camp in a cave on Ploymus Mountain, the duo built a fire and talked the afternoon away. The unending pitter-patter sounds of rainfall just outside the cave were relaxing to the two youths.
“I can already hear Muzu now…” Mipha said, pulling a large undercooked skewer of fish from out of their campfire. “He will lecture me about how unbecoming it is for a Zora princess to have spent the night in the wilderness with a Hylian. Again.”

She stared into the fire. “But I suppose that, in the end, we are both still mere children in a great big world… innocent, and ignorant of its harsh realities.”

“-But starting tomorrow,” Link said, confidently, “we’ll be adults, ready to take on the world!” He grabbed a nearby fish skewer himself and began devouring it in earnest. Mipha slowly nibbled at hers, stealing a glance at Link. He was his usual, confident, bold self. She neither doubted his abilities nor his resolve.

But she could not shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen tomorrow.

Afternoon gave way to night, and night to morning. The pair stayed up most of the night just chatting away, before Mipha fell sound asleep on Link’s shoulder. He followed suit immediately after. But soon, Link was the first to awaken, just as the morning sky brightened. Though the curtain of rain still blocked out the sun with its sheer density. Link looked over, saw the small Zora princess sound asleep on him. Drooling onto his bare chest.

...I’ll give her a minute. He closed his eyes and pretended to still be asleep. But try as he might, he just couldn’t hide the large grin across his face.

Before long, Mipha had woken up as well. Noticing her intimate position on Link’s shoulder, she didn’t flinch. She shook Link awake with her arm. “Good morning.” she said. Link opened his eyes. Mipha glanced below the spot where her head had rested. “It appears I have made a bit of a mess on you…” she said. "Allow me to clean that.”

“Don’t mind it, it’s only spit,” Link said. “We’re about to get drenched anyway!” She relented. The two cleaned up the camp, but left their stuff behind to retrieve at another time. They wanted to dive uninhibited. A short hike later they found themselves at their destination, right at the peak of the mountain. Shatterback Point.

And the view was glorious. The rain seemed to let up - just briefly - in time for Link and Mipha to see the surrounding countryside, seemingly endless in scale. Tall mountains, distant oceans, valleys, plains…

“Want to explore it all!” Link said, triumphantly. "Someday...soon." He turned to face Mipha. “And maybe you’d like to join me?”

Mipha grinned at this persistently audacious Hylian. “It would be my pleasure,” she said. They spent a few moments admiring the view, and then they were ready. Without hesitation, they dove off the top simultaneously. It was a remarkably long way down.

Mipha had given Link some diving advice prior to their arrival, and she spared a glance in his direction in order to observe him as they fell in-sync. He’s doing well, she noted. He was keeping his poise, pointing down, and-

Wait. What-

Link suddenly flinched in midair. His leg curled in pain.

He’s cramping. Oh no.
But there was nothing she could do. She watched in helpless panic as his body lost its diving form at the very last-second. Link rolled forward into a half-flip just as he collided with the water.

Flat on his back.

Mipha’s dive, on the other hand, was perfect. She swam down, arched underwater, then shot straight back out like a breaching fish. She landed right near the spot where Link had slammed violently against the water. She grabbed him without hesitation and swam his body back to the shore of the eastern reservoir.

_He’s not breathing, he’s not breathing_… she tried to calm herself down, blocked out all negative thoughts. But to no avail.

She rolled him over on the shoreline as they arrived. It was **bad. Bad bad bad.**

His entire backside was red and blotchy, like he’d been slapped by a massive paddle. But more than that, she could clearly make out his spine, prominent in his slight figure: It was destroyed.

...This might be beyond my abilities.

Mipha closed her eyes, held up her hands to Link’s ruined back. She tried to stay perfectly calm. And yet she simply could not stop the tears from falling.

“Please…Hylia,” she said, her hands glowing bright and blue, “let him be okay…” She felt a rush of power coursing through her body and out of her hands, opened her eyes, could see Link’s spine reassembling itself properly…

It was working. **Thank the Goddesses…** She thought. Yet again...

"GASP!" Link began to cough as water spilled out from his flooded lungs. His back repaired, Mipha rolled him around carefully.

“I….” he rasped.

“It's okay Link!” Mipha shouted. “Please, please, don't speak…”

“I…” Link grinned weakly, staring tenderly into her yellow eyes. “...I can understand why they… named it Shatter-back.” He passed out. Mipha stared after Link, brushed his long hair off his face. And she laughed. She couldn’t help it.

In that moment, the enormous potential of her healing powers had fully manifested.

In that moment... she knew precisely why.

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*Today is the day.*

It had been six months since the diving incident. Link had been at the Domain for two and a half years. It had taken him only a week to recover from the accident, due primarily to Mipha’s efforts, and he’d made the most of his final months with the Zora.

“I know something! I know something! And you do not!” Sidon was dancing circles around his big sister, and Mipha did her best to remain patient with him. There were days when Sidon spoke and acted so much older than he actually was - and other times when it was precisely the opposite. At this moment it was the latter.
She was making her way towards the entrance to Zora's Domain.

*Today is the day...*

They’d held one last banquet the previous night, where Link showcased an appetite that seemed to have increased in capacity every day since his arrival. King Dorephan had taken the opportunity to break out a hidden cache of alcoholic beverages to mark the occasion, and the night had escalated rather quickly. Link and Mipha had both refrained from drinking, and were more content with watching the Demon Sergeant Seggin and Rivan’s father Trello drunkenly challenging each other to various feats of strength and skill.

*But today is the day.*

“I know something! And you do-”

“Go ahead and say it.” Mipha cut him off.

"Kodah has asked Link to marry her."

What?!

“Well, not really. That is inaccurate. But she *did* ask him to choose between her and someone else…” a sly smile grew on his face. Mipha didn’t want to encourage his taunting, but found herself curious.

“Who was it?” she pressed him.

“You.” Sidon took his usual pose. “She asked him to choose between herself and you.”

Mipha was taken aback. She knew Kodah was bold. But this was too much. She kept walking past Sidon, who ran up behind her.

“Do you not wish to know what his response was?” he asked.

Yes.

But she didn’t want Sidon to know this.

“Speak freely, Sidon.” She paused and faced him. He stared dramatically at his big sister.

“I-” he shrugged. “Do not remember.” He sprinted ahead. “It hardly matters anyway! Adults are weeeeeeiiirrrrrrrrrd!”

“Sidon!” Mipha yelled. “Get back here!” she covered her mouth suddenly. She never yelled. Mipha glanced around to see if anyone saw her, gathered herself, turned, and shook off the experience.

*Today is the day...the day he leaves us for good.*

She was heading to the entrance to see him off. Colleagues of Link’s father had arrived to escort him back to Hyrule Castle Town earlier. He was waiting at the entrance for his old friends to see him off, one after the other. As she began to walk below the intricate arches that rose above the long bridge connecting Zora’s Domain to the southernmost land mass, she noticed another Zora walking the other direction - away from the entrance.

Kodah. And she looked sad...heartbroken.
What is the matter, Kodah?” she asked. Kodah glared at Mipha, but then her face softened instantly. She wasn’t mean-spirited after all. “It’s no use,” Kodah said. “How could I be angry? At least now I know for sure…” she paused, slapping her face into her hands. She shook her head as if there was a disgusting bug latched on to it.

“Okay!” She said suddenly. “I’ll be all right, don’t mind me!” She sprinted away, leaving Mipha standing there to ponder.

Mipha’s heart positively ached for the heartbroken Zora girl… and yet… Why was she smiling?

She wiped the grin off her face and kept on walking, eventually arrived at the entrance. Link was surrounded by many of the young Zora, and the Bazz Brigade. Link had already said goodbye to most of the adults in the Domain, but the rest of his peers insisted on watching him leave. He was chatting with Gaddison, Bazz and Rivan, likely reminiscing about their countless idiotic adventures. Sidon had arrived before Mipha, seated firmly atop Link’s head.

Link looked in Mipha’s direction as she arrived and flashed his old grin - still boy-like, still remarkably handsome. She smiled back at him, gently squeezing the loosely wrapped package she clutched in her hands as she approached.

“Hello, Master Link.” she said. The young Zora surrounding them spread out to give them some privacy, chatting amongst themselves. But their conversations were empty - they were definitely listening in.

Sidon backflipped off the top of Link’s head and started chasing a nearby dragonfly.

Mipha stood in front of Link, looking up at his face. Link was tall. So much taller than her now. And his voice…

“Hello, Lady Mipha.”

...Was even deeper than before.

“I have… something for you.” she explained, calmly. “A parting gift.” she held out the package to him.

His face lit up. “Thanks! Me too! Although... I suppose it’s more of a waiting gift in your case,” he said, grabbing the package from Mipha, then bending over to grab her gift from out of his knapsack. He handed it to her, and they opened their packages at the same time.

For Mipha, a collection of gorgeous turquoise-colored gemstones - her favorite color - smoothed and carved with care. “I wanted to have them set in some jewelry,” Link explained, “but I figured you would like some options.”

“Thank you… they are quite lovely,” she said. She rolled them around in her fingers, looked up, suppressed a laugh. Link had already pierced his own ears with the turquoise earrings she had given him in her gift. They were bleeding slowly down his lobes.

“These are amazing! How do I look?” he said. Blood dripped onto his bare shoulders.

“Silly,” she said. “Here-” She reached up and healed Link’s ears - one last time. The move was seamless, natural. It no longer took any kind of concentrated effort on her part. As she stood on her toes and healed Link, the young Hylian suddenly wrapped his arms around Mipha. This caught her off guard and she let out a small yelp, before returning his hug just as tightly. The other young Zora took this as a cue, crowding the pair for one final group hug. As they separated, Link picked up his
bags and walked towards his escorts. He looked over his shoulder, waving goodbye as they departed from Zora's Domain.

“I shall return!” he called back. “Before you even know it!”

Through tears, the Zoran youths waved and called after Link, long, long after he disappeared over the distant horizon.

Chapter End Notes

You wouldn't believe how much research went into the making of this chapter. There were severely limited resources on the internet for such a new game at the time... so I had to simply do a play-through to analyze things. My goal was to craft something that fit neatly into canon at the time (pre-Champion's Ballad, mind you). Obscure things such as the Big Bad Bazz Brigade, or Seggin's role as Mipha's combat mentor... can all be found in the game. Other things, like Rivan remembering swimming with Link, or Gaddison remembering being Link's playmate, can be uncovered upon your first arrival at the Domain in-game by speaking to them. At any rate, hope you enjoy my rendition, my efforts to fill in the blanks of Link's past with the Zora. Next is Memories of Mipha Part 2 - Hylian Hero. Thanks.
Bazz was annoyed. It was only his first day of on-the-job guard training, and already he was having to ward off this strange hooded intruder who claimed to be a part of his brigade. He had never seen this Hylian man in his life. And so, Bazz had offered his trademark passphrase to the stranger - just to give him an extremely unlikely opportunity to prove his case.

“If you know it, I must ask you to speak it now… ‘Fluffy white clouds! Clear blue…’”

He waited a few moments for this Hylian’s response.

Then he shook his head.

“Well,” Bazz scoffed, “Just as I thought, you’re not-”

“Zora.” The Hylian said. “Clear blue Zora.”

“Wha-...How did you-”

The mysterious figure pulled off the hood of his cloak, revealing a face with some familiar features. Lightly tanned skin, a pair of blue eyes...

...And an infectious smile.

“To be truly honest, Bazz-” The cloaked stranger placed his hand on the young Zora’s shoulder. “-your passcode still doesn’t make any sense.”

“Master Link!” Bazz pulled Link into a tight embrace - or at least his midsection anyway. “You’ve gotten so...tall! And I can scarcely recognize you, with your hair so short!”

Link pulled away and placed his hands on his hips, grinning lightly. He was still just barely north of five feet in height. Quite short for a Hylian. He looked Bazz up and down. “You haven’t changed a bit though. Quite literally.” Bazz was still only about three and a half feet tall himself. Almost exactly as he was when Link left.

“Right… well, my growth spurt ended up being more like a squirt.” Bazz explained. “Guess I just have to wait for-”

“Bazz!” An angry voice yelled from nearby, where Bazz stood guard. “What did I say about keeping your poise when on duty?” Bazz straightened his stance.

“Sorry father! Won't happen again!” He winked at Link. “We’ll catch up later…”

Seggin walked closer. “And who might you be? Yet another Hylian?” He asked, peering his eyes at Link.

Link shrugged. “Just an old stranger passing through!”

But Seggin wasn't much for joking. “Ah... yes, yes. I recognize you now Master Link, no need to mince words with me.”
“It is good to see you again, Demon Sarge.” Link said. The two shook hands, and Seggin began walking with Link down the path towards the throne room. The older black-scaled Zora held his hands behind his back as he walked, carrying his usual proud pose. He towered over Link.

“So what brings you back to our fair Domain?” Seggin asked.

“Well,” Link said, “I am on leave from the Knight Academy. I am graduating early. Seems I am moving up to the Royal Guard next month.”

“And in less than two years!” Seggin said with genuine respect. “Either you are supremely talented… or Hylians are as incompetent in their training as I always expected.” He paused, before smiling down at Link. “I am inclined to believe it is the former.”

Link nodded in gratitude. Seggin was a notoriously straight-laced and proper Zora. Earning his respect was no small feat.

“I never did get to thank you for helping to train my boy a couple of years back...” Seggin said.

“No trouble at all!” Link replied.

Seggin nodded. “Unfortunately… I think he also might have picked up on some of your… wilder mannerisms.”

Link shrugged. “Glad to know I had some influence, one way or another!” He glanced around. “Where is everybody else?” He had only just arrived and was eager to surprise his old friends… as well as a certain red-finned Zora girl.

“Unfortunately you have come at a rather… inconvenient time.” Seggin said.

Ah, that's right… Link had been wondering about how the pilot selection was progressing. That explained the incredibly nice horse-drawn carriages he had noticed just outside the Domain’s entrance. He’d mistimed his arrival after all.

“Have they come to a decision?” Link asked.

“Not yet...” Seggin said. They stopped at the bottom of the stairs below the Zora throne room. “But I have a distinct feeling they are going to make a selection that we will not like...”

Some time before, the Hylian Royal Family had begun an enormous excavation project in areas all over Hyrule, looking into ancient technology that their ancestors had used to defeat the legendary evil known as Calamity Ganon. Link was only vaguely aware of the whole situation, although during his knight training the last couple of years he had noticed more and more ancient machinery coming into Hyrule Castle Town. His curiosity had gotten the better of him, causing him to have been kicked out of the castle grounds numerous times when he tried to get a closer look.

King Rhoam of Hyrule and his daughter, Princess Zelda, had spent the last few months traveling to each of the major civilizations in order to select ‘pilots’ for vehicles that they had dubbed ‘Divine Beasts.’ Dug up from deep in the ground within each respective country, they were super-constructs which took the form of enormous mechanical animals that apparently wielded great power. It appeared that the Royal Family was now in Zora’s Domain, deliberating with King Dorephan, Jiahto, Trello, and other members of the Zora Council on who would pilot the Divine Beast Vah Ruta. This ancient machine was discovered near the domain and would be assigned to the Zora for their defense against Calamity Ganon. Should the legends turn out to be true, anyway. Link thought.

“Lady Mipha was immediately drawn to Ruta.” Seggin lamented. “She has been obsessed with it...
since the day it was discovered…” A knot grew in Link’s throat. For some reason, he felt a creeping sense of dread about these machines… and he’d assumed that one of the older Zora warriors would have been considered instead. But Mipha?

“I argued with her, you know.” Seggin continued. “I did not want her name put forward as a pilot candidate. Trello felt the same way. Yet here we are.”

Link nodded in acknowledgement. “And I suppose…” he said, “that is why you are out here, and not watching the deliberations?” he gestured towards the throne room with his thumb.

Seggin smiled. “They kicked me out before I could say anything that could be considered… disrespectful to your king.” He winked at Link, who smiled back in spite of his fears.

“Let’s be positive.” Link said “Perhaps they will choose someone else-”

Suddenly, a pair of Royal Guards began to descend their way down the stairs from the throne room.

And following closely behind them was…

...King Rhoam Bosphoramus Hyrule. And his daughter, Princess Zelda.

Link immediately knelt in respect - standard knight protocol. He had seen the King before, when he’d addressed the public several times regarding the predictions of Calamity Ganon’s return. However, this was the closest Link had ever been to the powerful ruler - and to his daughter. King Rhoam was dressed in his usual regal garb: blue cloak with gold accents, a white undershirt, and pristine white pants to match. His beard was enormous as usual. Princess Zelda also wore her usual dress, with colors matching those of the king. Her golden blonde hair was tied back behind her pointed ears, held in place by a golden tiara... She was certainly beautiful and all, Link could admit. But all he could focus on was how unusually thick her eyebrows were.

_I really shouldn’t be analyzing people like this_, he thought, holding back a laugh.

“We must make our way to the Gerudo Desert next. Should be but a couple of weeks’ travel.” King Rhoam said. “I have a feeling that Lady Urbosa will be more than happy to-” He suddenly stopped at the foot of the stairs, turned to his left. After a brief pause, Link realized that the King was staring directly at him.

“If I recall…” Rhoam said, dully, “were you not the victor.... of the Junior Swordsmanship Tournament this year?”

Link nodded, but remained silent.

“I thought so. Your sword skills are quite impressive, young one. Just like your late father’s. I am certain you are destined for great things in your future,” he turned to his daughter Zelda. “Shall we?” With guards leading the way, the two made their way past Link and out towards the entrance to Zora’s Domain. Link wasn’t completely sure about it… but he could have sworn that Princess Zelda had flashed a look of scorn at him as they departed.

Link and Seggin watched them as they left, then looked at each other. “Well then,” said Seggin, with a rare trace of sarcasm, “they sure are a lively pair…” He glanced back up the stairs at the throne room. “It appears they’ve finished the deliberations. I’d better go check up on them…” He calmly made his way up the stairway…

...just as a flood of young Zora began making their way down.

“That was so BORING,” said a black-scaled Zora...
“I know…” said another...

Gaddison!

“They were speaking so quietly, I couldn’t even tell what they were saying. Oh well, at least now we can-”

“…Wait a minute, who’s that?” Rivan interrupted. The gaze of the others fell to where he was pointing. “He kinda looks like Link, but with shorter hair…”

“That is Link!” someone shouted. They all practically fell down the stairs towards him in excitement. “Master Link’s back! He’s returned!”

Link held up a hand to wave to them, just as they bowled him over in an enormous pile.

“It’s been far too long!” Rivan said, laying on top of him. “What’s up with your hair?” The group slowly stood up, surrounding Link. He was surprised by how much... smaller everyone seemed from when he was last there. He pulled at the tie that was holding his hair back in a small ponytail. It was still quite a bit shorter than the length he’d worn it during his last stint here.

“Well,” he explained, “As soon as I arrived back at the academy, they wanted me to cut it all off…” The Zora all groaned. “But after seeing my immediate progress, and after a little... convincing on my part, we reached a healthy compromise.” He shook his head back and forth, allowing his hair to fall around his shoulders. He glanced back up at the throne room. “How’d everything go up there?” he asked them.

“We’re not sure… said Gaddison. “Everyone else is still up there, with Mipha and Sidon… discussing boring adult stuff I guess.”

Link laughed. “I have a hard time hearing 'adult' and 'Sidon' in the same sentence.” This produced a laugh from the Zora youths.

“Enough about them though!” said a voice from the back of the group.

Kodah!

“We want to hear what you have been up to!”

Link was happy to see that there were no hard feelings between them after all.

“Yes, please tell us about what the academy is like!” Rivan said. “Was everyone impressed with how skilled you were, when you returned?”

All of the Zora neatly seated themselves in a semi-circle around Link. There were a couple dozen there, of various ages. It was quite reminiscent of the late nights with King Dorephan he had experienced as a child, and he grinned to himself at the memories. He wasn’t one to really enjoy being the center of attention, but he couldn’t simply ignore a question either.

Nearby, Bazz was slowly inching his way from his guard post, eager to hear what Link had to say.

“Well, they all actually hated me at first,” Link began. “I progressed really quickly when I came back, because of my training here at the Domain. Especially in swimming and spear combat. The older boys claimed I had an advantage only because of my late father’s status.” He tossed aside his
cloak, pulled off his shirt, and pointed to a few scars on his shoulder and ribs. “They tried to bully me, physically, and thought they could get away with it. Because I was so young…”

The mood darkened, as frowns spread on the faces of all his old friends.

“That is terrible!” Gaddison shouted.

“Yeah, did you do anything about it?” shouted Bazz, from across the room.

Link shrugged. “No, not at first. I didn't want to get in trouble since they came from noble families, and I'm just a commoner.” He crossed his arms. “But then… they discovered I had lived here with the Zora for a time. Started calling me a filthy fishboy…” the Zora youths’ eyes widened.

“I could take the beating. That's fine. But the names? Not so much. So I fought back. And I beat the living snot out of every single one of them.” The Zora all cheered for Link in excitement.

“But then they reported me to the trainers… and then they started bullying me and calling me really stupid names as well. Fishhead. Flipper. Troutbreath. That last one was funny. ” He placed his hands on his hips. “So then, I…”

They all leaned forward in anticipation.

“...Did nothing.” Link frowned. A massive groan rolled through the group of young Zora.

“Just kidding!” He smiled again. “I beat them up too.” A loud cheer erupted again.

“So then the instructors reported me to our Sergeant. I went into his office, expecting to get kicked out of the Academy…” he turned aside briefly, then held his hands up in disbelief. “...And the Sergeant promoted me to be their team leader instead. No more problems.”

The Zora burst out laughing in unison. Justice had been served. And really, only someone like Link could have had such a ludicrous thing happen to him...

“It would appear that violence is still just as funny to you as it always was,” said a voice, familiar and gentle, from behind Link. His heart froze. He turned around, slowly.

_Mipha._

Radiant as usual. Smiling. She approached him, arms spread.

“Though I must say in this instance…” she pulled Link into a warm embrace, “that _I_ find it incredibly humorous as well.” Link hesitated slightly before returning the hug.

_Why am I so nervous?_ Link thought to himself.

_Why am I so nervous?_ Mipha thought to herself. They pulled away from each other.

“It is so good to see you again.” Mipha said. She glowed with warmth and life.

Link smiled. “I missed you. Every single day. Every minute.” He turned and faced the other Zora youths again. “We have loads of catching up to do guys, that's for sure!”

“I'll say!” A high pitched voice.

_Sidon._
He seemed to fall right on top of Link’s head from out of nowhere. “Greetings, my old and wonderful friend.” Sidon gently patted his hands on Link’s forehead. “What'd I miss?!”

Link laughed, pulled Sidon off his head. “Nothing special, just a story or two…” he dropped him to the ground.

“That is excellent, Master Link!” Sidon posed. “I am quite sure you have some endlessly ludicrous tales to entertain us with. Carry on please.” Sidon spun around and took a seat with the other Zora. Mipha followed suit, sitting next to Sidon.

“It's really not all that interesting…” Link said. “I would hate to waste your time.” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly - a familiar sight to his old peers.

“Nonsense.” Mipha said, holding a hand out in offering. “Please, continue.”

Link shrugged. It was settled. “As you wish!” he began to sift through the enormous catalog of insane stories contained within his mind...

“Pardon me, Link!” piped Rivan from the middle of the seated youths. He was raising his hand as if they were in a classroom.

“...But I need to ask something before you continue with your stories…”

Link nodded at him.

“Why…” he asked, “did it make you so much angrier when they started calling you those names?”

Link grinned. “Oh that's easy,” he explained.

“They insulted my family.”

The sun had once again set behind the tall mountains surrounding the peaceful home of the Zora people. The bioluminescent glow of river snails illuminated the paths Link and Mipha walked together, as did the gentle blue light emanating from columns carved meticulously from luminous stones. Link was enjoying the familiar feeling of relaxation that the sights and sounds of this place provided him. The smell of clean air… the sound of flowing water across the floor… the warm companionship of someone dear to him...

He was home.

The pair was finally getting some alone time together, after Link’s rather eventful day of reconnecting with peers and adults alike. He glanced down at Mipha as they walked.

“You've grown.” he said. “I'm a bit shocked to see it…”

“I would say the same,” replied Mipha. “But that would be a rather… enormous understatement in your case.”

Link had grown even more over their last couple of years apart, as expected. But more surprisingly, Mipha had also grown - both in height, and in beauty. Link couldn't help but notice both.

“Congratulations on your promotion, by the way.” Mipha said, calmly.

“Thanks,” Link replied. “I've worked very hard…”
Earlier, King Dorephan had boisterously welcomed Link back to the Domain with one of his classic rousing banquets. It seemed to have served two purposes: to distract the Zora from the stress of the Hylian Royal Family's earlier visit, and to congratulate Link on his remarkable upcoming promotion to Royal Guard.

“It is rare for someone under twenty-two to make it to the Hylian Royal Guard,” he explained to Mipha. “My father held the record… at twenty.”

“And you're just barely about to turn fifteen,” Mipha said. “Impressive… I am very proud of you. You’ll be a full-fledged knight in no time.”

“Couldn't have done it without you…” Link said. They continued walking. The silence between them was... different now. Somehow uncomfortable. Mipha had her suspicions as to why.

“I am guessing you have already heard the news…” She said.

“Yes,” Link said, flatly. The pained look on Seggin’s face during Link’s surprise homecoming dinner had said it all: Mipha had been chosen as the pilot of Divine Beast Vah Ruta in the end.

“I am really quite pleased about it!” she said, her voice buzzing with rare excitement. “And... I can guess from your expression…” her voice lowered, “that you are not.”

Link remained silent, unresponsive. A part of him wanted to be happy for her… but another part was fighting off worry and dread.

“It's okay…” Mipha continued. “My father expressed similar concern. And I understand. This isn’t something that I take lightly, I can assure you.” They continued to walk in odd silence.

"Why am I so nervous?" Mipha thought to herself.

"Why am I so quiet?" Link thought to himself.

After some time, Link finally decided he should break the ice. “I… can't deny that I'm worried for you. We don't know much about those machines, about how dangerous they can be…” Mipha nodded, and started to open her mouth to respond-

“But,” Link cut her off. “Seggin told me you felt an instant bond with Vah Ruta. I don't find that to be mere coincidence. Not at all.” He turned and smiled at Mipha. “And I definitely trust your feelings and your judgement more than anyone. You have my full support.”

Mipha’s eyes glowed. “Thank you Link.” It was really all she could say.

She decided to change the subject. It was odd for her to see Link so serious. So worried. So quiet. She wanted to lighten the mood a bit.

“Those earrings are quite lovely,” Mipha remarked, pointing at the turquoise earrings he had worn since the day he left. “Wherever did you get them?”

Link started laughing. “Well… someone incredibly important to me once gave them to me as a gift. Someone amazing…”

Mipha nodded, kept a straight face. “I see. You're making me feel rather jealous.”

“It's no competition, trust me,” Link said.

Mipha’s serious persona broke, and she smiled again. Link looked her up and down, finally got a
good look at the jewelry she was wearing: all adorned with the same turquoise stones he had gifted her years before.

“And how about those stones on your headpiece and necklace?” He asked. “Those look… nice.”

“Oh, these old things…” Mipha said, pulling her necklace up to look down at the embedded stone. “They were a gift from a person quite dear to me, just the same. A waiting gift.” She paused for a moment, then suddenly turned and hugged Link again. This time he did not hesitate to return her embrace.

“And to be frank,” she said, “I’ve grown rather tired of waiting.”

Link had been home for a week, and had fallen perfectly back in step with the ebb and flow of daily life in Zora’s Domain. He had been more than happy to begin training the Zora youths again, although Bazz’s guard training prevented him from seeing Link very often for sword practice. Nevertheless, the Big Bad Bazz Brigade had reunited several times that week in Bazz’s off-time, and Link found that the recklessness of his peers had only increased in his absence.

Perhaps they did pick up on some of my old habits, he had thought. Oops.

Fortunately, there’d been no injuries incurred in their new adventures. They had even returned to the scene of his failed pole-vault up to the cave at Veiled Falls years prior - except this time, Link was able to successfully scale the wall with ease. The Zora youths had waited patiently to find out what mysterious things Link would find in the cave… only to soon find themselves sprinting as fast as possible back to the Domain, a massive swarm of angry flying keese giving chase.

Still, they laughed and smiled with joy all the way.

In all of the shuffle, Link was also able to squeeze in time to bring back some of their classic swim races. He’d even managed to win one for the first time ever. Although he was quite certain that they had just let him win - especially since they all smoked him in the very next race the following day.

Sadly, Mipha’s selection as the pilot for Vah Ruta had greater repercussions than any of the Zora had expected. Much of her days were spent around the divine beast, as representatives from the Sheikah tribe spearheaded the project to bring the ancient machine to working operation. A clan of white-haired shadow warriors from an old tribe, the Sheikah had been assisting the Royal Family of Hyrule with researching and activating the old machinery that seemed to bear the same symbols the tribe themselves used today. Link was sure there was a major connection there, but kept his ideas to himself.

“How goes the research?” Link asked Mipha one day. They were seated together, watching the Zora youths practice their combat. Mipha was enjoying a rare break, so she had decided to make the most of it by spending some time with Link.

“We… are not making much progress.” Mipha said. “We have been unable to even open the entrance to Vah Ruta.” Her mood seemed dampened by their lack of success. “They tell me… that there is another device that may be needed in order to activate a strange pedestal that seals it.”

Link felt saddened by his own inability to assist with the research. Technology and science were never really his specialties, as evidenced by his low marks in both categories at the academy. Nevertheless, he found himself grasping for a way to help her out. Or at least… to make her feel more relaxed.

And he knew exactly how to do it.
Link stood up, patted off his backside. His old childlike grin appeared on his face.

“I do believe,” he said, “That I know precisely what will cheer you up.”

Mipha immediately knew what he was thinking. Her eyes glowed, her smile grew.

“A camping trip?” she guessed.

“A camping trip.”

Shortly after lunch, the pair carefully snuck out of the Domain - careful not to draw the attention of Mipha’s attendant Muzu. He’d been hovering even more than he ever had lately - probably due to the noise and business surrounding the situation with the Divine Beast. With so many Hylians and Sheikah tribe members coming and going at a moment’s notice, he was practically smothering her with what he described as ‘necessary care’ for her situation.

They made their way up the mountains to their usual camping spot, careful to keep a lookout for any uninvited guests. As usual, they were geared with supplies and armed with weapons - just in case. But this time, Mipha had brought along her trusty Lightscale Trident. Green jewels adorned the silver three-pronged weapon, reflecting glittery light on the ground around them as they walked. Now out-of-sight from the Domain, Mipha inhaled deeply, exhaled loudly...

“It feels as if I have been unable to breathe for many days now,” she said. She turned to Link, gently patting him on the shoulder. “I must express my sincere gratitude for this. I’d been waiting for a good time to ask you myself, but it seems you beat me to the jab.”

He returned her physical gesture, resting his left hand on the top of her head as they walked. “To be honest, I’ve been looking forward to this since the very day I first left the Domain,” he said. “So believe me when I say… that the pleasure is entirely mine.”

The familiar silence set in again. It seemed to be a much more frequent occurrence lately, but it was no longer uncomfortable or unwelcome. Although…

“I have noticed,” Mipha said, “that you seem a bit… quieter these days. More serious. At least a bit more so than when you were living here with us.”

Link couldn’t deny it. “To be perfectly honest…” he said, “I have noticed it too. And it bothers me.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I believe it started from the day I arrived back at the Academy. When I was being beaten and bullied, it seemed easier to just shut my mouth and take the hits. To face the pressure and abuse with a cold attitude. To not give them anything to feed off of.”

His face turned stoic. “I suppose that mentality has continued all the way up to my graduation. I made very few friends at the Academy. They were all nobles, or self-important types. I fought tooth and nail for the entire duration... survival of the fittest and all that.” Mipha found herself looking at the scars and bruises that decorated Link’s shirtless torso.

I’ll have to heal him later she thought to herself.

“I am so sorry.” She said. Her look was of genuine concern - of empathy - for the boy she’d grown so fond off. For the boy who had suffered in silence while she casually toiled away here at the Domain...

Link suddenly grinned. “Oh, let’s not be so downcast. I knew what I was getting into when I signed on!” He shook his head to and fro, his hair splaying out wildly as he did. It was golden, radiant in the bright beams of sunlight bearing down on them. His eyes glowed their usual vibrant blue, enhancing his boy-like smile. “Besides, being here with you, with the other Zora, being back at home… I’ve
never felt happier. More alive.” He looked at Mipha. “Let’s make the most of this.” he started sprinting towards Ploymus Mountain, towards Shatterback Point. His joyful enthusiasm was contagious. Mipha shook her head, smiling, and sprinted after him.

_It is a shame_, she thought to herself as she ran, _That we can only remain this innocent for so much longer…_

After a brief sprint up Ploymus Mountain, the pair found themselves at the top of Shatterback Point. Link glanced at the sign there, then burst out laughing.

’JUMP AT YOUR OWN RISK!’ it read.

“Am I single-handedly responsible for this?” he said proudly, pointing at it. Mipha giggled too, gently as always.

“At the risk of encouraging you to make the jump again…” she said. “I am inclined to not give an answer.”

Link shrugged. There would be no jumping for either of them that evening anyway. Not with a sunset like this. He walked over to the edge of the point, took a seat cross-legged at the rock’s edge. He patted the spot next to him, beckoning Mipha and she found her place next to him. The pair looked out at the world in sheer awe as a familiar sight greeted them: Rolling hills, oceans, valleys… but this time, the sun painted the landscape a gorgeous splash of bright orange and yellow. Clouds rolled over the landscape, their shadows deepening as the sun grew more and more eclipsed by distant mountains.

“How long do you suppose,” Link asked, “That you will last in the dry Gerudo desert when we travel there?” He pointed in the distance towards the mountains far southwest.

“...About as long as you can last underwater,” she countered. “Roughly ten seconds.”

Link started laughing. He was notoriously bad at holding his breath, a fact which was abundantly known by just about everyone in Zora’s domain.

“I’ll have you know,” he said, eyebrows furrowed, “that I have greatly improved my lung capacity.” He stared intensely at Mipha. “Unfortunately, it seems like nowadays my lungs are just full of hot air.”

This time, Mipha laughed. But more so out of relief. Because in spite of his traumatic experiences, Link was still his silly, funny, bold self. **At least for now.**

Link rolled forward onto his stomach, peering over the ledge towards the eastern reservoir below. Mipha did the same, and they laid side-by-side - peering at Vah Ruta. The gigantic machine had been discovered in excavations right near the reservoir before, and had now been floated out to the center of the lake for research and testing. The Sheikah knew that the machine was designed to interact with water in some capacity. They just could not seem to get it to work.

“It is a bond… that I simply can’t explain.” Mipha said, as they stared at the Divine Beast. “It’s as if I returned to an old friend after many long years.”

Link remained silent.

“The beast was named after an ancient figure in Zora history” Mipha continued. “A Zora princess, who was beloved by her people. My father also believes that it is not a coincidence that I was chosen to be its pilot… though I would hardly describe myself as ‘beloved.’”
Mipha was notoriously humble. So Link found it necessary to contradict her. “I believe there is no one more loved than you in the entirety of Zora’s Domain,” he said. And he meant it.

“Thank you…” she said. “I… am loathe to admit it. But I do feel pressure to be a good role model, to be a good leader for everyone. And I suppose that expectation is what smothers me the most on a daily basis…”

“Well, if nothing else,” Link said, his hand finding a place on Mipha’s head again, “you’re beloved by me. And while that’s not worth much, I hope that’s enough.”

Mipha’s heart melted at his words, and she smiled. Because in the end, it most certainly was.

The pair made their way down from the point, setting up camp in their usual cave. It was a nice warm night, so they set up a pair of torches for lighting rather than a full-blown campfire. They sat near each other, snacking on raw fish and snails they’d brought with them from the Domain. Mipha glanced over at Link.

“Link… I have a question. If you do not find it rude that I ask this…”

“Go ahead.” He said, taking a a few swigs of water from his canteen.

“I only just thought of this after Princess Zelda’s recent visit, as it is rare for me to encounter female Hylians. But from what I have observed,” she gestured at her chest with both hands. “Is it considered much more desirable among your people to be a bit larger in this area?”

Link snorted water straight out his nose as he failed to suppress his laughter.

Mipha smiled at this but kept on, staring straight ahead. “…Because with the Zora, it is more attractive to have a sleeker build. It means you are more streamlined and efficient when swimming.”

Link coughed a few times, wiped his face off, grinned… “To be honest, I think it really just depends on the individual!” he replied, screwing the lid back on canteen. “…But yes…people do seem to put a premium on those who they say are more…’well-endowed’…?”

“I see,” said Mipha, loosely crossing her finned arms. “So quite oppositely, Zora females would not be attractive to the average Hylian.”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that.” Link said. He held his palms in the air. “Like I said, it's a matter of preference. Besides, if anyone - Zora or Hylian - was judging you from looks alone, they wouldn't be worth your time if you ask me.”

This seemed to satisfy Mipha, although her face didn't show it. “Well then,” she replied, uncrossing her arms again. “I appreciate the sentiment.”

Link shrugged. “I only speak the truth.” He stared at the horizon for a bit, before looking at Mipha again with a raised eyebrow. “So what brought you to ask this question, aside from curiosity?”

“No particular reason,” she said calmly. “I just find our cultural differences to be endlessly interesting.”

“I see.” Link knew she wasn't lying. Knowing her, it was most certainly a scholarly question at the foremost. But he decided to change the subject before he started getting too flustered on the inside. “So I was wondering… if you don’t mind me asking.”
Mipha shook her head.

“‘A few years ago,’” he continued, “‘when I was here, it seemed like your healing powers only improved with time…”

“Oh!” Mipha said. “That reminds me…” she pointed at the ground, and Link knew she probably wanted him to lay down in front of her for the healing session she’d been insisting on for a while. He laid down, and soon her hands glowed a familiar, comforting blue. She hovered over the countless wounds Link had incurred during their time apart.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I had been wondering. You never did explain to me what triggered the sudden improvement in your healing capabilities!” Mipha’s hands paused for a second, then continued their movements. A half-smile formed on her face.

“Well Link, I-”

CLOMP-CLOMP-CLOMP-CLOMP-

Noises. From outside the cave.

Link shot to his feet. These were… footsteps? No. Hoof steps. But there weren’t any horse paths up on the ridge that Link was aware of. A hoofed moblin then, perhaps? Those were quite rare.

Wordlessly, Link grabbed his spear from nearby and started to walking towards the entrance of the cave. He held a hand back to stop Mipha, but she ignored it.

“I shall be joining you,” Mipha replied. The look she gave Link told him that he was not going to win that argument. And so, spear and trident in-hand, the pair exited the cave. Link held one of their torches in his left hand, guiding their path. The sounds stopped as they drew closer to the source. The orange glow of the torch illuminated the ground in front of them. But all they saw as they walked was coral-like foliage… grass… a stump… a set of hoofed legs.

Uh oh.

They’d found the source.

The light of the torch traveled up the legs of this beast, eventually revealing its entire body: It was huge. At least ten feet tall. From the waist down, this creature had the body of a brown horse, but its torso was similar to that of an enormous Hylian. From its red-maned head protruded two large horns, and its ferocious glowing red eyes were made all the most sinister in appearance by the orange light from the torch Link held.

This… was a Lynel.

I thought they were only found in the outer wastelands, Link pondered. He quickly dropped his torch and pointed his spear at the creature. Mipha made the same move with her trident.

Oh well. Wouldn’t be a proper camping trip without some kind of hitch like this.

The creature seemed to nod in acknowledgement of the pending battle, before letting out a huge roar. The fight was on.

It drew its sword, and reared back for a large swing. As if they’d rehearsed it, Link and Mipha back-flipped out of the way - just as the sword cut the air where they’d previously stood. The pair immediately went their separate ways, Link darting to the left of the beast and Mipha to the right.
Link backpedaled, and it appeared that the creature had decided to focus on him first. The Lynel reared back again, and charged Link with its powerful legs. As it leaned down to take a swipe at him, Link rolled to the ground, just under the Lynel’s sword, then spun around to jab it straight in the rear. This seemed to anger the beast greatly, and it let out another roar that practically pierced Link’s eardrums. It began a flurry of swipes in Link’s direction. Link dodged these too with ease, back-flipping and spinning just out of range. He jabbed his spear at the Lynel’s face with each dodge, occasionally hitting the mark. It did not seem to be doing any damage, however…

RRRROOAAAWWWW!

The creature let out another angry noise, this time out of pain. Link looked up, and saw Mipha standing on top of the Lynel’s head. She had leapt off the top of a tall rock, plunging her Lightscale trident deep into its skull. The monster reached up with its left arm and attempted to sweep off the top of its head with its bladed shield. It managed to graze Mipha with the blunt end, and she was knocked a few feet away. She landed smoothly on her feet and disappeared into the darkness again.

Irritated, the Lynel suddenly dropped its sword and shield. It stuck its head back, its mouth glowed and it lurched forward repeatedly, spewing fireball after fireball from its mouth into the darkness. It set fire to the nearby grass and illuminated the battlefield. Unfortunately, this meant Mipha no longer had the benefit of stealth to cover her. The Lynel drew a spear of its own from its back, and began to charge her instead.

From his studies, Link knew that Lynels were supposed to be smarter than the average monster. But this one didn’t appear to be all that bright. He picked up its sword and shield, chucking them off the cliff nearby, then he sprinted to rejoin Mipha in battle.

She was holding her own quite well. The Lynel jabbed at the small Zora princess, but found it difficult to hit its mark. Mipha spun past one of its hasty stabs, sliding on her knees through the Lynel’s legs and piercing it several times in the stomach. She ran out from under the beast as it spun around in an effort to grab her-

-just in time for it to catch a spear straight through the jaw from Link. Snarling and bleeding, the Lynel recoiled, and threw down its spear this time.

_What in the world is it -_

_Oh no._

The monster had drawn a rather intimidating bow, nocking an arrow that glowed yellow with sparks. A shock arrow.

_Mipha-

Before Link could do anything, the Lynel sent the arrow flying through the night sky in the direction she had run. A small shriek pierced the night air.

_Mipha!

Satisfied, the creature replaced its bow, picked up its spear, and began to charge in Mipha’s direction.

Link was fully aware of how potent electricity was to the Zora. He was shaking... his blood boiled. His heart hurt, his head hurt, he was positively sick. In blind fury, he sprinted at the Lynel, jumping on its back. As he jammed his spear deep into the Lynel’s spine, it bucked suddenly, kicking him up and over its head. He landed with a loud thud in the spot up ahead where the shock arrow had
impacted. The spear remained embedded within the Lynel - Link was now weaponless. He glanced around him, his blood roaring with adrenaline.

Where’s Mipha?

The Lynel ran towards him, descending upon him with its own blind fury. Link prepared himself to dodge, when he finally saw it - the Lightscale Trident. He grabbed it and rolled aside just as the hoofed beast nearly trampled him underfoot. The creature turned again, rearing back to let loose another fireball straight at Link. The glow of orange flame illuminated the Lynel’s head and the surrounding area, and then he saw it. A small figure, standing in a nearby tree.

Mipha. Thank the Goddesses…

She nodded, calmly, and he smiled back. As the creature prepared to unleash the fireball from its mouth, Link charged directly at it, leaping up and spiking Mipha’s ornate trident straight into its face. This caused the fireball to explode right in the Lynel’s mouth, just as Mipha leapt gracefully from the top of the tree above it. She landed on the creature’s back, ripped out Link’s Zora spear from its spine, and let loose a flurry of stabs straight into the back of the Lynel’s head. A perfect recreation of Link’s trademark move.

Looks like she’s been practicing, Link thought.

With Mipha’s trident, he let loose the same flurry of attacks himself, straight into the chest of the Lynel. The creature collapsed onto the ground in agony as the pair finished their strikes. It let out a final, pained roar, before finally dying.

It was over.

Mipha limped up to Link, smiling calmly. He could see the scorch marks on her leg from where the shock arrow must have grazed her.

“I must admit…” Mipha said as she approached him. “… a trident suits you rather well- OH!”

Link had wrapped his arms around Mipha. “Are you okay? How’s your leg?” He bent over to take a look. She made a vain effort to hide her damaged leg from Link.

“I was sloppy.” She said. “The arrow grazed me, but fortunately it did not make significant contact.” Mipha bent over and started to heal her own leg. “More importantly, however…” she said, with sadness. “We must report this danger to the Zora council immediately.”

Link frowned.

Their camping trip was over.

“I’ve said it time and time again. You absolutely cannot trust a Hylian.”

Muzu was ranting and raving in King Dorephan’s throne room. Several other Zora council members were there, but they remained silent. They knew better than to get between an argument with Muzu and their King. The fact that they’d been woken up in the middle of the night for this emergency meeting also didn’t help.

“Oh the contrary.” Dorephan countered. “I believe that Link is a hero. He and our brave princess just eliminated a major threat to our Domain-”
“But what if it hadn’t worked out in their favor?” Muzu argued. “We’re lucky that our Lady Mipha wasn’t injured in the attack!” Link and Mipha glanced at each other with guilty looks. They hadn’t told Muzu about Mipha’s leg...

“It’s entirely my fault.” Link spoke up. Muzu’s glare seemed to pierce a hole in his skull.

Nearby, Mipha shook her head violently. But Link ignored her. “I asked her to join me,” he said, “not thinking that there’d be such an enormous threat up there-”

“That’s precisely the problem.” Muzu said. “You weren’t thinking at all!”

Mipha stared at Link. Why are you doing this? She thought. It’s not your fault...

“Well if I may contribute,” Sidon said nearby. The council members groaned. “I find the actions of my big sister and the amazing master Link to be worthy of praise instead of scorn. I am reminded of the remarkably similar tales of the ancient hero my father often shares with us, where he had single-handedly fought off a Lynel on-”

Link suppressed his laughter at Sidon’s efforts to sound mature and grown-up. From the look on Mipha’s face, Link figured she was thinking the same.

Out of respect for the King, Muzu allowed Sidon to continue his rant for a minute or two, before finally cutting him off. “... and besides that,” Sidon was saying, ”Link’s really good at cooking and-”

“That’s enough!” Muzu snapped. Sidon shrugged, then ran back and climbed up to sit on Link’s head.

Mipha stepped forward. “If I may, Muzu. Please refrain from pinning the blame on Link for all this. He did not pressure me in any way to join him on this trip up the mountain. I made the decision on my own.” Muzu softened a bit at this, as it was incredibly rare to ever see Mipha so outspoken about something. But he still remained furious.

“And also,” Mipha continued, “We have never had any troubles like this before. How could we have anticipated that a Lynel of all things would be there?”

Muzu was unmoved from his position. “The fact remains, Lady Mipha, that you snuck out yet again to frolic in the mountains with this silly Hylian. Risking your safety. And all while we’re in the middle of dealing with this… ridiculous Vah Ruta situation...and I…” Muzu sighed.

A deafening silence settled into the chamber.

I’d much rather be dealing with the Lynel than this, Link thought to himself. He glanced at Mipha once more, and the look on her face again proved they were thinking the same exact thing.

After some time to consider his thoughts, King Dorephan chimed in again. His voice echoed deeply through the throne room. “Muzu… I believe that everyone here is feeling the stress and the pressure of this business with the Divine Beast. But that is no reason to take it out on these two… are we not all entitled to our leisurely activities, especially during stressful times?” he paused briefly, before continuing. There was a sense of finality in his tone.

“And while I may have my own doubts about Vah Ruta... we have a pact to maintain with the Kingdom of Hyrule that I fully intend to uphold. Besides-” he gestured at Mipha and Link. “-If their testimony is correct, then there may be some merit to the claims that Calamity Ganon is returning to this world. A Lynel indeed has not been spotted anywhere near Zora’s Domain in over 10,000 years...”
Muzu began to speak. “But regardless, I-”

“Enough.” Dorephan said, flatly. “Mipha and Link shall be recognized as heroes for their actions tonight. And that is the end of it.”

It was settled. The throne room emptied. Mipha and Link began to make their way down the stairs towards the overlook below.

“I am… sorry for causing you so much trouble.” Mipha said.

Link stared after her. “You must be kidding. I’m sorry. The whole thing was my-”

She held up her hand, cutting him off. “Then we agree,” she said, “that it is both our faults. How’s that?”

Link looked at her hand. Though it wasn’t her intention, he grabbed it and shook it. “Okay then. It’s settled.” He dropped her hand. “So. What now?”

“Now,” she said, stretching her arms and yawning loudly. “We get some sleep.”

It was five o’clock in the morning. They’d been up the entire night.

Link yawned himself. “Well,” he joked. “I don’t suppose that it’s a good idea to head back up to our cave for the rest of the night?”

Mipha’s tired laugh was music to his ears.

In the aftermath, Zora’s Domain was abuzz with news of Link and Mipha’s Lynel-slaying heroics. In particular, Link’s already high popularity among the Zora people skyrocketed, to say nothing of his now-permanent status as a legend among the youths. If there were any concerns about Mipha’s safety during that fateful encounter, those worries certainly were not voiced by anyone.

That is, anyone other than Muzu.

In spite of Muzu’s protests, King Dorephan hosted yet another feast to commemorate the occasion. Normal life seemed to have settled back into the Domain, although Mipha’s continued involvement with the Sheikah tribe’s work with Vah Ruta still hung over everyone like a shadow. With post-Lynel encounter Muzu out in full force, Link and Mipha barely had any opportunities to be in each other’s company. Nevertheless, they did the best they could with the time they had - a brief chat here, an exchange of glances there… they had even resorted to passing notes to each other as they passed by, just to help them close the gap. And Link was sure to hang on to every little scrap of cloth-paper that he received from her.

It had only been ten days into Link’s stay at Zora’s Domain when the Royal Messenger arrived to give him the good - and the bad - news.

The good news? He was no longer in the Royal Guard pipeline for basic knights. Instead, he was being placed on the fast track to be trained as an officer of the Royal Guard.

The bad news? He was to begin two years of the notoriously brutal Imperial Guard training in Hyrule Castle. Training that was due to start in less than two weeks. His granted leave from the Knights of Hyrule was cut off early. It was time to go.

The mood at the Domain was somber in the wake of his imminent departure, though markedly less
so than it was for Link’s previous exit from his home. The Zora once again crowded around him, and they once again made way for Lady Mipha as she approached him, gift in hand. Link kicked himself for not having a parting gift, though the extremely short notice made it near impossible for him to have procured anything for her in such a short time.

Which begged the question: how did she have a gift prepared? And a big one at that?

Mipha held the long package in her hands. She stared up, bright yellow eyes aglow, as she drew closer to him. “Master Link,” she said as she handed him the gift, “I wanted to wish you a happy birthday…”

*Oh. That's right.* He’d totally forgotten it himself. He was turning fifteen today.

“Happy birthday!” the other young Zora cheered. They all crowded around Link, taking turns hugging him and patting him on the back. The exchanges took a few minutes, and the Royal Messenger found himself growing impatient as he observed this drawn-out process of departure unfolding before him.

As the young Zora all said their goodbyes, this time they read the mood and began heading away from the entrance and back to the main area of the Domain - leaving Link and Mipha truly alone to say goodbye. Only Sidon remained, blissfully unaware of his surroundings as he clung tightly to Link’s thigh.

“You can open it now…” Mipha gestured at the long package in Link’s hands. “Though I’m sure you can already guess what it is…”

Link shrugged. “If you haven’t realized it already,” he said, as he tore open the package, “I’m quite the natural at playing stupid.”

From the contents of the package emerged a beautiful, hand-carved weapon - a Silverscale Spear. It was well-balanced, silver in color with blue accents. The spear’s tip was shaped like the crescent-moon tail of a fish.

“This is amazing!” Link cried. He spun it around above his head, jabbed the spear out in front of him, felt its weight in his hands. “Extremely well-crafted…”

“Thank you…” Mipha said. “I had planned for this, long before your arrival. Our smithy, Dento, gave me tips as I built it…”

“You’re incredible! Truly. This is far more than I deserve…” Link fastened it to his back, then immediately pulled Mipha into a loving embrace. This time around, she was quite ready for it.

“My hope,” she said, as they held each other, “Is that you will keep it, and remember all the good times we spent together… whilst violently skewering your enemies.”

Link pulled away, laughing warmly. It was her typically subtle sense of humor on full display, and he couldn’t get enough of it. His blue eyes shone with happiness and gratitude.

“Must you always be so casually… serene when you say things like that?” he asked her, grinning wildly.

Mipha smiled back. “Whatever it takes to get a laugh out of you…”

*The world turned pale, color seemed to fade.*
Link opened his eyes. He was laying on the floor of a pier, breathing heavily.

His fight alongside Sidon on the wooden platforms had apparently ended only a few minutes ago.

To Link, it felt like years. His lungs hurt too. As if he’d been holding his breath for just as long. As he gathered himself, an incredibly familiar face popped into view - but much, much older now.

“I am dreadfully sorry!” It was Sidon. Big Sidon. “You had me worried there, you were staring blankly and shaking quite a bit! I was afraid I had triggered some kind of psychotic episode with my question…”

Link shot straight to his feet and stared up at Sidon. He was completely overwhelmed…with heartache, with sorrow, with regret…

With memories.

“I…”

He could feel his eyes beginning to well with tears, but he fought them back.

“I remember…” Link pulled Sidon into a warm embrace - his midsection anyway - and Sidon returned the favor.

“I remember.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up is Chapter 7: Know You.

Post DLC-2 update: As of now, some of the details present in the previous two chapters contradict canon, namely Link’s age and the circumstances behind the Lynel encounter. Regardless, I hope you enjoy my portrayal of the events of the past!
Know You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So your memories just… conveniently returned in that moment. Easy as that?” Sidon’s eyes narrowed slightly…

“That is amazing! So you remember everything?”

Link shook his head. His brain was throbbing, his heart hurt. He had just finished recanting everything to Sidon. The circumstances of his awakening…his adventures on the plateau with the old man… his complete and utter lack of memories up until now.

“I only remember a few things.” Link said. “I remember my childhood, and my father. I remember the Domain. Up until I left for the second time.” He clutched his head in pain. Now I see why Rhoam didn't want to overwhelm me right away...

“The memories are fragmented, there’s still some gaps… to say the least. But they’re there.” He glanced up. “I cannot believe… that you're an adult now. It is quite odd. Other than your size… you've hardly changed!”

Sidon stroked his chin. “Is that so?” He closed his eyes. “I scarcely remember you from that time. I must apologize. I was quite young.”

Link shook his head. Felt like his brain was rolling around inside...

Sidon continued. “However, my father used to remind me often of you, would regale me with stories of this incredible young Hylian my sister had known so well…” his sharp-toothed grin returned. “I grew up with images of a mighty warrior, the lynel-slayer, the great man whose skill and bravery were the envy of anyone - Zora or Hylian! So I can’t help but feel… a bit of kinship with you! My friend! My old and wonderful friend!” He shook Link’s hand with a powerful grip.

“So,” Link said, “You told me you needed some help? What’s the situation at Zora’s Domain?”

Sidon’s face appeared conflicted. “Link, I'll have to be honest with you… I no longer believe that it is a good idea for you to immediately accompany me to our Domain. If awakening only a few memories had this sort of effect on you… perhaps we should abstain from overwhelming you again.”

Link’s head throbbed and he winced in pain again. “I am inclined... to agree.” He let go of his head. “However, I've dealt with way worse than this. Why don't we-”

Sidon held a hand up to cut him off.

Just like his sister… Link thought.

“You said earlier that you were… lost?” Sidon asked. “Were you searching for something? Someone?”

Impa! The name suddenly came to him. Rhoam had asked him to see her first. Perhaps he should have heeded the warning…

Oh well, he thought. I'm much better off with these memories restored. Incredible pain and all.
Link pulled out his Sheikah Slate, activating its map feature. He leaned over to show Sidon, gestured at a general area northeast to where the Great Plateau was pictured. The Plateau appeared as a detailed landmass surrounded by a sea of dark blue mystery... “I was told to visit Impa, the elder of a village. It’s supposed to be somewhere east of this large mass here...I think. But I can't seem to remember the name of-”

“Oh!” Sidon shouted. “My father told me about this interesting device. May I?” He grabbed the slate from Link’s hands, poking around with curiosity. “Astounding! I'm truly blown away!” He was like a distracted child with a brand new toy. “Hmmm… and what is this?” he poked at a strange menu item that appeared on the slate. A dot appeared on the map in the sea of black and blue.

“Ah! You're trying to reach Kakariko Village. I thought so.” He flipped the slate to show Link, whose eyes narrowed.

“You're joking.” Link said flatly. “It was in there the whole time?”

Never was good with technology...

“Excellent!” Sidon said. He handed Link his slate back. “I think it would be wise for you to do as your late King requested, for the time being.” Link frowned internally at this. He was still being jerked around by that old man, even now...

“But I am quite excited, truly…” Sidon said. “I believe we have found our Hylian! And not just any Hylian… but the Champion! I trust that we shall be seeing you again very soon. I cannot wait! I’m serious!”

Link nodded, gathering himself up and preparing to leave. But before he left...he felt like he really needed to address the looming question that both of them seemed to be avoiding.

“Sidon?” He glanced over at the tall Zora Prince. “I have one more thing to ask you. It's about… Mipha.” The smile faded. Sidon’s face suddenly appeared uneasy… strained. He knew what was coming.

“Rhoam told me that… all of the champions lost their lives. That I would need to free their spirits in order to proceed.” Link could feel the tears welling up again, fought them off.

“And I suppose that means... That Mipha-”

Sidon cut him off again. “All of the champions were sealed inside their divine beasts.” He explained. “We all found it incredibly unlikely that any of them survived.” Link nodded grimly. His heart hurt.

“But!” Sidon continued, “you said that Zelda is still alive herself, sealed away in Hyrule Castle. That gives me hope, even if it is quite the longshot for us...” Sidon looked down at him. “I will be blunt, Link. I have grieved for my sister for many long years now. Yet my blind optimism tells me... that we should hold onto any hope we possibly can!” His classic smile appeared. He clasped Link’s hand tightly once again, shaking it. “I look forward to your triumphant return...” He took his trademark pose, teeth gleaming. “And I shall keep your pending arrival a secret to everybody!”

A graceful backflip later, and Sidon was swimming straight up the river and away from Link.

Link turned, and left the pier - not stopping to look back. He still found himself fighting off tears as he climbed the hill and mounted his horse, Inferno.

There is still so much I don't know… he thought. So many questions, so many regrets…
Are you still in there, Mipha... trapped in Vah Ruta? After all these years?

Is it even possible?

...

Really. I just woke up from a one hundred year slumber, got attacked by giant lethal heat-spewing robot, and fought side-by-side with a hyperactive red fish-man.

I’m pretty sure anything is possible in this insane world...

Inferno began galloping, due south to the direction of the waypoint on his slate. Armed with even more resolve, Link’s smile slowly returned; his confidence grew.

Please wait for me Mipha. I’m coming for you, very very soon.

The sun set as Link and Inferno continued their ride back down to the beaten path. As the moon’s white light found its place in the night sky, Link saw a familiar, orange-glowing structure rising up from the marshlands ahead of him: a shrine entrance. After activating the shrine, he found that he had neither the energy nor the desire to immediately solve whatever puzzle awaited him in the interior. Instead, he decided to spend the night inside, leashing Inferno to the pedestal with a supply of apples to keep her satiated.

The next morning, he awoke on the floor near the shrine elevator, and quickly moved to solve the puzzle. It involved using the magnesis rune to scoop orbs out of small pools of water contained within the shrine.

They sure got creative with these, he observed. He wondered just how crazy these puzzles were going to get in the future...

The immediate rush of energy and life he’d received from his first exchange with the goddess statue, back at the Temple of Time, was enough of an incentive for him to continue pursuing these mysterious spirit orbs. It was for this reason that he made sure to stop at every shrine he found along the way back to the Dueling Peaks.

After about a half day’s ride and a morning of puzzle-solving, he finally saw the welcoming sight of another Sheikah Tower rising in the distance - just at the foot of the twin peaks. Before long, he’d already scaled the tower, marveling at his renewed stamina and energy.

I suppose raw emotion is a rather powerful motivator… he thought to himself, reflecting on his memories of Mipha and the Zora as he climbed. The feelings still stung, still ached like a fresh wound. He’d continue to channel this into positive energy. So long as he was able.

Soon, the familiar drop of strange fluid had dropped onto his slate from the Guidance Stone atop the tower. However, this time it not only gave him a detailed map of the immediate area, but also granted him another nice tool - a shrine sensor.

The annoying beep it produced told him there was a shrine nearby… he turned to face the Dueling Peaks, and the beeping grew louder in frequency as he did. I’ll have to find a way to mute this irritating sound, he noted.
He looked over and beheld the mountains now that he was up-close. They were totally massive. He had to fight back the urge to climb them for now - the next shrine was probably down near the river that flowed through the large split that separated the two peaks. And if his new detailed map of the region was any indication, he’d be traveling through there to get to Kakariko Village anyway.

He descended from the tower with his glider—

Much, much easier than climbing down. Thanks old man…

—and mounted Inferno again. They made their way through the split of the peaks.

After locating and activating the shrine, Link encountered a small encampment of bokoblins. But rather than wasting time with hand-to-hand combat, he figured he’d get some practice in with his Sheikah Slate.

So I can stop being a grumpy old technophobe, he thought to himself.

After wreaking havoc with several remote bombs and one magnesis-controlled boulder, the encampment was totally annihilated. As he sacked the camp for supplies, he discovered a chest. A nice treasure the Bokoblins were keeping, perhaps. Inside, he found...

...a thing. He actually wasn’t sure what it was. It was a carved piece of colored wood, bent at an angle and flattened. A melee weapon of some sort? He hadn’t the faintest idea, couldn’t conjure up a memory of such a thing. Sliding it into his pouch for later, he mounted Inferno again, and after about twenty minutes of riding the pair found their way out to the other side of the Dueling Peaks.

A strange building awaited them there. It was a wooden construct, with a gigantic crudely-shaped model of a horse head decorating the roof. Banners and tapestries were draped all around it, and Link saw several horses tied up nearby, happily eating from a bin of oats and water.

A... horse stable!

It had taken the better part of a day to get from the first shrine in the wetlands all the way to this stable, so Link figured it would be best to stay here for the night. And besides that - there were people around. Lots of people. He felt it would do his heart some good to be around warm souls again, even for a little while. And it made him happy to see that normal life in this world had simply carried on, in the decades following the Great Calamity one hundred years prior. He had expected to see a ruined, dark, sad world, filled with depressed people. The remnants of those that he failed to save…

But life had continued just the same.

Link and Inferno trotted up to what appeared to be the front desk of the stable.

“Well, you’re looking wild today, stranger!” said the man at the desk. His hair was dark brown, as was the squiggly moustache that ran across his face. Another man stood outside the stall, identical in appearance. He was shaking his head at him, and Link soon realized why - he was still basically naked. Aside from his underwear of course.

Oh well.

“The name’s Tasseren.” said the man behind the counter. “And over here-” he gestured at the man outside, “-is my brother Rensa.” The man waved.

“From the looks of things, you’re needing a place to stay for you and your horse?”
Link nodded. “Indeed.”

“Well I can certainly help you out.” Tasseren said. “You don’t appear to have visited here before… you’ll have to register your horse first. This will give you a nice saddle and bridle, and free board for your horse during future visits. We require a 20 rupee fee…”

Rupee? Link hadn’t the faintest idea of what this man was talking about. Tasseren seemed to recognize the look of confusion on Link’s face…

“You… do have rupees, right?”

Link recognized that he was talking about currency at this point. He shook his head.

Rensa began laughing suddenly, and walked off to examine the boarded horses nearby. Tasseren crossed his arms. “Well, I’m sorry young man, but without money you can’t-”

“Allow me to help with that!” said a jolly voice from nearby. Link looked up, and saw a strange-looking person walking up to the stable.

“The name’s Beedle!” the stranger said as he approached. “But most people call me… well actually, Beedle is all they call me. So it’ll do.” He reached up and shook Link’s hand.

He was certainly odd, but seemed friendly enough. His hair was a perfect bowl cut, his nose was bright red, contrasting with his tanned skin. He was incredibly muscular as well - likely a result of his apparent travels with this enormous beetle-like bag on his back…

He’s seriously ripped. Link couldn’t get the thought out of his head, and he held back a laugh. His face totally doesn’t match his physique...

“I’m a traveling merchant, I buy and sell things.” Beedle explained. “And my prices are quite good, both ways. If you have anything to sell, I’ll bet we can easily come to an agreement and get you those twenty rupees you need…”

“That sounds… quite helpful actually.” Link finally replied. “Thanks.” He swung his bag around, searching its contents for anything of value to sell to Beedle. After exchanging a few gems he’d retrieved from fallen Bokoblins, as well as some parts from guardians he’d destroyed in shrines, Link found himself with about seven-hundred thirty rupees - far more than he needed, yet far more than enough to be prepared. He hoped. Beedle explained the corresponding color values of each rupee type, and Link thanked him for his help.

“No no, thank you for the business!” Beedle said. He walked over and squatted down with some nearby travelers around a campfire. “I’ll be right here if you need me!”

Link turned his attention back to the front desk. “I guess that settles that,” he said.

Tasseren smiled back. “Indeed it does. So as I was saying… that’ll be twenty rupees for the registration, and twenty more for a bed in the inn, if you want it.” Link nodded, tossing him a pair of red rupees. He reached forward and rubbed Inferno’s mane to soothe her.

“Thanks.” Tasseren pulled out a quill and a registration sheet, began to scrawl some notes. “What’s your name, stranger?”

“Link.”

“Excellent. And the name of your horse?”
“Inferno.”

Tasseren suddenly paused his writing, then glanced up at Link, a bemused look appearing on his face. “That, my friend,” Tasseren said, “is a remarkably unusual name for a horse.” He examined Link up-and-down. “...and a remarkably unusual lack of clothing for a traveler. Didn’t really want to say anything before…” He paused for a second, then continued writing.

“Not that it’s any of my business... but what’s your deal?”

Link chuckled, hopped off Inferno and slowly approached the stand. He leaned in on the counter, grinning wildly. “Boy... do I have a story for you...”

Link spent the late afternoon making conversation with the various travelers who were staying at the Dueling Peaks stable. He particularly enjoyed his chats with Beedle, who was really quite well-traveled. Link discovered a feeling of vague familiarity with this person as they talked, to the point where he wondered if he’d met him before… long long ago…

“Perhaps in a previous life!” Beedle had joked, producing a genuine laugh from Link.

Meanwhile, the other travelers seemed unbothered by Link’s mostly-naked state. He easily befriended them, joking and trading stories of adventures from around the world. And in doing so he was beginning to realize… that he wasn’t bashful with them at all, wasn’t self-conscious. In this new world, nobody knew him. Nobody expected anything of him. Nobody demanded anything from him. There was no phony persona to maintain.

The only things he truly had to answer to were the responsibility of destroying Calamity Ganon - daunting as it was - and his atonement for the deaths of those he failed to save.

He was doing it all for these people. Some were cocky, some were strange, some were funny, some sad. But he was fighting for all of them just the same.

As he continued to interact with a variety of strangers at the stable, Link’s sense of duty began to take over. Each person carried with them unique food items and materials from the regions they'd visited. And each person… was very very hungry.

“Let’s have a feast!” Link suddenly declared, stealing a line from his memories of King Dorephan. He surprised himself with his confidence… with his carefree attitude. But it seemed to be in his very nature to want to help people out, to solve problems. And with darker days most surely ahead, he simply rolled with it for the time being.

Rensa and Tasseren brought out some extra cooking pots from the back of the stable, and Link and a few others got to work planning and preparing a massive dinner for the roughly thirty or so individuals that were staying there.

He wasn’t strictly sure where his skills or his overwhelming excitement came from, but before long they’d produced a diverse number of delicious dishes he had no idea he was capable of making; salted skewers of smoked fish and vegetables, peppered crab, medium-rare steaks with mushroom gravy, toasted honey bread, and Hylian herb salad - among many others.

It was fun. And the travelers seemed more than happy to help and to share and to partake in the experience of mixing and matching cuisine. They dined and partied the night away, and Link took great pleasure in their joy. This was hardly enough to make up for the weight of his failures, that much was true. But the smiles on everyone’s faces still helped to soothe the ache of deep guilt he felt. They gave him hope.
Humbly, he kept to himself during the actual meal, preferring to stay alone and out of sight in his state of reflection. For himself Link had carefully prepared a large plate of some fresh raw fish, skinned and cubed to absolute perfection - a craving that likely resulted from his newfound memories of Zora’s domain. The taste and texture eased his stomach, and its familiarity also helped to comfort his broken, hopeful heart.

After their nice feast, the group of strangers turned in for the night, and Link departed the next morning just before the sun rose.

Link and Inferno made their way north across the ancient Kakariko Bridge, which spanned over Lake Siela. At least according to his slate anyway. He found himself wondering how the Sheikah Slate was able to retrieve all of this information from the surrounding countryside - especially the names of landmarks and towns. But he decided not to fry his brain thinking about it too much.

Roughly a half hour later, the pair found themselves galloping along a roadway that was curving up into the mountains towards Kakariko Village. Link glanced to his right as he rode, enjoying the breathtaking view of the valley below. It only grew in majesty as they climbed, higher and higher and higher. In the distance, Link could see an orange-glowing Sheikah tower - likely another place he’d be making his way to soon, and-

What. Was that.

Link did a double-take, as he could have sworn he saw an extremely odd-shaped tree along the road… one that vaguely resembled a tall, pudgy humanoid.

He pulled back on Inferno's new reigns, looked behind him, spotted it.

It... was alive.

And it was waving at him.

Link paused for a second. Stared intently at the plant-like creature. Then he shook his head.

Nope. I am not dealing with this right now.

He turned around, spurred Inferno, and continued on his way.

“You there! Who are you?! How dare you trespass upon Lady Impa’s abode!”

Link took a battle-ready stance, but kept his Zora spear mounted on his back. These two guards - dressed in what appeared to be traditional Sheikah garb - looked unarmed themselves. So Link decided it would be fair to fight them on their terms. If it came to that.

“Wait… is that… a Sheikah Slate on your hip?” the first guard asked.

Link eased up. The Sheikah lady at the gate earlier had asked him the same question, and it seemed everyone in this quaint village could probably recognize it. “But that would mean…” the guard continued, “…No, it’s not possible. Can it be?”

Link decided not to dilly-dally. “Yes, yes. I’m the guy who overslept for a hundred years, here to see Lady Impa… you know…”

The guards straightened up. “Please, do forgive our rudeness. Impa has told us all about you…” Link nodded, and prepared to head up the stairs towards what he presumed was the home of the village
elder, Impa-

-But one of the guards grabbed his arm, holding him back.

“...Why aren’t you... wearing any clothes?” he demanded.

Link rolled his eyes. He’d still forgotten that he was basically naked.

“I’m sorry,” the other guard said, “but we simply cannot allow you to proceed if you’re not...properly dressed.” He gestured back towards one of the straw-roofed traditional buildings behind him, where Link had left Inferno tied up earlier.

“There’s a clothing store right there. If you have the money, please clothe yourself properly before seeing our Lady Impa...”

Link sighed, and laughed at himself as he turned and made his way to the store. **Figured I could only get away with this for so long...**

He entered the clothing store. The clerk, Claree, was really quite friendly. She let him try on a variety of outfits they had for sale, although Link only truly felt comfortable in a pair of stealth tights he found. It was like a second skin to him.

He figured the guards would complain if he didn’t buy a shirt as well. He was deciding between a pair of different-colored Hylian tunics, when he saw it: a very neat-looking hood and cape set, solid black in color with an ornate design flowing down the back.

*I want that.*

He glanced in his pouch. He’d already dropped most of his rupees on that nice pair of armored tights... and he could really only afford *one more* item. He glanced back and forth between the hood and the green tunic he’d selected.

**This... is the toughest decision I’ve had to make since I woke up.**

Meanwhile, the two guards at the bottom of the staircase to Impa’s abode were lightly chatting with each other. “I’m genuinely shocked to see that the hero... has finally returned” said the first guard, Cado.

“Indeed” replied Dorian, the other guard. “Although I have to say... he’s a bit wilder than I expected-” He paused mid-sentence, as Link was approaching them again.

He’d done as they’d asked.

*Sort of.*

“Gentlemen.” Link said as he approached, nodding cordially at the two guards. He was wearing a very nice pair of Sheikah stealth tights, a black Hylian hood-

And nothing else.

Cado pulled him aside again as he tried to pass. “I... I give up,” he said. Sit tight, I’ll go grab you a shirt.” he ran off to grab a spare top from his home. Dorian shook his head, tried not to laugh. “To be honest,” he said, “it doesn’t bother me. But young Paya would positively *flip out* if she saw a boy dressed like you are...”

Soon, Cado returned with a Sheikah stealth top to match Link’s new tights, which he donned
immediately. The Sheikah eye symbol decorated the shirt's chest, and the pauldrons were made of leather, just like the shin guards on his tights. It was a pretty nice look, he had to admit. And quite comfortable to boot.

With his new clothes - and with approval from the guards - he was finally on his way up the long stairway to the entrance to Impa’s home. Without hesitation Link pushed straight through the double-doors, stopped right in front of the entrance way, and put his hands on his hips.

A frail yet powerful voice, withered with age, spoke up as he entered. “...So… you still seem to know how to make an entrance…”

As Link’s eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, he saw her. Impa.

She’s a lot smaller than I figured she’d be, he thought.

She too was dressed in what appeared to be traditional Sheikah garb. A tan jacket with red accents adorned her small torso, the chest area dyed a royal blue. On her head she wore a pointed straw hat. The Sheikah eye symbol adorned the front, and eye-shaped blades appeared to descend from chains all around the hat’s brim.

It was a bit excessive, to say the least. But Link found he quite liked the aesthetic.

“You’re finally awake.” Impa continued. She raised her head, looked up at Link, and smiled. “It has been quite a long time… Link.” She patted her leg as a welcoming gesture, and he took it as his cue to enter. Nearby, he saw the head of a young woman peering down from upstairs. When he caught sight of her, she let out a small yelp, and ducked back up the stairs. That... must be Paya. Link thought.

He stopped in front of Impa, and stared blankly. Even up-close, he didn’t recognize her... at all.

“What is the matter?” Impa asked. “You are looking at me as though I am a complete stranger. Those eyes… they lack the light of familiarity.”

Link finally spoke up. “Well, that could just be because you are ridiculously old now,” he deadpanned.

But Impa laughed.

“But,” she said, “it could be that you’ve lost all your memories after all. But surely...courageous one… you must at least remember the name Impa?”

He shook his head.

“Well, this could be a blessing in disguise.” Impa’s hands folded into her lap. “Link… a hundred years ago, the kingdom of Hyrule was destroyed. It was Zelda’s wish that you were put into the long slumber you have awakened from, so you could live to fight another day.”

Link nodded. “I am aware. King Rhoam’s spirit told me everything.”

“...I see.” Impa shook her head. “It does not surprise me that the old man has found it difficult to pass from this world, without seeing the destruction of his greatest enemy firsthand.”

Link took a seat, cross-legged, in front of Impa. He figured a long talk was coming...

“Zelda entrusted me with some words she wished to say to you… about what you must do next.” Impa explained. “I have been waiting 100 years to deliver this message. However-”
Link held his hand up. “Pardon my interruption… but if you’re going to send me on some inane mission before you tell me what I need to know, then I must warn you that I’m a rather impatient type…”

Impa began to laugh. “I can see… that you’ve gotten quite well-acquainted with King Rhoam and his more… roundabout ways of doing things.” She shook her head and smiled warmly. “And I can also see that you’re just as intent to charge forward with only courage and justice on your side! Once a hero, always a hero. Even without a memory to your name.”

Link found himself returning the grin. “Actually… I do have some memories back.” he explained. “I ran into a Zora… Prince Sidon.” He explained what he’d experienced so far, and what he knew of the Divine Beasts. Impa listened intently, smiling all the more as she did. When Link had finished, she held her hands up in defeat.

“Well then.” she said. “It seems you’ve jumped ahead of Princess Zelda’s plan for you… we were expecting you to come straight here after your awakening. We did not foresee your taking a brief little detour…”

“To be fair though,” Link countered, “It’s not like I woke up with some kind of instruction manual on how to go about saving the world and all…”

Impa laughed. “I can see your sense of humor is well-intact to boot. I will not mince words with you then. There are four Divine Beasts that you must free. Vah Rudania, controlled by Daruk of the Gorons. Vah Medoh, controlled by Revali of the Rito. Vah Naboris, controlled by Urbosa of the Gerudo. And as you already know… Vah Ruta, controlled by your Lady Mipha.”

My lady?

“Link, I must warn you… it would be ill-advised to face Ganon without the power of the Divine Beasts to help you. You must infiltrate them and bring them back to our side.” She gestured towards Link’s slate. “I shall enter in the locations of each Divine Beasts on your map. You can expect to find more information on each beast by visiting the four races.” He handed her the Sheikah Slate, and she got to work.

Link pointed at the device as she tapped away. “I am admittedly… not very tech-savvy. But I noticed that there seems to be some missing functionality in the slate.”

Impa nodded. “You are missing several features, indeed.” She finished fiddling with the slate’s map function, and handed the device back to Link. “I believe that someone in the research lab in Hateno Village might be able to help you. It would be a good idea to restore functionality as soon as possible - the missing functions might be key to restoring your lost memories.”

“Got it.” Link said. “I’ll leave immediately.” He wasn’t sure what else to do, so he stood up, holstered the slate at his hip, and pulled Lady Impa into a big hug. He nearly pulled her off the large stack of pillows she was kneeling on, but she returned the gesture just the same.

“Thank you.” he said. “For all your help.”

“You are quite welcome.” Lady Impa replied. “Please check in as soon as you can, so we can keep a gauge on your progress… and on your safety.” Link nodded, spun around, and began to make his way back through the entrance to Impa’s house.

“Oh, and Link…” she called from behind. He stopped in front of the door and turned around.

“I feel that I must give you one last piece of advice, before you depart. It’s about Lady Mipha.”
He took a deep breath, exhaled. “Yes?”

“You may not know me right now…” Impa said, her voice turned low. “But I know you, quite well. And if you find yourself chasing a ghost… then I must warn you to please suppress your desire.”

Link opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. “I know that it’s hard, Link. But it is useless to worry too much about the dead…”

“Yes.” Link replied. “I understand. ...But even the dead have stories to tell. Even the dead need resolution. It would be good to both learn from them and to honor them.” He paused for a second.

“And it is my full intention to chase after any shred of hope I possibly can.” He spun around, and left the house abruptly. He didn’t look back.

Impa smiled again.

“...Profoundly wise words from someone so young.” She closed her eyes.

“Do what you must.”

Chapter End Notes

See you in Chapter 8: Outlier.
Link made his way down the steps from Impa’s home.

“Excuse me-” he tapped on one of the temple guard’s shoulders as he descended the staircase from behind. The guard - Dorian - spun quickly in a defensive stance.


“What’s the quickest way to Hateno?” Link asked.

“Ah, so she is sending you there next…” Dorian pointed out towards the entrance to Kakariko Village. “You’ll need to head south back to the Dueling Peaks stable, I’m sure you passed it on your way in… From there, follow the signs and head east. The main road should take you there.”

“That’s very helpful, thanks.”

“Oh, and I must warn you-” Dorian said, as Link started to walk away. “There are some… dangerous travelers out and about lately, with all these shrines and towers emerging from the ground all of a sudden..”

“Explain.” Link said, spinning back around to face the guards. He pulled an apple from his bag and took a bite.

“Sure thing.” Cado said. “There’s a clan out there… whose members would love nothing more than to kill you on sight…”

Link raised an eyebrow. “So… they just murder others for sport or something?” His mouth was full of chewed apple as he said this. Bad habit...

Dorian shook his head. “…no. They want to kill you in particular, Link. They want the head of the hero…”

Oh.

“The Sheikah tribe has long been celebrated as a wise people,” Dorian said. “As you might have discovered, our technology was the key to sealing Ganon away 10,000 years ago. Surely Impa mentioned this to you…”

Link swallowed the rest of his apple, shook his head. “I… kinda rushed her. I know of the divine beasts and all, just not so much about the details of the Sheikah's role in building them. I’m in a bit of a hurry you see-”

“Understood.” Dorian said. “I’ll be brief then. “While our technology was once praised as the power of the gods, the people of Hyrule turned on it…”

“.They turned on us .” Cado interjected. “They viewed our creations as a threat to the kingdom, and our people became outcasts… exiles. Some, like us, chose to cast off our technological advances and strove to live normal lives. But others… fostered a deep hatred to the kingdom that shunned them.”

He crossed his arms and lowered his head. “These people… swore their allegiance to Ganon. They
became what’s now known as the Yiga Clan.”

Dorian shook his head. “They have surely noticed that you’ve returned, what with the appearance of
the ancient shrine trials and sheikah towers. Please be careful out there… they will stop at nothing to
kill anyone who opposes Ganon. Especially you. They’ve killed countless innocent people
already…”

Link nodded. “And what do they look like? Aren’t they just Sheikah spin-offs? How will I know the
difference?” He squinted his eyes and peered carefully at Dorian. “And how do I know… that
you’re not actually a spy for the Yiga? Hmmm…?” His face inched dangerously close to
Dorian’s.

The surprised guard returned Link’s glare. A brief pause. Then Dorian started laughing.

Quite loudly.

“You’re wild, and you're funny…” he said, finally. He patted Link on the back. “I like you.”

Link smiled back. He was just being silly of course. Yet something seemed a bit… off about
Dorian’s reaction. He made a mental note for later…

“In all seriousness though,” Cado continued, “They really could be anyone. As they are former
Sheikah, they are masters of stealth and disguises. Be on the lookout for any… suspicious behavior.
Trust me. You’ll know them when you see them. Stay on your toes.”

Link held his finger in the air. “I-” he spun around on his heels, “-shall do just that.” He began to
walk towards the small goddess statue he’d spotted earlier.

“Oh!” called Dorian, as Link walked away, “and if you hear any odd strangers talking incessantly
about bananas… might be best to simply stay away. The Yiga love bananas.”

Link didn’t even bother to acknowledge that ridiculous last bit.

The spirit orbs that Link had accumulated from the Sheikah monks all disappeared from his hands as
he quietly prayed to a small statue of the goddess. He felt… quite good. Full of life. It was rather
nice. He still wasn’t quite sure just what those orbs were, or why they were made by the Sheikah for
the purpose of prayer. And he certainly wasn’t sure how they worked. But he supposed that he
didn’t really need to understand it either. Just as he didn’t need to understand the specifics of how all
of this crazy technology functioned. He just had to use it - and that was enough.

On his way out, Link decided to activate the shrine he’d spotted just above the village. It was only a
short walk up the hill, so he left Inferno down below to get a little exercise.

After arriving at the shrine and scanning his slate on the nearby pedestal, Link noticed an older
Sheikah man peering carefully into the thick forest further up the hill. He seemed puzzled, troubled...
Like the other Sheikah, his hair was solid white, and he wore a traditional outfit of tans and blues. He
also appeared to be a painter, as indicated by the art tools and canvas frame strapped to his back.

“Hello there.” Link called to him. “What are you doing?”

The man turned around. “Oh! Sorry, didn’t see you there. I’m arguing with myself about whether to
attempt to enter this forest or not…” he walked up to Link and shook his hand. “The name’s
Pikango. I’m a traveling landscape painter.”
“I see.” replied Link. “Well I... am Link. And I’m trying to save the world.”

Pikango seemed unaffected.

“Then I wish you great success in your endeavor!” he turned to look at the forest again. “Perhaps we can help each other out then.” He pointed into the woods. “There’s a Great Fairy in there, that’s rumored to live deep inside the forest. But from what I understand... there’s a bit of danger in there as well. Monsters and all that.”

The puzzled look on Link’s face told him plenty.

“Allow me to explain, Great Fairies are beings who wield immense power... but you must satisfy very specific requirements just to see them.” Pikango crossed his arms. “My fighting days are long, long over, so I don’t know that I would feel safe traversing this forest without someone a little more... combat ready by my side.” He winked. “My only desire is to see one up close. But you on the other hand... perhaps you’ll receive blessings far greater in order to help with your quest. What do you think? Will you accompany me?”

Link was really rather eager to get a move on to Hateno... but he still couldn’t turn down an honest request for help. Especially from someone who seemed so friendly and sincere.

“Let’s get a move on,” Link said, as he drew his spear and began to walk towards the forest entrance. “I’m in a bit of a rush... but it seems you’ve successfully piqued my curiosity!”

Pikango smiled as he walked alongside Link. “If there’s one thing I’ve discovered in my many years of travel... it’s that this entire world is a goldmine to the curious soul.”

"Boy...sweet boy... please... listen to my story,” said the booming female voice.

It was coming from the inside of an enormous thorny bud that Link and Pikango had finally stumbled on. It had only taken about twenty minutes of exploration to find it - and couple of fights with monsters here and there along the way.

They both looked at each other in mild shock, but Link shrugged. “Sure, we’ll hear you out,” he said.

“Thank you,” said the voice. "I am the Great Fairy Cotera... this place was once a beautiful spring... but as time passed, fewer and fewer travelers arrived to offer rupees. And now my power has abandoned me. I beg for your help. I need rupees to become whole again…”

Sounds like an elaborate scam, Link thought. But it appeared that Pikango had no reservations about it.

“How much do you require?” he asked.

The voice did not respond. The two looked at each other again, and Pikango gestured at Link to try.

“How much do you require-” Link asked.

“In order for me to regain my power, I need 100 rupees,” Cotera said. Suddenly, an enormous hand emerged from the giant bud, ready to take his money.

Link sighed, held his hands up. “I got nothing. Sorry.”
Pikango laughed. “Allow me, then.” He reached into his pocket, producing a silver rupee and handing it to Link. “It’s the least I can do for your helping me get this far.”

“Much appreciated.” Link held the rupees out to Cotera, and they were instantly snatched out of his hand in the blink of an eye.

“Thank you. You are too kind…” The hand retreated back into the bud. ”Aaahh... the power.... is overflowing!!!” Purple smoke began to emanate from the top of the bud, which was pulsating with energy. Suddenly, the bud split open, revealing a cavernous interior filled with crystal clear water. Floating yellow lights danced and shimmered in the air, as a rumbling sound was heard… Link and Pikango took a few steps back, unsure of what to do.

"Ah-HAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

A gigantic blonde-haired woman, dressed in a skimpy outfit and adorned in glittering jewelry, suddenly erupted out of the bud-turned-flower. The pair stood wide-eyed, as the gigantic woman leaned in to get a closer look - at Link.

"Hah, what a feeling.” she said. “That first breath of fresh air after an eternity of decay... intoxicating. I've been returned to my former glory, thanks to you.” Link and Pikango continued to stare, blankly.

"One good turn deserves another,” she continued. “Allow me to help you, boy. I can grant you… additional protection." She winked at Link. Before he could say anything, Cotera reared back and blew a kiss directly at Link with both hands. A rush of energy and warm air blow through his clothes. He had absolutely no idea what to make of it though.

“Um...thanks?” Link said.

“No, thank you. ” Cotera replied. “Please… come and see me any time.” She spread her arms in the air. “Good-byyyyyyyye!!!” she sank quickly into the depths of the water, disappearing as quickly as she’d come. Silence set in for several seconds, as the pair spent some time processing what they’d just witnessed.

Finally, Pikango laughed. “Well that was certainly peculiar. How do you feel? Empowered? ”

Link shook his head.

“I… actually just feel kinda violated.”

Link rode back down south to the Dueling Peaks stable. It had taken him several hours just to ride to Kakariko that morning, and another few hours to ride back down. His thoughts had frequently turned to his restored memories from the previous day. It no longer hurt his head to consider them, but they still most certainly hurt his spirit.

He arrived at the Dueling Peaks stable late in the afternoon. There were very few people there this time around, though he was mildly thankful for this - he felt like he needed some alone time to recharge. Deciding it would be best to spend another night there, he sat outside the stable and had a quick chat with Beedle. The mobile merchant would be heading south the next morning, but bid Link good luck and a fond farewell as he went inside the stable inn to sleep. Unfortunately, Link himself no longer had any money to pay for a bed.

He did, however, have a rather awesome -looking hood which made up for it.

So he slept outside by a campfire built by a fellow traveler. The ground was certainly no substitute
for a soft bed of course. Still, he woke up the next morning feeling quite refreshed and revitalized. And after a quick breakfast of apples and steak, he mounted Inferno and headed east in the direction of Hateno Village - according to the yellow dot on his slate.

Starting to get the hang of this... thingamajig, Link thought, poking around the screen. He laughed at himself.

...I'm still like an old and out-of-touch grandpa over here... He gave himself some credit though - he was a hundred and seventeen years old after all.

Alone with his thoughts as Inferno continued her steady gallop down the eastern roads, he found himself traveling through what appeared to be a junkyard of ancient guardian robots. He was shocked by the sheer number of them. Many looked battle-worn, damaged, or frozen in place. It was like a life-size diorama, an intense scene that was frozen in time; just like the ruined temple back at the plateau.

Link found himself imagining what sort of amazing battle might have occurred there. In fact, he couldn’t shake the profound feelings of familiarity this place brought to him. The sense of hopelessness... of resignation. But as he thought this, he saw a pair of strangers up ahead.

They were standing underneath the gateway to a fort wall. Fort Hateno, according to his slate. As he rode closer, he saw the strangers chatting with each other. The sounds of their conversation eventually reached his ears as he approached...

“...and I’m told that a great battle was fought here. The last stand of the great Hylian champion...” said one of them. He looked to be a young man, about Link’s age.

“Oh, I’m not sure he was all that great. He died here after all...” said the other. A middle-aged woman.

Link slowed Inferno down, trotting past the pair. He nodded at them, and they waved back. Their conversation continued as he passed.

“I actually heard that the hero survived,” said the young man, “sealed away to return to fight another day. I wonder if that’s true...”

The woman sounded annoyed. “Don’t believe the lies. There was nothing noble or heroic about that man. About that failure. It’s good that he died.”

The young man raised an eyebrow at this. “...Let’s just... agree to disagree then.”

Link had heard enough of this conversation. The first stranger seemed firmly in his camp, which he appreciated. But the second... sounded resentful. Angry. He prepared to spur Inferno to move on, when the woman suddenly started yelling.

At him.

“Hey! Do you have any bananas?”

Link immediately pulled back on Inferno’s reins, froze. His head turned, slowly-

-That woman was staring straight at him. A wild grin appeared on her face...

I knew it.
“Actually… I can’t stand bananas.” Link replied, dully. He returned the stranger’s wild grin.

“Then I suppose…” she said, “That this is a disagreement we absolutely must settle. Here and now.” She drew a rather nasty-looking sickle weapon from her back.

“Indeed.” Link dismounted Inferno, drawing his own weapon from his back. He pointed his spear, took a loose battle pose…

The first stranger looked bewildered, as he slowly backpedaled away from the ensuing fight.

The sickle-wielding woman pointed at the Sheikah symbol adorning Link’s chest. “You… who bears the mark of a traitor on your chest... In the name of the Yiga Clan, I will have your head.”

A puff of red smoke, and her appearance changed. She was now wearing the unmistakable uniform of the Yiga Clan: a simple red jumpsuit with a white mask bearing an upside-down Sheikah eye.

*My, how very creative…*

The Yiga warrior dove in for a hasty swipe at his neck. Link’s move was automatic, he ducked, spun around, and swung his spear around his body like a club. He struck the clan member directly in the head, cracking her mask. She recoiled, spitting blood on the ground, then disappeared.

Link kept his eyes peeled. If his assumptions were correct, this stealthy Yiga warrior would be trying for a sneak-attack where he least expected it-

*Right from above.*

He glanced up, then braced himself as the clan member re-appeared from thin air and descended upon him from the sky. Link waited for a split-second, then thrust his spear straight up into the air, skewering her right down the length of his spear’s shaft with a loud SHUNK.

The battle was already over.

...But he hadn’t killed her. At least not yet. The Yiga clan member laughed hysterically as Link lifted her up with his spear, and slammed her into the grass nearby. He pried his spear from her body, planted the butt end firmly in the ground, and stared after her.

She stared back, face shrouded by her mask. “I….” - cough - “have underestimated you.” She remained defiant in spite of her mortal wounds. “But mark my words, boy. When-”

“-I really don’t have time for this.”

Link kicked her in the head as hard as possible, finally knocking her out for good.

The first stranger - clearly just a regular, frightened traveler - ran back up to Link.

“Boy, that sure was wild, huh?” he asked.

Link just stared at him.

“Err… yeah. Right. Anyway. You’re a Sheikah warrior, aren’t you? Thanks for that. She was crazy, to say the least.”

*You think?*

Link whistled for Inferno, who galloped towards him. He replaced his spear on his back and
mounted her. “...Just be careful.” Link said. “I hear there’s a lot of these crazed Yiga Clan members out there.”

The stranger nodded. “I’ve heard the same. But by the time I realized it just now, I was too late… Good thing you were here.” He glanced around at the large fort wall they were standing by. Link noticed some of the guardians appeared frozen against the wall mid-attack...

“What an epic battle scene.” The young stranger observed. "I can almost imagine that hero fighting valiantly here until his very last breath..." He glanced at Link. "Why do people like the Yiga Clan support the forces of darkness like that anyway? It's beyond me...”

Link shrugged. “I suppose that some people just simply aren’t big fans of sanity and justice.” He spurred Inferno, and they began to trot away. He wanted to get out of this ancient, frozen battle site as soon as possible. Something about being here… just made him feel awful inside. Sick to his stomach with guilt and pain.

“I sure hope it’s true… that the hero will return.” the stranger said as Link departed. “I’d love to meet that amazing, brave man someday…”

You and me both. Link thought.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 9: Half Note is up next.
The weight on Link’s chest began to lift as he rode farther away from the scene at Fort Hateno. After several hours of travel, Link finally spotted another Sheikah Tower: the one he’d seen far off in the distance whilst climbing the mountain towards Kakariko Village before. After literally plowing through a few Bokoblin camps, Link approached and then ascended the tower. It was overgrown with massive, thorny vines, which made it a bit more difficult to climb. But he was pleased to see that his near-constant conditioning over the course of the week was beginning to bear fruit for his stamina. In no time, he’d climbed the tower and activated it.

His new map indicated that Hateno Village was due directly east of the tower. With the scope function of his slate, he could see it far off in the distance. He found himself tempted to simply jump straight from the tower and glide in on his own - but he couldn’t just leave Inferno all alone, right there at the foot the tower. He figured only a truly terrible person would do something as awful as leaving their horse alone in the middle of nowhere like that...

He floated down from the tower with his glider to mount Inferno again. And after another hour of riding, he finally arrived at the front gate of Hateno Village in the mid-afternoon. Storm clouds were gathering in the sky above, and Link found himself looking forward to the relaxing pitter-patter of raindrops that was sure to come-

“WHUH!” A shout from up ahead....

_Ah, a guard. I think_...

“Who… who are you?! I demand answers!” It was a young man, clad in simple clothing that would more befit a farmer rather than a guard. He looked to have been patrolling the front gate of Hateno Village...

...Armed with a pitchfork.

Link dismounted Inferno and smiled, holding his hands up. “Calm down, please. I’m not an enemy.”

“Yeah, right!” said the young man. “I’ll bet you’re up to no good.” His eyes drifted to Link’s chest.

“Ah-HAH! I _knew_ it! You’re part of the Yiga clan!”

_What._

Link laughed, shook his head. “You are sorely mistaken, I—”

The wannabe guard pointed his pitchfork in Link’s face. “Begone! Before I slay you where you stand, evildoer!”

Link’s smile melted into a frown. “Yeah, no.” He pushed the end of the pitchfork aside. “Get that thing out of my face.”

The man shook his head, pointed his ‘weapon’ right back at Link’s head again. He clearly wasn’t going to back down...
Link sighed. *It seems trouble follows me, everywhere I go...*

In a flash, he disarmed the young man and put him in a stranglehold on the ground.

“Get off of me, you- AH!”

Link began to ruthlessly tickle the poor guard, who burst out laughing uncontrollably. “STOP, HAHHAHAHA, PLEASE STOP OH MY GOODNESS HAH OKAY, I GET IT.”

Link let him go, climbed to his feet, dusted himself off. “You’re gonna have to do better than *that* if you intend to protect anyone, *friend.*” he said, crossing his arms.

“...Yeah… yeah I know. Sorry about that...” he picked up his pitchfork and turned to face Link. “And close-up, I can tell you’re just a Hylian like us. Hylians are generally good folk, so-”

“As opposed to whom? The Zora? Sheikah?” Link interjected. The young guard suddenly grew flustered.

“No wait, I didn’t mean-”

Link laughed. “Don’t worry about it. May I go through? Of course I can. Bye.” he grabbed Inferno’s reigns and began to walk her into the town.

“Oh um, yes sure, sure. I’m… sorry for getting all worked up.” He turned and pointed towards some buildings nearby. “We’ve got plenty of shops to check out, a general store and an inn if you need a place to rest.”

But Link wasn’t listening. His attention was focused on the tall building looming on a hilltop in the distance. He didn’t recognize it at all… but somehow he knew that it was the Hateno lab he was seeking.

Still, Link decided he wanted to take some time exploring Hateno village and speaking with locals. He’d been in such a mad rush to get here that it just seemed appropriate to catch a quick breather. Besides, he found that he really quite liked this quaint town. It was bright and energetic, even in the overcast weather.

The buildings were simple; stone foundations with mortar walls and red roofs. The people also seemed fairly friendly, easygoing. Many of them were curious about the hilltop lab and many were also quite keen to gossip about what kind of work went on in there. Others were simple farmers, just trying to live life day-to-day in peace and enjoyment. It did Link some good to see even more reminders of daily life continuing on after the Calamity, though his thoughts turned frequently back to Zora’s Domain and its potential troubles. Link wondered if *they* had managed just fine in this post-calamity world...

As he browsed the various stores in the town, he stumbled upon a clothing dye shop. The owner of the shop was fairly generous, offering Link a first-time dye job at no charge. After some pondering, he chose the color black for his Sheikah shirt and tights. He wasn’t sure why, but *black* and *stealth* just seemed to go together. Plus, his Hylian hood was already black anyway, which completed the aesthetic. If his entire wardrobe had to revolve *around* this awesome hood, then so be it.

As he wandered about, Link noticed a series of unlit stone lanterns interspersed throughout the village. They also appeared to have been placed along the road leading up to the hilltop lab. His curiosity got the better of him, so he decided to ask his new friend Ivee about them. She was a pretty girl, short hair, friendly. She worked as the greeter for East Winds general store and seemed fairly knowledgeable about the town.
“Ah, those are blue flame lanterns.” she explained.

“Blue flame?” Link asked, as he chewed absentmindedly on a piece of deer jerky.

“Yes. There’s an ancient furnace in town that’s said to have first been lit over 10,000 years ago! We’re not sure why, but the flames have always burned blue.”

She turned and pointed up to the hilltop lab. “All of the lanterns went out recently, and I imagine the same holds true for the lab’s furnace up there. Nobody really goes up there though. People are a bit… weirded out by the work they do. It seems to be a secret to everybody.”

She turned to face Link. “Meanwhile, the blue lanterns have always been a pretty iconic aspect of this town. They usually burn constantly, even in the most violent rainstorms. But after they went out, it seems like nobody can be bothered to light them up again.”

Link shrugged, bit off another piece of jerky. “So, would I get a reward from the city if I lit all these lanterns up?” he smiled warmly.

Ivee smiled back at him. “You’d get our heartfelt thanks and gratitude! But that’s about it.”

Link laughed at this. “That sounds hardly worth the trouble...” he paused.

“But you've all been very welcoming, very kind. I believe I'll return the favor.”

After some searching, Link located the ancient furnace. Aesthetically, it vaguely resembled the Sheikah Shrine entrances he'd visited. A hearty flame burned blue from a pedestal that mounted the front. After borrowing a small torch from one of the local residents, he got to work. It took him roughly an hour or so, but he found himself on Inferno's back once more, slowly galloping up the hill towards the Hateno lab. The storm clouds above grew darker and darker, deepening the bright glow of his blue-lit torch. He continued lighting lanterns all the way up and just hoped that the rain wouldn’t put his torch out before he got to that last one...

It was after some time that he finally drew close to the hilltop lab. It was rather eclectic in design, resembling a white lighthouse at first glance. A massive ancient telescope jutted out from the interior, and the base was a simple shack made of wooden planks. As he approached the lab, he could see the unlit furnace Ivee had previously mentioned, right next to the ground-level shack. He didn’t really want to assume anything… but he decided to light it anyway. He dismounted Inferno and held the torch to the furnace.

As soon as the flame caught, the bulbous tank of the furnace began to emanate blue light. A circular platform in front of the shack also suddenly glowed, its intricate veinlike surface now pulsating with energy.

On cue, a lightning bolt struck a mountain nearby and shook the air around Link with a thundering boom. The rain fell in sheets immediately, and Link grabbed Inferno’s reins to guide her under some cover near the shack. He tied her to a post, fed her an apple, and patted her mane to soothe her. She seemed a bit spooked by the lightning...

“I’ll be back soon, don’t worry.” he told her. She seemed to snort in acknowledgement.

Link walked back to the lab entrance, took a deep breath, and burst inside without warning-

“-Whaaaaaa?!” A high-pitched, childlike voice. The wind slammed the door shut behind Link.

“Linky?! Is it really you? Snappity- snap!”
The source of the voice was what appeared to be a very young, bespectacled Sheikah girl. She was standing on a stool next to a table in the middle of the room. “No, no, no! Now is not the time for this…” she said to herself. Link walked up closer, put his hands on his hips.

“The Guidance Stone is working again… Linky has arrived…” she clapped her hands together and looked up at him.

“Ah-hah! Linky… did you by any chance, happen to light the furnace with a blue flame?”

Link nodded.

“All right!” the girl shouted. “So if you figured out how to do that without being told… that means you’ve come out of the Slumber of Restoration in pretty good shape….OH!” her eyes widened in a look of shock as she grabbed her face with both hands. “I haven’t introduced myself!” She placed her hands on her hips. “I… am the Hateno Ancient Tech Lab’s distinguished director… ~Purah!~”

Link shrugged. “Well I… am Link. And it looks like you already know me.”

“Hmm….” Purah rubbed her chin. “I suppose you have yet to fully grasp the specifics of our current situation.”

She took a pose, pointing in Link’s direction. ‘You! Were instructed by Impa! To come here to have your Sheikah Slate repaired. Correct?’

“So dramatic!”

“Precisely.” Link said.

“~Nailed it!~”

She was rather cute, Link had to admit. In a baby Sidon kind of way.

"And yet..." she said, "You don't seem to recognize me."

"...No, I have absolutely no recollection of you at all.” Link explained. “I’m sorry.” He decided to delay the obvious question about her weird age, for now.

Purah looked disappointed. “Oh, Linky… even though I was the one who took you to the Shrine of Resurrection after Calamity Ganon fatally wounded you?”

Link shrugged.

“Even though I was the one who put you safely into the Slumber of Restoration…?”

Link shrugged.

“Despite all that, you still don’t remember me? At all? And don’t you dare shrug again.”

Link shook his head.

Purah suddenly whipped out a notebook and began to write, talking to herself as she did. “After 100 years in the Slumber of Restoration, subject… lost… all… memories. Noted!” She put her notes away. “Oh, soooorrrryyyy, I have a rather bad habit of abruptly taking notes like that. Pretty charming quirk right?”

*Not if you have to explain it to people…* Link thought.
I’m a bit shocked you don’t remember me though.” Purah said. “I could have sworn you were just fine… especially since you already knew to light my furnace with blue flame! I was genuinely impressed.”

But Link was too honest. “Well, at the risk of receiving more credit than I deserve… it was more out of dumb luck that I lit your furnace for you. Wouldn’t want you thinking I’m some sort of genius or something,” he said, playfully.

“Oh, don’t worry about that Linky. I knew you a really really long time ago. And I can safely say, with the utmost confidence,“ she snapped her fingers, “that you are not a genius!”

Great. Glad we got that sorted.

He looked Purah up and down. It didn’t take long, she was only about two feet tall after all.

“So. I might as well ask the obvious question here.” Link said. “Aren’t you… just a child?”

“How rude!” Purah said.

Link shrugged. “I’d actually say that’s a pretty logical conclusion to jump to…”

“How true!” Purah said.

She crossed her arms. “So the thing is, I look this way because of a failed experiment. Well… I say ‘failed’, but… in some ways it was a major success! I documented the full affair in my diary upstairs…”

A brief pause, then her eyes suddenly widened. She waved her arms dismissively in panic. “Don’t you dare go up and read it though! It’s really quite ~embarrassing …”

Link raised an eyebrow. “I hardly believe that you’d be able to stop me from reading it, if I really wanted to. You might as well tell me now.” He glanced out the window. “I’ve got time to kill after all, with this sudden downpour…”

The weather itself didn’t really bother Link of course, but he figured Inferno would appreciate a nice rest under cover for a while. And besides, his curiosity was yet again getting the better of him anyway.

Purah pointed at Link’s face. “Say please!” she said.

“…Please…”

“Say pretty please!”

“…I think just please will do.”

“Awww… you’re no fun.” she placed her hands on her hips, swaying to and fro.

“At any rate… If you had your memories, you’d probably have remembered that you are the one who gave me the idea to perform this anti-aging experiment in the first place…”

“I was? How so?” Link asked.

“Well, I would see you quite often, before the Great Calamity. Usually when we were testing the Divine Beasts with the Champions. You basically never talked. You were suuuuuper boooooring. ~Anyway… out of the blue, you suddenly came up and asked me if it was possible for a Hylian to
extend his lifespan for hundreds of years.” She winked at him. “I can’t imagine why you’d ask such a thing…”

“I can’t either,” he said, only half-jokingly.

“Oh, I’m quite sure. At any rate… your question prompted me to wonder if it really was possible to create an anti-aging rune, using ancient Sheikah technology. And the experiment was launched! I had grand plans to create an army of ageless super-soldiers for the Royal Family. To bring back retired heroes for Calamity Ganon’s inevitable return. It burdened me that such technology seemed so necessary for our fight, but I persisted nonetheless.”

She gestured at herself. “And since I am generally not a cruel person, I - the one and only Purah - was the very first test subject.”

“And the last one too!” a voice called from across the room.

A Sheikah man. “Hello there!” he waved at Link. Link waved back...

“That’s my assistant, Symin.” Purah explained, gesturing in the man’s direction. “Sorry for not introducing you sooner! I’m not usually this rude, I promise.” She faced Link again, as Symin walked up to join the conversation.

“Where was I… Ah!” She snapped both fingers. “Seems I got ahead of myself there. ~ So... I’ll spare you the details. I was obviously far too late, and the Great Calamity struck before I could even finish my work. Not that it would have made a difference…” She frowned. “Meanwhile… I continued my research long after you fell asleep. I recently tested the rune on myself, and began to reverse in age. ~Success!~” she held her fist in the air.

"...But it worked a bit too well. I went from being over a hundred-twenty years old… down to six. In a matter of days! Our lab’s furnace went out before I could finish developing the age-boosting rune… and here you are now! ~The End."

Link clapped playfully as Purah took a bow. “Thank you, thank you…” She turned to Symin. “So that’s enough of our silly story-time. Let’s get to work.” she pointed her finger in the air. “We have a slate to repair!”

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“Camera… Hyrule Compendium, album… yep! Looks good!”

Link was showing Purah his Sheikah Slate after pulling it from her personal Guidance Stone in the lab. It seemed everything was in order now…

She poked around on the screen. “Wow… I knew Princess Zelda had made frequent use of the Camera feature, but this…just wow. Wow!” she pulled the slate from Link’s hands and showed him a slideshow of pictures that were making their way across the screen. “Since you were Zelda’s appointed knight… I’ll bet you actually accompanied her to all of these places where these pictures were taken!”

Link rubbed his chin. “As it stands now though… I don’t really recognize any of these landscapes. Which I suppose isn’t a big surprise…"

“Nope!” said Purah, handing Link back his slate. “But you should check with Impa, she knew Princess Zelda much better than I did.”
Link nodded. “Right… well, it’s getting late. It might be best for me to stay here for the night, since it’ll take me about a day’s journey just to get back to Kakariko...”

Purah laughed. “Oh Linky, you silly boy you. Why don’t you just teleport?”

Link’s face turned aggressively stoic.

“Now I know you’re just messing with me,” he said.

Purah snapped. “Nope! ~Lookie here-~” she showed Link the map feature of his slate, changed a setting to display all of the shrines he’d activated… “Right there! Just tap on one of these blue icons, and awaaaay you go!”

Link was speechless.

There’s no way…

But Purah seemed quite pleased with herself. “Well, get a move on then! We’ll take good care of your little horsie while you’re gone, don’t worry!”

Link shook his head in disbelief. I’m so completely out of the loop...

“Well,” he said, “here goes nothing…” he scrolled through the map to find the shrine in Kakariko Village-

“Oh Linky! I almost forgot-~” Purah ran up to her bookshelf, pulling a rather plain-looking book from the bottom shelf. She ran back to Link, flipped through the book, and produced a small, damaged slip of cloth-paper.

It was charred quite badly. He could only make out a few words, a handful of letters:

\[
\text{It is qu--- s-m--- e----.}
\]

\[
\text{All I ha- -- --s ---n- f ---}
\]

“I found this in your pocket when we brought you back to the Resurrection chamber one hundred years ago. Seemed to be the only thing intact in your possession. Well, mostly intact. We did our best to keep it safe and hidden away all these years...”

Link peered at the paper carefully… there was something incredibly familiar about it. The texture, the handwriting. He just couldn’t seem to put a finger on-

\*Mipha. It’s a note from Mipha.*

His eyes widened in shock. An enormous grin spread on his face. He blinked his eyes, shook his head. He laughed.

Link pulled his rucksack around, slipped the note into a waterproof bag…

“What do you recognize it?!” Purah asked excitedly.

Link couldn’t hide his happiness. “Something like that.” he said. Tears started to well up, but he
fought them back. He looked up at Purah.

“Thank you so much. For everything...”

“Our pleasure!” said Symin.

“What he said!” Purah shouted, pointing at Symin. “See you soon, Linky~!”

“...See ya.” Link glanced down, placed his finger on the Ta’Loh Naeg shrine in Kakariko Village on his map, and selected “Travel” on the menu that appeared. At first... nothing happened.

Then his body suddenly disintegrated into a million tangled strands of blue energy.

In an instant, he was gone.

The world blurred around him, he saw trees, grass, stars, and rivers… all flashing by in an instant. The sound of falling rain, coming and going, the sounds of wind rustling through the trees... it swirled around his entire being. It was the oddest sensation.

A blue light parsed through every corner of his mind, particles of energy dancing and spinning, he was floating... he was free... he was-

“M-M-My name is Paya!”

Link opened his eyes. He had already rematerialized on the Ta’Loh Naeg shrine’s glowing blue platform. This strange white-haired girl, upon spotting his imminent arrival, had immediately run up the hill towards the shrine above Kakariko Village. She didn’t seem even remotely out of breath either. And she was quite fast to boot.

He recognized her - well, her head anyway - as the same girl that had been sneaking a peek at him during his conversation in Impa’s house.

Paya held her fists up in triumph as she introduced herself, as if she'd just won some sort of prize. “I did it!” She said. “I-I said my name!” Link couldn't help but find it rather adorable. She was so nervous about simply talking to him that she was practically shaking.

“I...I…. -ahem- I have something for you!” she continued. “From my grandmother, Impa. I've been waiting for your return!” She held a small bag in front of her face, peering out from behind like it was a shield.

Link laughed internally, found himself wanting to comfort her, to try to calm her down. Yet his twisted, cruel side was tempted to simply watch how this awkward scene would unfold…

But in the end, he decided to be merciful. Especially because he found himself already liking this rather quirky Sheikah girl. He held his palms up to her as if in retreat. “Relax,” he said. He offered his hand for a shake. “Allow me properly introduce myself. I... am Link. And I’m totally harmless.”

She seemed to warm up to this gesture. She grasped his hand with both of hers and returned his handshake, her head bowed. Link examined her up and down. Traditional Sheikah clothes of course... she was clearly in very good shape, sturdy build... she was a bit taller than him too, he noticed. Not that he resented that or anything. Like Impa, she had markings of the Sheikah eye crest on her forehead.

He found himself wondering if it was paint… or a tattoo. But he decided not to ask.
“So, Paya, I’m actually here to see Impa again,” Link explained.

“I… thought so.” said Paya. “That’s why I’m here. She has gone to sleep early tonight.” She gestured at the Sheikah Slate on Link’s hip. “Have you… restored any functionality to the slate yet?”

"Yes." Link pulled the slate out, poked around to the gallery, and flipped the device around to show her.

“May I?” she asked.

“By all means.”

Paya grabbed the slate and swiped through it. “Ah, if what my grandmother told me is correct… this is the Camera rune that Princess Zelda used 100 years ago.” She turned around, aimed the slate, pressed a button, then showed the result to Link: A perfect recreation of the Kakariko townscape below. “It works!” she said excitedly.

...Does everyone but me know how to work this thing properly? Link thought, bitterly.

He grabbed the slate from Paya, scanned through the pictures again.

Paya continued. “Impa believes… that if you visit the locations within those pictures taken by Zelda, you might be able to restore some of your lost memories. Just like what happened when you saw the Zora prince in-person the other day.”

She clasped her hands together against her chest. “We… both hope that your memories will return to you soon.” She bowed in respect, then spun around to leave.

“O-oh! And I completely forgot…” She turned again, reached into the bag she was carrying, pulled out a long, blue piece of clothing. “My grandmother... wanted me to give this to you if I saw you. She said that it was the Champion’s tunic... and that it could only be worn by one who had earned the respect of the royal family of Hyrule...” She handed it to Link. “It would seem this once belonged to you, many years ago…”

Link looked at the Champion’s tunic, then back at Paya. “Thanks.” he said.

It was bright blue, with white accents decorating the collar, sleeves and waist. There was also a white undershirt with yellow sleeves inside it. He pulled off his weapons, his rucksack, and began to remove his shirt to change-

“Ah!!! Master Link! What are you doing?!” she covered her face in embarrassment. “I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to be seeing this right now-”

But Link just laughed as he put his Sheikah armor into his bag and donned the tunic, patting down the wrinkles as he did. “What do you think?” he asked her.

Paya dared to open her eyes, and relaxed as soon as she saw he was fully clothed again. “It looks... “ she paused. “To be honest, it looks okay. I liked your other shirt better. But, I mean, not because I’m biased … or anything.” she looked away nervously. “...Is that okay?”

Link smiled.

She... was incredibly honest, sincere. He genuinely respected that. And in that moment, he just knew that they were going to be good friends.
He put his hands on his hips, looked down at his new tunic...

“Yeah… I have to agree,” he said. “This really isn’t my style at all.”

So far, so good…

Link had made it to the top of the Sheikah Tower deep in Hyrule Field. And he’d done so with relative ease. In fact, he was really quite shocked with how smoothly his travels had gone. He’d somehow expected far more resistance and action, being so close to Hyrule Castle.

Earlier, after teleporting from Kakariko all the way back to the Great Plateau Tower, he simply glided his way across Hyrule Field to some ruins nearby. The sun had already set over the great plains around him, but the full moon above had helped to light the way. He had witnessed a torchlit battle between some travelers and a pack of some blue-colored Bokoblins, jumping into the fray just in time to slay the monsters with relative ease. The travelers had treated him to some delicious crab risotto for his troubles, and then he’d left on his way again. He’d somehow managed to avoid the gaze of nearby stationary guardians as he climbed the sheikah tower that rose high above the field. Soon, that familiar data drop was splashing onto Link’s slate. A new map of Hyrule Field appeared on the screen. As he glanced over it… he finally spotted it.

The sacred grounds.

It was the first picture in the Sheikah Slate’s gallery, and at his first glance he had seen that this spot was right in front of Hyrule Castle. The picture showed an elaborate concrete platform with pillar surrounding it. The pillars framed in the enormous castle - not yet ruined - looming in the horizon. While the picture itself jogged his memories of the name of the place, he’d recalled nothing else particularly significant about it.

That would be too easy anyway… he thought.

He stepped to the edge of the tower platform, peering at the massive field now separating him from his destination. Guardian Stalkers patrolled the area in different intervals… but there was a forest in the distance that he could use for cover in the event that one of the lethal robots spotted him.

But Link felt like he had nothing to fear. After all, he’d already escaped one of these before - and the worst it had done was set him on fire anyway. No worries.

Feeling confident, he jumped off the tower and started to glide down towards the field below...

Link was on fire.

He ripped off the scorched and tattered Champion’s tunic, tossing it to the ground as he ran. Well that sure didn't last very long...

The Guardian Stalker that grazed him immediately gave chase, and began to charge its laser up again just as Link managed to dive into a ditch behind the first tree he reached. He crawled on his stomach, careful to stay out of the guardian’s view.

As he pulled himself up behind the nearby tree, out of the guardian’s sight, he stopped to catch his breath.

This is turning out to be a bigger pain than I thought. He sighed. This better be worth the-
A red dot suddenly appeared on his chest. He looked up.

_Not worth it! Not worth it!

He was being targeted by _another_ guardian stalker. He thought fast, turned, and scaled the tree behind him as fast as he could. He was starting to understand the timing of these robot's lasers... so he waited for a moment-

Then _dove_ away, just as a guardian blast incinerated the poor innocent tree he was just standing on. He landed in the branches of another, unfortunately drawing the attention of the _other_ guardian stalker that had been chasing him in the first place. Now with _two_ red lasers aimed at him, Link leapt from tree to tree, dodging blast after blast, eventually finding himself tangled in a cluster of branches just above the second stalker...

In spite of his insane predicament, his mind entered a sense of calm as he recalled the small training robot from the cryonis shrine.

_Would it work?_

He jumped before he even bothered to consider.

Link landed on top of the second guardian’s head and held on _for_ dear life. Just like its miniature counterpart, it began to spin its head wildly while Link held on _for_ dear life.

But this wasn't for pleasure this time. The red dot from the first robot _still_ targeted him and he knew it was only a matter of time before he needed to...

..._let go._

He did so, just as a laser blast from the other guardian nearly took the whole head off of the second one. Link was launched about ten feet away and began to sprint through the woods in the direction of the sacred grounds.

He dared to turn around... check out the damage...

The second guardian’s head was spinning slowly, as if it had just taken a punch. Half of its coned head was missing, but this unfortunately appeared to only be superficial damage. The two stalkers started to look at each other... as if they were _glaring_ in anger at their silly mistake.

Link decided now was not the time to consider this, using their distracted state to hightail it over to the grounds and hopefully find some cover...

It was another five seconds or so before both of the guardians recovered and began making their way straight towards Link. But he'd finally spotted it, just ahead.

_The sacred grounds._

They were surrounded by a miniature moat of sorts, filled with clean water. Without hesitation he dove straight in, crawling on all floors underneath one of the small bridges leading to the center platform. Above him, he could hear the stalkers pacing back and forth. Searching for him.

_In fact, _if his ears weren't deceiving him...

...There was a _third_ stalker approaching from the distance, looking to investigate the situation.

Link laughed bitterly. It was all he could really do.
He sat there, in the darkness, for several minutes. Minutes turned to hours. At times, he was tempted to simply teleport back to the Sheikah Tower and re-assess the situation. But he remained patient. He’d gotten a good glimpse of the sacred grounds before he dove in, but no memories really came to mind.

At this point, he was quite certain that the stress of the situation was providing a relatively major distraction for him. Fortunately, it was currently impossible for the guardian robots to spot him. So he took a deep breath, tried to focus... tried to relax. To slow his heart rate, to calm himself down...

His hand gently massaged the watertight bag which held Mipha’s old, scorched note...his mind churned with the message hidden away there, lost in battle, lost in time...

*It is qu--- s-m--- -e----.*

*All I ha- -- --s ---n- -f ---*

He began to relax as he contemplated - even while the rhythmic pounding of heavy feet and the whirring sound of ancient gears above him continued to flood his senses. For the moment, this shred of paper was all he had left of Mipha. Simply *possessing* it brought him some mild comfort. He just wished he knew what it *said.*

It was about four in the morning now... and despite his best efforts, his adrenaline finally wore off. His energy failed him. Tunnel vision. Blackness... *longing... loneliness...*

*He was losing focus, his consciousness drifted in and out. A feeling of wistfulness and remembrance latched onto his very soul. And soon, right there in the shallow pool of water, Link had slowly drifted away into a deep, dark sleep...*  

Chapter End Notes

RIP unnamed tree #2.
Sassy Link has finally arrived in all his glory... and next chapter, so will Silent Link.
Next up: Memories of Mipha Part 3: Hylian Champion Captain
In addition to being the youngest knight ever appointed to the Imperial Guard, Link was also by far the most skilled soldier to have served as a Hylian Knight.

And all before he’d even turned seventeen.

It had nothing to do with pedigree, or favor, or cheating - despite the accusations of such by Link’s peers. Training alongside the absolute best of the best in the Imperial Guard pipeline, Link found himself still scrapping, still fighting for every single little inch of progress.

Nobody worked harder than him. Nobody faced more resistance or adversity. Nobody was ever doubted as much as he was. Yet he pushed through his nearly two years of brutal, intense training with laser-focus and a calm, silent demeanor. His attitude eventually earned him the trust and the respect of everyone around him.

Before he’d even known it, he had been promoted to Captain.

And before he’d even known it... he had gone totally silent. He’d fully retreated into himself. The happy, carefree young boy had become a stoic young man, forced to grow up just a little bit too fast. He was a mere child, now thrust into a cold adult world - a repressed spirit longing to be unleashed.

Link still spoke at times, sure. But only when it was truly necessary, and only when he was out of the public eye. Only when his duties as Captain demanded it, and when the cold stares of expectation weren’t bearing down on him. Yet his unique promotion had brought about all the fanfare and bombast one might expect from someone as young and talented as he. It didn’t help that he was the son of a rather popular Captain either. And with more and more eyes fixating on him, enclosing him, strangling him, Link knew of only one safe place to retreat - his mind. As the specter of Calamity Ganon’s possible return cast a grim shadow over the Kingdom of Hyrule, his silent focus only grew in intensity. As did the intensity of King Rhoam and Zelda’s preparations...

The pilots for each of the four divine beasts had been chosen from among the diverse races of Hyrule. Their skills as warriors unmatched, these pilots had been dubbed “Champions” by the king in order to forge a unique bond between them in solidarity. The very first meeting between the selected Champions was scheduled to take place in Hyrule Castle, very soon.

There were three primary objectives for the champions in this meeting:

One: To receive basic training for operating the divine beasts.

Two: To train the knights of the Hylian Royal Guard for the potential ensuing war against Calamity Ganon.

And three: To determine just which of these elite soldiers of the kingdom would have the distinct honor of taking their place as the Hylian Champion. The chosen hero... who would follow in the footsteps of legend.

“Less talking, more slashing!”

Urbosa.
She was a member of the Gerudo - a race of tall, red-haired and dark-skinned people composed entirely of women. Renowned far and wide for her ferocious skill with the scimitar and shield, Urbosa had been an easy selection as the Gerudo Champion by King Rhoam and Zelda. Her strength and leadership were truly unrivaled amongst her peers. She was also quite close to the Royal Family, which certainly helped her case.

Urbosa herself was considered quite beautiful, even by the standards of her own people. Like her fellow Gerudo, she wore very little clothing - only an elaborate breastplate, shoulder guards, and a gold belt to match her jewelry. Also like her fellow Gerudo, she had killer abs - and a killer attitude.

“I have very little tolerance for whining! Do you think your enemies will just let you stop and take a break in the heat of battle?!”

Urbosa had been the first to arrive in Hyrule Castle Town for the meeting, and thus was the first to receive the special blue scarf that was to be awarded to each of the Champions for their selection to the elite group. She chose to wear hers around her waist like a skirt, and it seemed to suit her quite well. Upon her arrival, she had not hesitated to begin her clinic on swordsmanship for the members of the Hylian Royal Guard - literally assembling the group the very moment she’d received her Champion scarf.

“When you finish form practice, I want you to find a partner and begin sparring. Your Captain will advise…”

Urbosa turned and began to make her way up the stairs overlooking the small training field that these knights were practicing in. From her view at the top, she analyzed each of the soldiers, noting their strengths and weaknesses. She smiled.

In spite of her frequent taunts and verbal abuses towards them, Urbosa was genuinely impressed by the skill, determination, and strength exhibited by these imperial knights. They were the most elite members of the entire Hylian army, and it showed in their dedication. By contrast, she found that the soldiers of her own people would be completely tuckered out and complaining by now. These Hylian knights were impressive indeed.

Even more impressive, however, was a certain Hylian boy among the ranks of the elite guard… The young Captain.

Link.

With his silent demeanor, he was now calmly directing his fellow knights into neat rows for spar practice. He had exchanged only a handful of words to Urbosa since she’d arrived, but in those very few words she’d already known that he commanded quite a hefty amount of respect.

He… is truly special, Urbosa thought. I can see why King Rhoam speaks so highly of him . She glanced over at Princess Zelda, whose cold, flat stare did very little to hide the underlying scowl on her face.

... And I can see why she resents it so much.

She walked over, put a hand on the princess’s shoulder. Zelda’s icy, cold persona seemed to melt in appreciation of the gesture. She looked up at Urbosa, nodded respectfully. “The Royal Family wishes to express its most sincere gratitude for your work here, Lady Urbosa.”

“Oh, drop the formalities, princess .” Urbosa replied, with a smile. “We’re all friends here.”

Zelda smiled back. “Indeed.” She turned and faced the soldiers, who were now aggressively sparring...
with each other. They were giving it their all, despite having been training non-stop for several hours now. *Already* they were looking much-improved from the previous day, entirely under Urbosa’s critical eye. Zelda looked each one over, evaluated them…

Then her eyes narrowed.

She spotted Link again, silently giving instructions and tips on each soldier’s form. Each of these elite imperial guards followed the direction of the young Captain without hesitation, seemed to greatly respect and admire him - despite many of them being nearly twice his age.

The cold stare immediately returned on Zelda’s face. And this didn’t go unnoticed by her observant Gerudo friend.

“That boy…” Urbosa said, “is really something else. I’ve spent the entire day nitpicking and training every single soldier here. I’ve found countless flaws with each and every one of them. All except for *him*. There is basically *nothing* for me to teach him.”

Zelda nodded bitterly in agreement.

Urbosa continued. “And yet… he still trains himself brutally, consistently, and without compromise. As if he’s a mere novice rather than a master swordsman. He gives and receives instruction freely and humbly.” She crossed her arms, smiled at Zelda. “…And perhaps *that* is the reason why he finds so much success.”

Zelda’s face remained unchanged.

Urbosa shrugged. “But *you* on the other hand, should give yourself a little more credit.” Zelda raised an eyebrow at this.

“What’s with that look? I’m serious. You have your own legacy to look after. And I have to say, you’re doing a good job of filling in some rather… enormous shoes.”

She was referring, of course, to Zelda’s mother - the late queen of Hyrule, who had passed away when Zelda was but a mere child. The queen was beloved across the land, loved and admired for her mastery of the sealing magic that was inherited by women born into the royal family of Hyrule. Tragically, she died before she could pass any of the knowledge of this power to her young daughter, Princess Zelda.

The princess finally broke her temporary silence. “I cannot deny… that I feel the pressure of expectation. And even now, ten years later… I find myself missing my mother terribly.” Zelda looked up at Urbosa again, and smiled.

“But I must thank *you*, Urbosa. For being just like a mother to me for all these years. It has been a tremendous help.” Urbosa patted Zelda on the head and shrugged.

“Well then, Zelda. As your mother … Might I suggest that you and Captain Link… try to get along?”

The infamous scowl returned.

And Urbosa suddenly broke out into loud, boisterous laughter.
Daruk.

Daruk. The Champion of the Gorons. Like the rest of his people, he was big, brown, bulky, and bold. A largely silicon-based race of rock-eaters, the considerable weight of the rock-like Goron people was matched only by the weight of their big hearts. This was the same for Daruk. However, he was widely considered *formidably* strong - even for a Goron. His enormous stone-colored beard and frayed hair made his appearance all the more threatening. Yet he was respected and admired by his people as a great warrior *as well* as a gentle leader, which contributed to his selection as the Goron Champion.

He had arrived only one day after Urbosa. Upon receiving his Champion scarf, he chose to wrap it across his chest as a badge of honor. Like the Gerudo Champion, this personal touch suited him quite well.

As a master of two-handed weaponry, Daruk was asked by King Rhoam to help hone the elite guard’s claymore techniques. While he didn’t consider himself much of a teacher, Daruk humbly complied with the king’s request. At first glance, Daruk might have *seemed* like a bumbling oaf to the imperceptive individual… But he was surprisingly deep-thinking and analytical when it came to interpersonal dealings.

“Better toughen up, you weak little pebbles!”

He just chose not to show it.

“Fifty more push-ups, let’s go! I want to hear you *counting*!”

Before he’d even started his weapons clinic, Daruk was putting these elite knight through the *ringer* with strength conditioning. At three-hundred fifty push-ups and counting, these poor soldiers were already on the verge of collapse.

That is, except for Link. It seemed he hadn’t even broken a sweat yet. Daruk grinned. He’d immediately developed a liking for the quiet young Hylian. He was expecting some rather *big things* from this little guy...

As they finished their push-ups - with Link performing an extra one-hundred reps for good measure - a tall figure suddenly burst into the room, striking a dramatic pose. A cloud of blue feathers, a pair of outstretched wings…

“It is I. The Rito Champion, Master Revali.”

The figure took a bow. “I apologize for my intrusion…” Daruk waved the interruption off, nodded cordially at his Champion counterpart.

Revali was a tall member of the Rito tribe, a birdlike race of debatable origin - though they were commonly believed to have possibly evolved from the Zora several millennia ago. His slender build, adorned with dark blue feathers frayed with white strands, masked his great strength. He was dressed in typical Rito attire, simple red vest with white accents and a pair of baggy, tan pants. As he’d only just arrived, he had yet to receive his Champion scarf. A master bowman, Revali was selected as the Rito Champion and subsequently tasked with honing the archery skills of the imperial guard.

Revali’s green eyes narrowed as he spotted Link approaching him…

“Ah, and this must be the famous young Captain I’ve been hearing *so much* about.” he sneered. Link held his hand out for a shake, and Revali returned the gesture. The shake lasted a bit *too* long though,
with Revali’s grip tightening more and more, testing the young Hylian’s strength. Link responded with single a bone-crushing squeeze before finally letting go.

Ignoring the pain in his winged right hand, Revali turned his attention to the other knights, spreading his wings dramatically in a welcoming gesture. “I’d like to get to know each and every one of you! Allow me… to take you all out for drinks tonight! My treat!”

He certainly knew how to charm a room. The knights all turned their focus on Link, who nodded his head in approval at Revali’s gesture. They let out a cheer for the Rito Champion, before quickly assembling in front of a training dummy for the first phase of combat practice.

Link smiled. As a Captain, he’d certainly grant his knights leave for the evening. They’d been working quite hard over the last couple of days and definitely deserved a night of fun. He on the other hand… would have to refrain from partaking in the festivities. Link was, after all, underage; a fact which Revali seemed to know all too well…

“I must apologize that you are unable to join us… Captain.” he crossed his wings. “Maybe someday in the future, when you’re a bit… fuller-fledged.” Revali grinned as he spread his wings and flew to the upper platform where Princess Zelda was, once again, overseeing the events below.

Link was unmoved by Revali’s teasing. He had no intention of participating anyway, even if he was old enough to drink. He’d have the training rooms all to himself tonight. And he looked forward to another late-night of sword and spear practice in peace and solitude-

“What’s say you and I spend some quality time together tonight instead, eh?” A rare grin slipped across Link’s face as he nodded at the offer.

He found that he quite liked Daruk. The goron was genuine, unassuming, and sincere. All admirable traits in Link’s mind. Daruk smiled back. “I’m not really interested in ‘going out on the town’ or whatever they call it here. The garbage they drink is as good as water to me anyway. Like to see one of these lightweights try the stuff we make back home - they’d melt into a puddle on the floor. Literally!” His boisterous laughter warmed Link’s spirit, and he sighed happily. It seemed his night of peace and quiet would have to wait… But he was quite okay with that.

Daruk walked away from Link and began to pace the floor in front of the other knights. “I want to see what kinda stuff you’re made of...” he said to the assembled knights. “Are you pebbles… or are you stones?”

From his back, Daruk produced his gigantic club-like sword made almost entirely of stone. It shook the earth as it fell in front of him.

“This… is the Boulder Breaker. It can crush enemies into fine powder, it can move mountains, it causes earthquakes every time it touches the ground... But I only use it to fan myself once in awhile.” The group of knights burst into laughter, as Revali rolled his eyes up above. Zelda was giggling in spite of herself.

Daruk left his weapon on the ground, walking towards the stone dummy he’d placed in the center of the room earlier. “I have a challenge for you lot. If you can destroy this dummy with the Boulder
Breaker by the end of the day, I’ll personally give you one of these bad boys. And, I’ll let you all get out of training early.” He wiped his nose. “Trust me… after an hour or two with me, you’re gonna want to leave.”

A fellow officer assisted Link in handing out practice claymores to the assembled knights.

“But for now...” said Daruk, “Let’s get started!”

Combat training began in earnest, with the exhausted knights receiving tips and advice from Daruk. Link himself participated, mostly because he considered his skills with two-handed swords to be incredibly lacking. In no time, however, he was mastering the techniques. And he could see from the looks of it, that Daruk’s advice was honing the skills of his peers too.

As the training continued, many of the older, larger knights stepped out and attempted Daruk’s dummy challenge - only to fail spectacularly. Most of them could hardly even lift the weapon, and the ones that could found themselves unable to swing it with enough force to even graze the target. They’d returned, frustrated, to the brutal training at-hand.

Still, they refused to make even the slightest complaint, refrained from showing any weakness. But Link was perceptive. He could see the minute weariness growing in each of his fellow soldiers, could see their moves growing all the more sluggish, noted the slightly increasing look of strain on their faces...

Determined, Link rolled up his sleeves, cracked his neck, stretched his arms, and began to walk across the room towards the stone dummy. He’d give it his best shot.

Up above, Revali got himself reacquainted with Princess Zelda. His charm was certainly having its intended effect. The two were getting along swimmingly, just as they had when the princess had first visited the Rito Village earlier that year for the Champion selection.

As Revali looked down from the viewing area, he noticed Link making his way over to attempt Daruk’s challenge. He scoffed at this. “Really? What does that scrawny little boy think he’s going to accomplish?” he said, loud enough for some of the knights to hear.

But Zelda said nothing. She knew better than to doubt Link’s infuriating resolve...

Sure enough, Link somehow managed to at least get the Boulder Breaker off the ground - only to fall over backwards right onto his rear. This produced mocking laughter from Revali. “See?” he said. “Looks like our boy can’t even-”

He paused mid-speech. Incapable of giving up, Link had thrown himself right back at the large weapon, lifting up the handle and finding his center of gravity with it. Now balanced, a memory flashed in Link’s mind... Sidon spinning like a top during spear training, his frustrated instructor dodging the tip of his spear and yelling in a vain effort to stop the hyperactive Zora prince...

Link grinned. Using the Boulder Breaker’s weight as a counterbalance, Link began to spin uncontrollably, the force of his spin causing the heavy end of the weapon to lift and extend from his outstretched hands. He focused on the target as he spun, adjusted his trajectory, drew the tip closer and closer…

...And violently impacted the stone dummy, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

Link dropped the Boulder Breaker in triumph and calmly walked away.

The training grounds erupted in a mass of cheers, as the relieved knights ran over to congratulate
Link on his triumph. Even the nearby Sheikah men, performing maintenance on repaired guardian stalkers nearby, clapped at Link’s entertaining accomplishment. Daruk crossed his arms and grinned.

*Looks like we can expect some big things after all...*

Up above, Revali rolled his eyes as Zelda shook her head in disbelief.

“He’s.... merely a showoff.” Revali said. He gestured at the bow on his back. “What good is bumbling brute force like that, when you can simply eliminate your target from over five-hundred yards away?”

Zelda shared Revali’s sentiments regarding Link. “To be fair,” she said, “I believe that a well-balanced skillset is rather crucial for any successful knight...” She grinned at Revali. “But I do agree, that brute force isn’t always necessary, when *precision* is just as effective.”

She rather liked Revali. He was cocky and a bit too sure of himself, sure. But he would *always* say exactly what was on his mind, without fail. And she genuinely respected that.

But Link… she could never tell what he was thinking. He seemed to know just how to get under her skin. To her, his silence was a weapon; and he wielded it just as heftily as the Boulder Breaker itself.

“It seems that the Zora Champion will be arriving a bit later than expected,” said the Royal Messenger. “As such, the King wishes for Captain Link to provide some interim spearmanship training in her absence.”

Link’s stoic face did little to hide his disappointment. He’d been looking forward to this day, to her arrival, for several weeks now. He quickly buried this emotion deep inside his heart.

The messenger continued. “The King also requests that the knights of the elite guard train with the new prototype spears developed by the Sheikah...” as he said this, a pair of Sheikah warriors entered the room, each carrying a handful of the new weapons. This was the first time Link had seen these prototypes, and at first glance he found that he quite liked the style. Their black-metal surface contrasted sharply with the standard-issue royal spears that were gold and silver in color.

Link pulled his own weapon from his back - the Silverscale spear - and began to pace in front of the assembled group of knights. They wobbled and groaned slightly, still seemingly hungover from their drunken misadventures with Revali the previous night. Some of them examined their new prototype weapons, noting how light and well-balanced they felt in the hand.

Link briefly glanced up at the viewing platform above. Revali and Princess Zelda were conspicuously absent, but Daruk and Urbosa were in attendance. They both waved at the young Captain, and he nodded back. Turning his full attention to the elite guards, now armed with the prototype Royal Guard spears, Link got to work...

Above, Daruk and Urbosa were getting thoroughly acquainted with each other. They were both rather fond of the young Captain, with Daruk already declaring Link his brother after their quiet chat the previous night, “If it were up to me,” said Daruk, “I’d have selected Link as the Hylian Champion immediately.”

“I believe the King shares your sentiments, Daruk,” said Urbosa, “...However, until he draws that darkness sealing weapon, he’s just as good as a regular old soldier in the public’s eye.” She smiled. “But if anyone here can do it... I would have to say that he’s the most likely candidate...”
The training continued for several hours, with Link demonstrating many of the fine-tuned techniques he’d honed in Zora’s Domain years prior. Unfortunately, he was forced to cut their training short a bit early. These new Sheikah-developed prototypes had proven to be just a little bit too effective, as their razor-sharp ends had completely shredded every single one of their test dummies. And besides that, Link couldn’t take much more of the groaning and puking from the hungover guards. He was beginning to regret granting them leave the previous night...

After assembling in the dining hall for a quick meal, the imperial knights retreated back to their quarters to turn in early for the night. It was, after all, a rather big day tomorrow...

A quick shower later, and Link was sitting on his bunk in the officer’s quarters of Hyrule Castle. Splayed out on his bed was a series of notes… the very ones he’d exchanged with Mipha near the end of his last visit to the Domain almost two years ago.

Sadly, all candidates in the Imperial Guard pipeline were strictly barred from sending or receiving mail for the entire duration of their training. This, of course, didn’t stop Link from at least trying to get a few letters out, but he was largely unsuccessful. As a result, he took to scouring these old notes tonight - just as he had done every single night since the start of this training pipeline. His face flashed a rare trace of joy as he perused Mipha’s words for about the thousandth time...

Have you ever noticed that Muzu’s fins will twitch a bit when he is extremely angry? Perhaps you should consider pranking him some time. See for yourself.

-Your Lady

A rather interesting Sheikah scientist met with us at the site today. Her name is Purah. She seems to be Impa’s sister, though you’d never know it at first. They could not be any more dissimilar!

Impa is rather calm and reserved. Boring.

Purah, on the other hand, is incredibly energetic and quirky. Reckless.

Does that remind you of a certain pair?

-The Boring Princess

I am a bit embarrassed to admit it. I am entirely out of my comfort zone with this divine beast research. I was never particularly good with technology and science, as Muzu will not hesitate to remind me of. Anyway.

I cannot help but feel a bit out-of-place alongside these brilliant minds. My own intellect utterly pales in comparison. Some days I long for the simpler times of our youth, when our only duty was to the whims of the present, and not to a future so uncertain.

Nevertheless, I will persevere as the selected pilot for Vah Ruta. I take this duty rather seriously you see. Even if I am a bit... lacking in technical side of things.

-A Fish out of Water
That is astounding! I hope you know that we are all quite proud of you. We’ll certainly be cheering you on at a distance.

-Your Biggest Fan

P.S. Have you injured yourself yet? No? Well, get on with it then.

“Hey, Troutbreath”. Lieutenant Relk peered his head down from the top bunk. He was Link’s fellow officer and bunkmate. And one of his very few friends. “You ready for tomorrow?!”

Link shrugged, continued reading through Mipha’s notes...

Relk jumped down. “Well I hope you’re prepared for a shock… because I’m gonna be the one to draw that darkness-sealing sword tomorrow.” Link nodded in acknowledgement, but wasn’t really paying much attention.

He looked at Link, then down at his carefully folded notes, groaned. “How many times can you read through those anyway? It’s just the same thing over and over and over...” He paused, then attempted to snatch one from his bed. Link’s reflexes made sure that he didn’t get very far...

Rubbing his sore hand, the Lieutenant shook his head. “Come on, what do they say, Trout? You’re killing me here. Is it your grandma? Your girlfriend? Your uncle? A fish? What?!” Link just raised an eyebrow, and the Lieutenant shrugged his shoulders. “Aw, you’re no fun…” he climbed back up to the top bunk. He knew better than to push too far in teasing Link anyway. Relk had been one of his old trainers from back in the Academy, and he was all too familiar with Link’s volatile retaliation to aggression. His shoulder still ached occasionally from when Link had dislocated it in a fight all those years ago.

Free of this minor distraction, Link found himself clutching one last note. Not one of Mipha’s, but one that he’d written himself. It remained undelivered, unread. He’d hoped to give it to her upon her arrival that day… He shrugged, buried his emotions again, and turned his focus on the big day ahead. He put the notes away, blew out the candle, laid on his hard pillow.

He allowed himself a single quiet sigh.

Deep down, Link knew that one way or another his entire fate was about to change. If he failed to draw the legendary Master Sword tomorrow, then the weight of responsibility he’d felt for many years would be lifted from his shoulders. But if he was successful … then the pressure of the entire world would threaten to crush him down in an instant.

Whatever the outcome, he was ready.

The Great Hyrule Forest was situated directly northeast of Hyrule Castle. It was only a day’s ride away from Castle Town, but the trek to the heart of the forest could take anywhere from a few hours… to an entire week.

Many years before, a survey team managed to finally penetrate deep into the forest to discover just what sort of hidden secrets were at its center. Legends of a mystic sword that was housed deep
within had persisted for thousands of years; yet not a single soul had been able to find it in all that
time. Countless expeditions had been launched over recent centuries, growing in frequency during
the current reign of King Rhoam Bosphoramus Hyrule. With so many souls going missing for many
months - many never to return - the forest had been nicknamed The Lost Woods as a sort of warning
to any would-be explorer that would dare to sojourn inside of it.

That the mythical Master Sword had finally been discovered deep within the woods just now was
only a cruel reminder to the king that Calamity Ganon’s return was indeed inevitable. It was as if
the forest itself was alive, revealing its hidden treasures only when the time was right.

It was at this time that a large group of Hylian Guards, Sheikah attendants, and the Royal Family
itself made their way to the pedestal housing the sacred blade, eager to see if the legends were true:
that the sword would choose its master. And only a master who was truly worthy of wielding a blade
that could cut through the very darkness itself. In the past, many individuals had tried to draw the
legendary blade, and just as many had failed. Only now did the strongest warriors in all of Hyrule
finally make their way to the heart of the forest to give it their best shot. And an entire kingdom
waited with bated breath to see if the chosen one was indeed numbered among them...

A grunt, a shout, a thud, another knight who needed serious medical attention...

Whatever curse or spell or hex it was that was cast on this weapon, it was causing hearts to literally
stop in the chests of any who attempted to draw it from its pedestal. A decorated officer of the Royal
Guard was the latest victim, having collapsed in sheer agony on the ground the very instant he
touched the hilt of the Master Sword.

This isn’t going well… Zelda thought, as she observed this consistent stream of failure before her.
She looked around, saw the pained but curious stares of Sheikah attendants and Royal Guards, and
couldn’t help but feel that this spectacle was a bit… contrived. As if they were forcing the issue just a
bit too hard.

She sighed. Sounds a bit like my entire life, pursuing this cursed power I’m supposed to have-

“I am beginning to think,” said Revali, who was seated nearby and struggling to hold back his
laughter, “That we’re watching the greatest string of failures this world has ever seen.”

Nearby, a frustrated Lieutenant Relk glared angrily at the arrogant Rito. He had failed to draw the
sword moments earlier. “Well, then, if you’ve got the time to sit there and mock us, perhaps you’d
like to give it a go, eh Rito?”

A chorus of shouts and jeers at Revali prompted him to action.

“Very well then!” he spread his wings and flew straight to the pedestal.

“Allow me to show you Hylians just how it’s done.” Revali paused, took a deep breath, and grasped
the hilt of the Master Sword with both wings. He grunted and heaved as he pulled at the blade with
all his might… and for a split second the blade actually seemed to give way.

“AAAAARGH!” Revali suddenly let go, clutching at his chest and gasping for breath. Hylian
doctors ran up to administer aid, but he waved them off. Coughing, he slowly made his way back to
his seat, as another chorus of jeers and taunts were heaved in his direction-

SHINK.

Dead silence settled into the sacred grove.
Revali slowly turned his head, his jaw dropped.

A scrawny, blonde-haired Hylian boy stood above the pedestal, arms in the air.

In his hands: the Master Sword. Finally removed from the pedestal that had housed it for nearly ten thousand years.

Slowly, the young Captain lifted the sword, pointed it straight up in the air. A gleam of light flashed across the blade, as if it was demonstrating its tacit approval to its new master.

Slowly, a wave of murmurs and whispers filled Link’s ears as he clung tightly to the blade. He lowered the sword, turned to face his awestruck audience, and calmly nodded.

The cheers that erupted could have been heard all the way to back to Zora’s Domain. Even King Rhoam found himself grinning wildly in approval of this latest development. He’d been right about that boy after all...

“WELL!”

A booming voice suddenly cut through all the excitement.

Dead silence, yet again.

“It is good… to see your return, o courageous one.”

It was coming… from a tree. The enormous tree in front of the pedestal that was propped in the center of this forest clearing. Many had commented upon their arrival that the tree's face resembled that of an elderly Hylian’s. And now they could see why.

“I… am the guardian of this forest. I have been referred to as the Deku Tree over the ages…” The stunned crowd just stared quietly at the sight. “I can see…” the Deku Tree continued, “That we seem to have ourselves an audience. If I may… I must request a bit of privacy with the young Master… and your Hylian princess.”

Many attendants spoke up in opposition, but they were quickly shushed by King Rhoam. He knew very well about the legends of the Deku Tree… and he would adhere to legend as much as possible for the sake of his kingdom.

When the crowd had departed to the perimeter of the clearing, the Deku Tree began his discussion with the young princess and captain.

“By drawing this blade, young master, you have become its chosen one. You are destined to become the hero that will save this land from ruin yet again.”

*He’s always been the ‘chosen one’,* Zelda thought bitterly, though she quickly brushed this from her mind.

“As for you, Princess Zelda… I see that you have not yet awakened your powers. This will be most critical in the days to come… you will be instrumental in beating back the threat of darkness.” Zelda nodded.

“It is my hope that the two of you will find success in your partnership. Just as your ancestors have done, time and time again. I wanted to ensure… that you understood the gravity of the situation you find yourselves in. Now go forth, and be prepared for the upcoming trials still ahead. I pray that the Goddesses will be with you…”
With that, he was finished. Link and Zelda glanced at each other, nodded respectfully, then began to make their way back to the waiting crowd.

“We must make preparations at once.” King Rhoam said. Zelda had just finished briefing him on the Deku Tree’s words. “We have many things to set into motion now, if we are to follow perfectly in the footsteps of our ancestors. Zelda, you will begin constant training to unlock your sealing power. Do whatever it takes to make this happen. Do you understand?”

“...Yes father.”

“Good. As for Master Link... I do believe a celebration is in order. Shall we?”

The cluster of Royal Guards walked in a perimeter around the Royal Family, with the Sheikah tribe members bringing up the rear. As they made their way back through the Lost Woods, guided by surveyors, Revali drew alongside Zelda.

“Oh, Revali!” Zelda said. “I keep forgetting to give this to you.” She reached into a bag held by one of her attendants. From inside, she pulled out a long, blue piece of cloth - Revali’s Champion scarf. He quickly tied it around his neck.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Like a Champion indeed…” Zelda said. She glanced over at Link, who was walking by himself outside the perimeter of his fellow guards, the Master Sword already sheathed on his back. The sword gleamed at her. Taunted her. She found herself glaring involuntarily. “And I suppose we’d better make arrangements to suit up our new Hylian Champion with a uniform of his own,” she said.

Revali noticed her glare, held his wings up in mock defeat. “...Guess we shouldn’t have expected anything less from the ‘chosen one’ himself…” he scoffed.

Zelda shook her head.

“Some people are just born lucky I suppose… just simply gifted...” She sighed. “...I’ll bet that he’s never had to struggle even a single day for his entire life...”

Chapter End Notes

Next is Memories of Mipha Part 4: Hylian Champion.
See you tomorrow.
“...It’s like he’s had to struggle every single day for his entire life,” Mipha said, as they passed through the front gates of Hyrule Castle Town.

The trio of Zora - Mipha, Seggin, and Muzu - had finally arrived in the bustling city after several delays. A bit later than expected. Mipha thought. But at least we’re finally here... Calm but curious, she scanned the bustling marketplace, quietly marvelling at the variety of Hylians around her.

“Master Link is one of the toughest Hylians I have ever met,” replied Seggin. “I believe he thrives on struggle. Loves the challenge...I’m quite sure he’s fine.”

Muzu shrugged. “Well, when we see your little Hylian friend again, you shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't even remember us, Lady Mipha. Hylians are a terribly... unreliable sort. Remarkably ungrateful. Friendship means very little to them...”

Mipha resisted the urge to defend Link against Muzu. Her attendant was generally unaware of the extremely close bond that she and Link had shared, and overall he viewed Hylians as fickle and inconsequential people due to their relatively short life spans. She couldn't even imagine trying to explain to Muzu how she truly felt about Link. He'd positively blow the top off his flat head in sheer fury.

So she dropped the subject, continued to observe the curious scene around them. She had not been to the Castle Town since she was much younger, so her memory of its typical state was certainly lacking. But even to her, things seemed a bit... busier and more bustling than they perhaps should have been. Thousands of people from all over the country were flooding the marketplace, surrounding a large platform that had been assembled in the center of the town square. People milled about, gossiped, speculated...

"I hear the princess still cannot access her powers-”

“...How could we trust someone like her to lead us, if the Calamity actually does come back?”

“Do you think it’s true? About the master sword?”

“-I guess we’ll be finding out shortly, either way!”

The loud voices that swirled around her were a bit overwhelming, to say the least. It was all quite a bit much to take in. But she remained calm regardless.

Seggin seemed to share Mipha’s curious sentiment, however.

“I wonder... just what in the world is going on here...” he said.

“A joke, that's what,” scoffed a voice from nearby.

Mipha looked over.
The smiling face of a dark-blue Rito greeted her. She was familiar with the birdlike race, as their kind operated the most commonly-used postal service in the entire country. This particular Rito was quite tall, and wore a bright blue scarf with white accents around his neck. He was certainly handsome by Rito standards, she could admit that much. Yet all she could focus on was the set of bright red feathers under each of his eyes, which gave him the silly appearance of a permanent blush. She held back a giggle.

*I really should not be analyzing others like this...*

“Hello there,” the Rito said, as he walked toward the Zora trio. “The name’s Revali. Master Revali. The Champion of the Rito.” He stopped in front of Mipha, looked her up and down. “And I can deduce… based on your… staggering beauty and your ornate jewelry and trident… that you are the Zora Princess and Champion, Lady Mipha. Am I correct? Of course I am.” He bowed slowly and winked at her.

Mipha just stared back in confusion for a brief moment, then suddenly remembered her manners. She nodded back cordially. “Ah, yes, your… deduction is correct, Revali. May I call you Revali?” She found herself wanting to avoid addressing him as ‘Master.’ It didn't seem right. At all.

But Revali didn't get the hint. “Ah, we’re on a first-name basis already. Excellent, Mipha—”

“‘Lady Mipha’ will do,” she and Muzu said at the same time. She glanced over at Muzu, who seemed to be wearing a look of sheer disgust on his face. For the first time ever... Mipha actually appreciated his overbearing nature.

Revali grew mildly flustered. “Oh, I...well, do pardon me, I didn't mean to—”

A loud chorus of cheering and clapping erupted from the crowd, as King Rhoam suddenly emerged on the stage in the middle of the town square. Immediately, most of the members of the crowd knelt in respect for their ruler. Only now did Mipha notice that there were also Gorons, Rito, and Gerudo numbered amongst them - as well as a few unfamiliar Zoras from distant domains.

*Am I... missing something here?* She wondered, as she also bowed her head in respect to the foreign ruler. *Well, I suppose that’s what I get for being late...*

The King raised his hand to shush the crowd, and silence set in almost immediately. They all stood back up at once, and listened intently to Rhoam’s words...

“Three days ago...” he began, “The legendary sword that seals the darkness... was finally drawn from its pedestal.”

The public went absolutely insane at the news. The king raised a hand to shush them again.

“And the new master of the sword... your Hylian Champion... is none other than Captain Link of the Hylian Royal Guard.”

*Link!*

Mipha’s face lit up, but she quickly calmed down before Muzu could notice. She allowed herself to clap politely, though she wanted nothing more than to cheer and shout congratulations, as Link himself emerged onto the stage after his introduction. He was dressed in an Imperial Guard Captain’s uniform, his pose was respectful, confident. She could see the blue hilt of a beautiful sword on his back - the *Master Sword*, which her father had told her about.
Mipha watched intently as Link knelt in front of the king. She couldn’t help but feel so very proud of him, so happy for his accomplishment.

And yet… something was wrong. Something was off about him. Even at this distance, the stone-cold look on his face was evident. It was that same stoic demeanor that she’d only very rarely seen when he was living at the Domain. She recalled Link’s last visit home, how he’d seemed just a little bit more aloof. A little bit colder. …But still the same old Link in the end.

*Maybe it’s just a calm front he’s putting on…*

…

…*Yes, I am sure that is the case.*

Her intuition was sounding alarms through her mind. But she decided to be optimistic. After all, she hadn’t seen him in nearly two years. This was a moment to savor and enjoy, to-

Silence set in again. A Royal Messenger had arrived on stage, whispering something in the King’s ear. As he did so, he pointed directly at Mipha. Rhoam looked up, recognized the Zora princess, and smiled.

“It would seem that all of our great Champions have finally arrived!” He spread his arms in a welcoming gesture. “Would our dear friends kindly assemble themselves on the stage?”

Revali immediately grabbed Mipha’s hand and pulled her through the crowd towards the stage, before Seggin and Muzu could do anything.

They arrived on the platform just as Princess Zelda, Lady Urbosa, and Daruk lined up next to Link, facing the crowd alongside King Rhoam. Mipha and Revali also found their places in the line, as King Rhoam’s booming voice once again brought the crowd to silence.

“All of the chosen pilots of the four divine beasts, and the Champions who will beat back Calamity Ganon.”

As the crowd erupted in more cheers, Mipha glanced around in awe at the strange scene. She really was not particularly fond of this loud spectacle. She dared to glance over at Link, and she could immediately tell that he shared the sentiment - even through his cold, detached look. Link briefly returned her glance and for only a short moment, the shine in his eyes returned. He fought off a grin, before quickly giving way to his stoic look again.

Mipha sighed internally. There was definitely something wrong with him. She knew him far too well… this wasn’t just a simple front he was putting on after all…

And as she glanced around from atop the platform, saw the expecting, hoping, demanding faces of the thousands of people watching them, she felt she had a pretty good idea of what that something was.

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After the presentation, the Champions were quickly summoned to the large dining hall of Hyrule Castle in order to get further acquainted. The King had arranged for an enormous variety of dishes to satiate the diverse tastes of all the Champions. Mipha lamented that she hadn’t a single moment to catch up with Link, though she was sure she’d get a chance soon…
Just not right now, apparently.

As if deliberately, the two youths had been seated exactly on opposite ends of the dining table that was set out for the Champions. King Rhoam sat at the head, and Zelda alongside him. Link was seated to Zelda’s left, followed by Daruk and Urbosa. On the other end, Impa, Revali, Muzu, and Mipha were seated to the King’s right. Earlier, Sergeant Seggin had gotten himself reacquainted with some old war buddies from another domain, so he was absent from the congregation.

“It is a pleasure to finally have our Champions assembled today.” King Rhoam began. A waiter knocked on a nearby door, poked his head in. The king beckoned. “I am quite certain that we’re moving to an... adequately-prepared state to oppose Calamity Ganon,” he continued, as a stream of waiters and waitresses began filing in with plate after plate of steaming food.

“Indeed.” said Impa. “Though we would be wise to not get overconfident. There is still much to accomplish, according to prophecy.”

Despite only being a few years older than Link and Zelda, Impa was incredibly wise. She was also rather tall for a Sheikah, and well-built as a warrior. She carried a calm but demanding presence, and every word she said seemed carefully thought-out beforehand. Rhoam found he had no problem heeding her advice when it was given.

“You are correct, Impa, there is still indeed much work to be done,” said King Rhoam, as he bit into a piece of steak and began to chew quietly. He swallowed, continued, “But for a brief moment… let us have a short time to reflect on our success thus far.” He wiped his face with his napkin, and spread his arms. “Don’t be shy, everyone! Eat up!”

The Champions had all been waiting for the king to finish speaking, but didn’t hesitate to dig in after hearing his invitation. They were absolutely famished.

Having already been introduced to all of the Champions earlier, Mipha decided to study each of their mannerisms. She tended to do this with any new individuals she met, though as an introvert she found herself rather overwhelmed by the sheer number of large personalities surrounding her now. She nibbled quietly at the raw salmon on her plate as she analyzed the other champions...

Daruk and Urbosa appeared to be hearty eaters, enjoying their specially-prepared Rock Roasts and prime cut steaks respectively. It was almost a competition for them, and Mipha noticed they seemed quite comfortable with each other.

Revali and Impa were light eaters by contrast, preferring dishes of poultry and rice balls over the heartier selections available to them. The two were chatting a bit, and Mipha noticed, based on Revali’s speech patterns and mannerisms, that he seemed to enjoy laying it on a little too thick with just about everyone he spoke to. She found she was not that fond of his personality, though she refrained from passing judgement on him without getting to know him first.

Across from them, Link was quietly enjoying his… well, Mipha actually had no idea. He’d apparently eaten all three plates of food he’d been given before the king even finished speaking. She smiled briefly. Glad to know that his appetite is still intact at the very least.

Next to Link, Princess Zelda ate absentmindedly, and seemed to prefer greens and salads for her meals rather than any form of meat. She didn’t seem to be paying much attention to anyone around her. That is, until the King spoke up again.

“I do have an announcement to make, one that may come as a surprise to some of you…” he said.
Everyone paused immediately. Except for Link, who was in the middle of grabbing a couple of salted meat skewers from the center of the table…

“But as you may have heard in legend... there was a skilled warrior who fought at the side of nearly every princess who opposed the Calamity we may soon face…”

He gestured towards Zelda and Link. “As such… we have decided to adhere to prophecy by assigning our young Captain as Princess Zelda’s appointed knight. I will make the assignment official tomorrow.”

Urbosa, Impa, and Daruk clapped politely. But Revali and Zelda refrained. Mipha heard Muzu grumble something under his breath, but she ignored him and began to clap respectfully herself. Though it went unnoticed by others, Mipha noticed that Zelda’s jaw clenched tightly, as if she were biting her tongue to prevent herself from lashing out. In fact, she almost appeared to be shaking and seething with restrained rage.

Meanwhile, Link sat unmoved next to her.

“Congratulations little guy!” said Daruk.

“Congratulations indeed.” said Impa.

Link looked down the table, and caught sight of Mipha. She nodded cordially at him, and his eyes seemed to widen in joy - before his stoic persona quickly washed over yet again.

Mipha found that she just could not get used to seeing him like this. She wanted nothing more than to run up to him, embrace him, tell the boy she so deeply cared for that he didn’t have to go it alone...

“I have an idea.” said Daruk.

Revali rolled his eyes, but Daruk ignored this. “Why don’t we recreate the ancient ceremony of legend, in honor of our new Champion? It couldn’t hurt. I think his accomplishment is worthy of a heaping mountain of celebration!”

Zelda nearly dropped her fork, but King Rhoam laughed joyfully. “A splendid idea!” he said. He turned to Zelda. “I trust that you will have no problem memorizing the ancient verse?”

“...No father.”

“Excellent! I will arrange to have the sacred grounds cleaned and polished in time for your ceremony.”

Zelda sank deeper and deeper into her seat as the dinner wore on. Soon, the meal was finished and the group found themselves mingling about just outside the dining hall. Zelda and Impa had departed quickly to begin some late-night research into ancient technology they’d recently retrieved from an excavation.

Mipha and Link were standing on opposite sides of the large corridor. Both of them could sense each other’s desire to draw closer, to catch up on their missing years… Yet they found themselves frozen in place, unsure of what to do. Around them, the other Champions mingled with ease, gave Revali some advice for his upcoming archery clinic with the Hylian Guard.

Urbosa suddenly turned her attention to the unassuming red Zora standing near her. “Ah, Lady Mipha, you’re holding your spearmanship lessons tomorrow morning, is that right?” she asked.
Mipha nodded. “That is correct, Lady Urbosa. Six o’clock sharp at the imperial training grounds.”

“I’m looking forward to that!” Daruk chimed in, “I’ll bet there’s some serious power in that little body of yours!” Mipha smiled at the two, nodding gratefully. She found them to be quite friendly, and naturally sincere. It helped to ease her strange nervousness, though she looked down at her feet and returned to her thoughts again. Link continued to stand on the opposite side of the hall, also staring at his feet. He massaged a small note between his thumb and index finger. The Champions around them continued to chatter incessantly...

After a few minutes of silence, Mipha was finally filled with resolve. She was going to go for it. She lifted up her head, and began to quietly march right over to where Link was standing-

“Lady Mipha.”

Revali had stepped in between her and Link.

“I wish to… apologize for my behavior earlier.” he said, bowing in respect. “It was rude of me to assume that I could just call you whatever I pleased…”

Mipha tilted her head. “Ah, well, no harm done Revali.” She placed her hand on her chest. “I am certain you did not intend to be offensive or presumptuous.”

“Indeed. I meant no ill will at all, madam.”

Mipha shook her head. “…’Lady Mipha’ will still do just fine…”

As Link overheard this conversation, he found himself relatively indifferent to Revali’s typical efforts to charm. He was honestly just happy that Mipha was having no trouble making new friends in this foreign place. He decided he’d just give her his note later. He stuck it back in his pocket.

Mipha leaned over and stole a quick glance at Link. A half-smile spread on his face as he nodded in her direction, then began to make his way down the hall where a group of Hylian Guards were summoning him.

Mipha could barely contain the frown that spread on her face. She prepared to excuse herself from her conversation with Revali to catch up with Link, when Revali suddenly placed a hand on her shoulder. Behind them, Mipha heard a loud gasp from Muzu.

“What do you say we get further acquainted?” Revali offered. “There’s an excellent tavern just outside Hyrule Castle that we could-”

“The answer is no!” snapped Muzu, from behind her.

Mipha relaxed. For only the second time ever, she was quite grateful for Muzu’s nature. She shrugged at the now-shocked Rito Champion.

“I apologize Revali.” she said. “It is quite late now, and we are rather tired from our travels. Perhaps next time? We could invite Link and the others…” Revali’s eye twitched slightly as she nodded cordially to him and her fellow Champions.

“It was a pleasure meeting you all. I shall see you first thing in the morning.” She departed with Muzu down the corridor, stopping only to ask a guard for directions to the guest chambers of Hyrule Castle.

Revali stared after them, shook his head-
CRUNCH!

A giant rocky hand slammed into the poor Rito’s back. “Better luck next time, buddy!” said Daruk. “I’ll be more than happy to accompany you though. What do you think Urbosa?”

Urbosa turned, paused for a minute to consider...

“All right, sure. I’m in.” She grinned at Revali. “That is, if you think you can match me drink-for-drink tonight. Featherweight.”

Revali’s competitive nature wouldn’t possibly allow him to decline. He stretched his sore back, crossed his wings across his chest, and grinned.

“You’re on.”

That night, Zelda sat down to write in her diary. It wasn’t something she did often, but she felt it was all the more necessary with the chaos surrounding her life at the moment. She found it easier to lay out her thoughts on paper…

...After meeting with the Champions, I left to research the ancient technology, but nothing of note came of my research. The return of Ganon looms—a dark force taunting us from afar. I must learn all I can about the relics so we can stop him. If the fortune-teller’s prophecy is to be believed, there isn’t much time left... Ah, but turning over these thoughts in my head puts me ill at ease. I suppose I should turn in for the night.

P.S. Tomorrow my father is assigning HIM as my appointed knight...

Zelda finished writing, sighed, closed her diary, and fell asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Outside her room, a mysterious stranger crept through the darkness along the rock wall below. Dressed in makeshift stealth gear, the figure made his way carefully towards the guest chambers of Hyrule Castle. His target: the room of the Zora Princess, Lady Mipha.

It was just after eleven-thirty that night, and well-past Link’s curfew. He ordinarily would not go through such clandestine methods just to meet with someone. But this was Mipha. He knew that with their tight schedule for the next two days, this would be his only chance to see her alone. To meet with her outside the prying eyes of his peers and superiors. Besides, this was fun. He felt like he’d at least earned the right to goof around some - and sneaking around the castle to see Mipha seemed a good excuse to bend the rules just a little bit.

He was making good progress too. As the Captain, he’d memorized the patrol patterns of every guard in the entire castle, and he was closing in on what he knew to be the window of the common room of the chambers that Mipha would be staying in. And he hoped she’d be happy, if not pleasantly surprised, to see him suddenly drop in unannounced…

He climbed up towards the window, and peered inside. The common room was empty. Perfect.

Link slowly opened the windows - the guards never remembered to lock them, something he nagged
them about constantly and crept inside. If his assumptions were correct, she’d be staying inside the master bedroom of the chambers. As he walked through the darkness, he saw a light emanating from below the master bedroom’s door. This was all the proof he needed. Muzu always went to bed early, while Mipha was more of a night owl. Seggin was probably still out and about with his old Zora friends. Which meant…

He knocked on the bedroom door.

"Yes? Is that you Muzu? I’ll be right out.” Mipha.

Link’s heart was pounding. In just a few seconds, he and Mipha would be-

CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP-

Footsteps. Outside of their guest chamber.

KNOCK KNOCK-

“Routine patrol, may we enter?”

Link groaned. He’d totally forgotten about the chamber patrol. Panicking, he felt around his pockets, produced the note he’d written for Mipha long ago. It was the best he could manage…

He quickly slipped the note under the door, quietly made his way to the window, and dove out-

-just as the chamber patrol burst into the common room.

Link plummeted down towards a tall tree below, grabbed a branch, swung around. He looked up behind him.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” he heard Mipha ask.

“Just a regular patrol madam, we - ah, looks like we forgot to lock the window…” The guard stuck his head out, nearly spotting Link sitting in the tree just below him. Seeing nothing amiss, he swung the windows shut and locked them with a loud click.

Link shook his head. Of course they’d suddenly remember to do their jobs correctly at the worst possible time…

Defeated, he climbed down from the tree and began to head back to the Royal Guard barracks, when suddenly the bright glow of a lantern lit up his face.

“You’re getting sloppy, Captain Link.”

Link sighed, straightened up and saluted in respect.

It was General Krant.

Of all the nights for him to be randomly patrolling…

“If I recall…” Krant said, “You’re not scheduled for guard duty this week, Captain. And given that it is several hours past curfew… then I suppose you must have a very good reason for sneaking around out here in the darkness? No? Ah... well then it seems we have an issue…”

General Krant paused to consider his countless options for punishment.
“Ah, I know. Meet me at the training grounds tomorrow morning at four o’clock sharp. I expect no fewer than ten laps around the perimeter of the castle.”

In spite of the relative cruelty of this punishment, Link really liked Krant. He was a fair man, and a great leader. He surely wouldn’t report Link to his direct superiors... but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to ensure that justice was served in this case.

“Champion or not,” Krant said, “there are rules to abide by as an officer of the Royal Guard. I believe this is an adequate punishment for you.”

Link sighed. A run like that would take him several hours to do. It would most certainly overlap with Mipha’s planned spearmanship clinic tomorrow... Or worse - he could possibly miss the whole thing entirely. General Krant seemed to be quite aware of this. “And I suppose,” he said, “if you end up late for your scheduled spearmanship clinic... then so be it.” he grinned slyly. “I guess you’d better run fast.”

It was rare for Mipha to form any sort of dislike for anyone, but Revali was a rare exception. She could get past his self-absorbed nature and gratingly cocky attitude. And his advances were rather easy to turn away.

What she could not get over, however, was his incessant bad-mouthing of Link.

“Well well,” Revali said, “it looks like our main character is absent today. I find that unbecoming of a Champion, wouldn’t you agree, Zelda?” Below them, rows of Royal Guards were practicing their spear form on newly-repaired practice dummies.

Revali had attempted to say this out of her earshot, but Mipha could hear the Rito Champion’s rude words quite clearly. It was raining heavily outside that morning, so the class had moved indoors to one of the training halls. As such, particularly loud voices echoed through the small chamber with distinct clarity...

Zelda did not respond to Revali’s comment on Link’s absence. The two of them had, after all, skipped out on Link’s spearmanship clinic earlier that week. And Daruk didn’t hesitate to remind Revali of this.

“That’s a bit like the flint calling the coal black, isn’t it, Revali?” Daruk said. “Didn’t see you anywhere during Link’s training session before.”

“Well, that was hardly something worth attending.” Revali replied. “Link was merely filling in for our Lady Mipha here. Why sit through a copycat when you can see the real thing?”

Ah, so Link has already trained them after all, Mipha thought, as she heard this. That explains why their form is already quite solid.

“Your form is impeccable.” Mipha said to the guards, loud enough for Revali to hear. “I believe Captain Link has taught you quite well in my absence. Perhaps even better than I could. We may need to cut our training short.” The Zora princess was really quite popular with the guards, and so they each took turns insisting that Mipha was a great teacher, and that they still had so much to learn. After much protest, she was convinced.

“Very well then,” Mipha said. “I shall-”

SLAM.
The doors of the training hall swung open violently as a panting, drenched figure confidently strolled in. He was dressed in an officer’s uniform, soaked to the bone, and carrying a familiar silver spear on his back.

It was Link.

He’d just finished his ten rain-drenched laps around the perimeter of Hyrule Castle - in record time.

And he was grinning.

His eyes met Mipha’s, a brief memory flashed before her eyes. *Link’s rainy-season run. His boyish grin. The innocence of younger days. ‘We….have….not…..been spending much time together…..lately.’*

Mipha returned his grin, briefly, before her own serious persona immediately returned to her.

Link took his place in the row of knights, his grin disappearing quickly as well.

Mipha began to pace the floor in front of them. “...As I was saying… I shall continue with the lessons.” The soldiers cheered.

Mipha stood up straight, planted the end of her trident into the ground. “Has your Captain taught you... how to properly lunge?”

The training continued, as guard after guard ran down the length of the training room floor, stabbed their spear out at the target with one outstretched arm, then spun quickly to their feet. Each of them used the new prototype Royal Guard spears, and Mipha found she quite liked the black aesthetic. As Link lined up to demonstrate the technique to his peers again, Mipha's eyes brightened as she saw the weapon he wielded up-close. Despite the assignment of the prototype spears, he still chose to use the Silverscale Spear she’d gifted to him years ago. She found herself fighting off another grin, as Link lunged down the hall with the weapon. Perfect technique, just as she’d first taught him when he was only a child.

From the viewing area above, the Champions continued to observe the lessons below. They seemed mostly oblivious to the extremely subtle interaction between the young Captain and Zora princess. Except for Revali. He had long known of Link’s extended stays at Zora’s Domain, and of his unique connection to its people. He certainly noticed Link’s spear as well.

And he was quickly putting two and two together.

“Since you seem to think you’ve got it all down pat, perhaps you’d like to have go… against me.” Revali glared at Link with a wide grin plastered across his face.

Link nodded in acceptance, and Revali continued.

“Excellent! Then I shall assemble the target immediately.”

It was late in the afternoon, and Revali had just wrapped up his indoor archery clinic. All four other champions had stayed to observe, along with Princess Zelda. Link had remained long, long after his peers had departed, getting a bit of extra practice in to hone his skills. Not to be outdone, Revali had also stayed to get in some practice of his own. Not that he needed it.

After setting up the target, which swung back and forth in the distance like a pendulum, Revali flew
back to Link. “I shall explain the rules.” he said. “The winner will be whoever has the most arrows in the bullseye by the end of our contest. We each will receive ten arrows apiece. It’s really quite simple. Any questions? Oh that’s right, you don’t talk. Let’s get started.”

The Champions all moved down from the viewing area to get a closer look. They stared intently as Link and Revali took turns nailing the bullseye of the distant target. As expected, Revali wasn’t missing a single shot.

But surprisingly, neither was Link.

Revali grew irritated. Link was a mediocre archer at best - at least according to his skills from before the start of his clinic. Yet here he was, seemingly replicating Revali’s own technique with relative ease. He dared to wonder if he’d underestimated him, but quickly shook the thought from his brain.

The Champions continued to keep their eyes glued to the contest at-hand, their expectation of Revali’s most certain victory gave way to the possibility that Link might actually pull this one out…

Finally, the pair came to their last arrows. Link went first, letting his shot fly towards the distant target…

…and nailing it dead-center of the bullseye. All of the Champions - Zelda included - found themselves cheering involuntarily at Link’s success. Mipha also cheered a bit too loud, in spite of herself. Revali scoffed at their reaction and grinned to himself. He closed his eyes, turned his head, and let his final arrow fly.

His arrow also hit dead-center, splitting Link’s arrow right in half. It fell to the ground in pieces.

Game over.

Revali didn’t even glance at the target. “Looks like I win.” he said, gloating. “You know the rules…”

Link nodded, walked up to Revali. He shook his hand politely, then began to clean up his station.

“Better luck next time Link. Perhaps some day, when you’re half as skilled as me, you’ll find victory.”

“Winning… is overrated,” Link said abruptly.

Revali scowled. Daruk grinned. Mipha’s face lit up, though she immediately regained her composure. Zelda’s eyes widened in shock.

And Link continued. “How can you expect to get any better... if you’re always victorious?” He smiled, turned, and left the room, tilting his head at Mipha respectfully on his way out. “Lady.” He opened the training room door and shut it quietly behind him.

Mipha smiled widely in her heart. This was classic Link...

Revali seemed taken aback. This was the first time he’d actually heard Link speak. Ever.

“I… well, it… hardly matters.” He turned to face Mipha. “When you’re unmatched in skill like me, you’re always ahead of the curve anyway.”

The other Champions slowly departed, but Revali suddenly blocked off Mipha’s exit. “Lady Mipha… perhaps you’d be interested in staying for some extra lessons? I’m certain you could learn a
thing or two…”

Despite his cockiness, Mipha knew that Revali had no real sinister intent with his offer. She decided to be polite. “Very well, Revali. Let’s give it a go.”

His face lit up with joy at her acceptance. He hadn’t expected that...

Revali started his lesson by demonstrating his own technique with his bow. “This...is the Great Eagle Bow. It takes a great deal of strength to draw it, though I can now do so with relative ease. I’d like to see that silly Hylian captain wield a bow of this caliber…”

Mipha’s eyes narrowed slightly.

If all Revali was going to do here was cut Link down in front of her... then he was simply wasting her time.

“Anyway,” Revali said, “Let’s see your form with the bow.”

Mipha shrugged, picked up her bow, and held it in front of her - with the string facing forward.

Revali stared for a minute, then shook his head in disbelief. “No, no…” he said. “Turn it around the other way.” Mipha did as she was told.

“Oh, okay, now grab an arrow, nock it right here.” he pointed to the notch at the end of her bow. Mipha reached down and picked up an arrow out of the bin nearby. She swung the arrow at the notch, “knocking” it gently with its shaft, then dropped the arrow.

She looked up at Revali. “I knocked it.”

Revali took a deep breath, rubbed his eyebrows with his fingers.

“…okay… I can see we have a ways to go here.” He posed with his bow, nocked an arrow. “Do precisely as I do.” He pulled the arrow back on his string, let it fly. Bullseye.

He faced Mipha, gave her a thumbs-up, winked. “Perfect shot.”

Mipha slowly recreated Revali’s movements, drew the arrow back, and struck the ceiling.

She faced Revali, gave him a thumbs-up, winked. “Perfect shot.”

Revali paused and stared, then walked towards the wall behind them. “Please excuse me a minute.” He fought off his frustration, his profound confusion.

Either I’m missing something here… he thought, or she’s truly this much of an airhead-

SHUNK. SHUNK. SHUNK. SHUNK. SHUNK. SHUNK.

Revali turned around. Mipha was nailing the target’s bullseye with arrow after arrow after arrow - and with nearly flawless form. She nodded gracefully, tilted her head at Revali. “I think I got it. Thank you for your time.” She mounted the bow on the wall and calmly exited the room.

The Rito Champion just stood there for a while, awestruck. He wasn’t sure whether to be angry… or impressed.

Mipha headed back to the guest chambers to check in with Muzu, musing about Revali’s presumptuous attitude about her archery skills. She had, after all, been trained with the bow by the
Demon Sergeant Seggin himself. One of the greatest archers who ever lived.

The next morning, the Champions gathered in one of the castle chambers for a divine beast presentation lead by Impa and Purah of the Sheikah tribe. The pair had unlocked functionality in a mysterious tablet they’d discovered - the Sheikah Slate - which had provided them with schematics of each of the divine beasts. This knowledge had allowed them to recreate the controls for each beast as a physical simulation for training purposes. The simulated controls they developed were synced with the slate, and could control a virtual version of each divine beast within the slate itself. This allowed the two Sheikah tribe to easily monitor the progress of each champion's familiarity with the controls using this equipment.

Link and Zelda sat in on the meeting, though the princess was incredibly cold to her newly-assigned personal knight. It wasn’t that she hated him. Not at all. But she found herself resenting his success. Resenting the fact that her father found it necessary for her to have protection at all - especially from this silent, unreadable, incorruptible young Captain…

“Our intent,” said Impa, “Is to streamline the process of getting accustomed to your divine beast.”

“And I’m pretty sure we ~ nailed it!” said Purah. “I mean, even Impa here found it easy to master the controls. It’s gotta be easy!” Impa didn’t react to Purah’s teasing, instead, turning to demonstrate the control arrangement for Vah Rudania, the lizard-like divine beast that was assigned to the gorons.

“Each leg can be controlled separately, or in-sync.” Impa explained. "There is also an auto-walking mode, but you will want to ensure that you set the boundaries properly using this dial…”

Impa completed her walkthrough, then summoned Daruk up to try it out first. He struggled quite a bit with the controls, but eventually got the technique down.

Revali and Urbosa were up next, and they easily understood the controls. This didn’t surprise Zelda much at all.

But what did surprise Zelda… was how quickly Mipha seemed to master them.

“I’m sort of shocked that it’s come so easy to her.” Zelda muttered. “She seemed a bit... fragile, to be honest.”

Link accidentally rolled his eyes. 'Fragile' was the last word he would use to describe the Zora princess…

“You got it, Mipha!” shouted Purah. “Pretty easy. Though we shouldn’t be surprised, after all the time you spent studying Vah Ruta with us!” Link found himself feeling incredibly proud of Mipha, as she returned to her seat. He slipped her a grin as she sat down, and she discreetly returned the favor.

“And that… is a wrap!” Purah said, with a thumbs-up. “Thank you all for joining us today, I’m glad we were able to sneak in a brief little primer here, while you were all still in the same place.”

Impa nodded. “As you all depart from the castle tonight, please begin preparations for our imminent arrival at your divine beasts. We will start hands-on training with each of you in the coming weeks. Princess Zelda and Captain Link will be on-hand to help with oversight.”

“It’s been a ~pleasure !” Purah said. “See you soon!”

And that was it. The Champions all departed from the room, one after another. But Revali and Zelda
remained in the room, long after it had emptied. “Well, Princess Zelda,” Revali said, "are you ready for our little spectacle this afternoon?”

Zelda grinned bitterly. “As unnecessary as I feel it will be… it will do my father some good to see us doing our best to follow in the footsteps of our predecessors.” She shrugged. “Nevertheless, it is my intention that this would be a rather… subdued ceremony.”

"Hero of Hyrule, chosen by the sword that seals the darkness…you have shown unflinching bravery and skill in the face of darkness and adversity. And have proven yourself worthy of the blessings of the Goddess Hylia…”

The Champions stood around the perimeter of the Sacred Grounds, as Princess Zelda recited the ancient verse that told the tale of generations of Hylian heroes. Link knelt in front of her, eyes closed for the ritual. He had finally been given the Champion’s tunic, which he now wore in place of his old Captain’s uniform. He found that the tunic didn’t really suit him, however.

Mipha had also finally been given her own blue Champion scarf. She wore it on her shoulder, draping it across her body like a robe as she stood alongside her fellow Champions.

"Whether skyward bound, adrift in time, or steeped in the glowing embers of twilight, the sacred blade is forever bound to the soul of the Hero. We pray for your protection… And we hope that… that the two of you will grow stronger together as one.” She paused briefly and took a deep breath, before continuing.

Link noted the detached, sad tone of Zelda’s voice as she recited the verse.

She’s making it sound like we already lost… he thought.

“She’s making it sound like we already lost.” said Daruk, a little bit too loudly.

SNRRRRKKKKK-

Link barely suppressed a laugh, and was thankful that Zelda seemed to ignore his loud snort…

“Wasn’t this your idea?” scoffed Rivali. Mipha glanced at the Rito out of the corner of her eye.

He continued. “You’re the one who wanted to designate the appointed knight with all the ceremonial pomp, grandeur, and nonsense we could muster!”

Mipha rolled her eyes at Revali as he said this, focused her attention back on Link. She felt incredibly proud for him, and she was not about to let some arrogant Rito spoil this precious moment for her...

“And if you ask me,” Revali said, “the whole thing does seem to be overkill. I think I’m on the same page as the princess regarding… this boy.”

“Oh, give it a rest.” said Urbosa. “That boy is a living reminder of her own failures. Well… at least that’s how the princess sees him.” They all shrugged, and before long the ceremony had abruptly ended.

The Champions picked up their gear and began to depart one after another, saying their goodbyes as they did. Zelda took a picture of the site using the Sheikah Slate's camera, then walked briskly to a
waiting carriage nearby…And finally, after all this time, Link and Mipha found themselves with a moment alone.

...Or so they thought. Muzu and Seggin suddenly approached them from nearby, ready to accompany Mipha on the two-week long trek back to Zora’s Domain.

They looked at each other, laughed, and cordially shook each other’s hands… then Mipha suddenly pulled Link into a brief hug. It was warm, powerful, loving. Even in its brevity. They pulled away, nodded at each other, and went their separate ways as well.

When they’d traveled far enough away, Mipha allowed herself some time to reflect on the note that Link had snuck into her room a couple of nights ago:

‘You never did answer my question about how your healing powers improved so quickly,’ the note had said.

Sitting in the carriage with Zelda as they made their way back to Hyrule Castle, Link unfolded the small note that Mipha had slipped into his hand as they shook just moments ago. He carefully read the note...and quickly turned his face away from Zelda. Barely hiding the enormous grin that spread uncontrollably on his face. Barely restraining the tears that threatened to spill forth as he replayed the words over and over in his mind:

Oh, it is quite simple really.

All I had to do was think of you.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry for the delay. I had less time to write today than I thought, but managed to cram out 90% of this in the afternoon. As such, I apologize for any typos or crappy writing. I'll be revising and editing in the coming days, but it's nice to have this out here anyway.

Next is Chapter 12: In Return
In Return

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Link awoke from his remarkably lucid dream, out-of-breath and panting.

His head… didn’t feel as bad as he had expected it to.

His heart… felt about as bad as he expected it to.

He was sitting in waist-deep water under the small walkway at the sacred grounds. It was still just after four in the morning, and he’d apparently only been out for a few minutes. This surprised him.

What didn’t surprise him, however, was the same menacing sounds of those hostile guardians pacing to-and-fro above him...

Link shrugged. At the very least, he’d gotten what he came here for. Quite a bit more than what he came for, in fact. As he wiped the tears from his eyes, he pulled out his Sheikah Slate and turned it on. He knew precisely where he needed to go next. It was finally time to return to-

Wait.

What is this. He stared at the screen of the Sheikah Slate.

‘Enter Passcode’ it said. Link stared some more.

...

What. How? How did this happen?

...

WHY DID THIS HAPPEN.

Link thought for a minute, frantically tried a random set of numbers. Nothing.

He tried Zelda’s full name. Nothing.

He tried the names of places around Hyrule Castle, the names of people. He tried his own name. Nothing, nothing, nothing…

And then some words flashed on the screen. Finally...

‘Your Sheikah Slate is disabled. Please see a technician for’

Link SLAMMED the slate against the wall, nearly drawing the attention of a searching guardian above. He clenched his jaw. Guess I'm doing this the hard way...

He reached into his rucksack, searching for something expendable to throw as a distraction for the guardians.

Apples? No... Ore? Maybe... Steak? Absolutely not!

He looked down.
Sheikah Slate? **Definitely**. He chuckled to himself.

He felt around in his bag some more. Surely there was *something* in there he could-

*Ah-hah!* He pulled out that odd treasure he had ‘procured’ from the raided Bokoblin camp under the Dueling Peaks. It was just some random piece of carved wood anyway, but at least he could probably throw it pretty far…

Reluctantly, he slipped the currently-useless Sheikah Slate on his hip again, crawled to the edge of the small moat he was in, slowly poked his head up. The guardians were still marching about, still scanning… but hadn’t noticed him yet. He took a deep breath, yelled loudly, then threw the hunk of polished wood as far away as he could in the opposite direction. Immediately, the guardian stalkers locked onto this new movement and began chasing it down. As soon as the three guardians had passed him, Link jumped up and out of the moat and began his wild sprint in what he *hoped* was the direction of the central Sheikah tower of Hyrule Field.

...But the sound of marching guardians wasn’t slowly fading away like it should have been. In fact, it almost seemed like it was getting *louder*-

**CRACK!**

Something collided with the back of Link’s head, knocking him to the ground. He scrambled to his feet in a battle-ready pose, glanced around, then spotted what hit him:

It was the piece of wood, lying on the ground next to him, just waiting to be picked up again.

*What...? How did it...?*

*Oh.* Only then did Link recognize what it was. He groaned loudly to himself.

He’d thrown a *boomerang.*

He looked up in time to dodge a laser blast from one of the three guardians, now hot on his trail. At this point, he didn’t know or care what direction he was running anymore. He just needed to get away from these things before they vaporized him like that poor tree earlier.

Hearing *all three* pursuing guardians charging their lasers at the same time, he counted down in his head… waited… then dove to the ground as supercharged plasma flashed through the air just above his head, turning the entire field of grass in front of him into a roaring inferno. Link picked himself up and decided to take his chances with sprinting *through* this crazy firestorm. Perhaps it would mess with the targeting systems for each of the stalkers...

He ran through the flames, ignoring the intense heat that seared the bare flesh of his torso. As he did so, he noticed his cape billowing up above him from the rising air current, caused by the burning field. Instinctively, he pulled out his glider, unfolded it quickly, and held it above his head. The updraft instantly lifted the glider, sending Link skyward, higher and higher and away from the chasing guardians. One last missed laser blast, and he found himself finally, *mercifully* out of range of the guardian’s laser targeting systems.

*One of these days...* he thought as he flew away, *I’m going to tear apart one of these stupid things limb from limb...*  

A minute later, Link landed, checked his person. *Still alive, still breathing...* He examined his surroundings, smiled and laughed.
Once again, he was utterly lost.

And once again, he was really rather pleased about it.

The pleasant feeling was gone.

It had been bad enough having to fight endless waves of skeletal bokoblins way back at the plateau before. But now… he was dealing with skeletal versions of strange creatures whose fleshly forms he hadn’t even seen yet.

And they were enormous. They absolutely towered over him. Their skulls were elongated into large snouts, a long horn protruded from their foreheads. The weapons they wielded were as big as Link himself, and they hunched over menacingly as they each took turns swiping at the exhausted Hylian.

Link managed to destroy a few of these with his spear, having to destroy their skulls to do so just as he had with the undead bokoblins. But they just wouldn’t stop coming. And with at least a couple of hours left before the sun rose and stopped the waves from spawning, Link decided that he’d much rather just flee than fight.

So he did. He began to sprint away, aimlessly, hoping to find some cover somewhere - so he could simply rest and prepare for his long travels likely ahead. Link still had absolutely no idea where he was, though he could see a glowing red and purple speck far southwest that was probably Hyrule Castle. After some running, he decided to check behind him to see if he’d managed to outrun those enormous skeletons.

Nope.

In fact, there were now roughly thirty of these things relentlessly giving chase.

As he ran, he spotted a natural stone bridge spanning a wide river up ahead. Link decided that if he could at least make it to the center of the narrow bridge, perhaps he could turn around and fight two or three of these things at a time, instead of all at once. He arrived at the bridge and began to sprint across-

–when a fireball flew straight towards his head from in front of him. Link rolled to his left instinctively, peering through the darkness to see what had tried to hit him. He recognized the creatures instantly.

Moblins.

So this was what those skeletal beasts used to be. He’d run into an entire encampment of them, and they were now shooting an endless volley of fire arrows at him. Surrounded on either side by moblins - both dead and undead - Link made a quick decision and dove off the extremely tall bridge to the river below. He was struck by several arrows on the way down, but the cool water extinguished the flames immediately. He glanced back up at the bridge as the current of water quickly pulled him downriver.

But these things were relentless. The army of moblins were all still drawing back their bows, ready to send another hail of fire arrows at Link. He dove to the bottom of the river, using the water as a natural shield, and continued to swim downstream. I’ll only last about ten seconds down here, he mused, bitterly.

It was enough. As his head breached the surface, he looked back and sighed. He was safe for now, though at this point he wouldn’t even dare to swim ashore. Not when it was still this dark out, and
when these things could still spawn up from the ground for yet another pursuit. A small log drifted gently through the water nearby, and Link latched onto it to use it as a flotation device. He laid his head down as he floated, tried to get a bit of rest as he did.

He floated this way for a couple of hours, his random thoughts drifting in and out. But he focused on staying awake as long as he could, at the risk of falling asleep and drowning in the cold waters below…

Finally, fortunately, the sun began to rise, giving way to the embrace of the sun’s warm light and the promise of safety. As his surroundings were illuminated, Link saw that he was floating near a large man-made bridge of stone. The log he floated on eventually washed up to the shoreline, and he slowly, painfully, clawed his way up the bank. An enormous coliseum rose up in the distance.

Won’t be heading there anytime soon...

He found his way to a main road, limping all the way; but he was surprised at how little pain he felt. Surely the freezing cold river helped to numb the pain a bit... but unfortunately, it had also brought his body temperature down to dangerously low levels. The rising sun actually did very little to prevent him from shivering violently, as he continued along this path.

Soon, he spotted the welcoming sight of a giant wooden horse head peeking out at him from around a hill. A horse stable.

He made his way there and sat down next to the stable’s community fire, utterly exhausted. As he examined his sore body, he saw that three arrows had struck him before: one in his thigh, one in his shoulder, and one in his arm. Yet again… it’s a good thing I’m ambidextrous, he laughed tiredly to himself.

Link began to treat his own wounds, and knew he’d have to start by removing these arrows from his body first. He wondered if he’d been struck by arrows at some point in the past, because he suddenly realized that he shouldn’t simply yank them out of his body. This carried the risk of leaving the arrowhead behind, and causing even more damage. So he focused on the arrows lodged in his limbs first. They had both passed clean through, so he’d have to break the ends off and then pull them the rest of the way out from the head.

Fun.

The arrow in his leg actually came out quite smoothly, and he was grateful that the fire arrows seemed to have cauterized the wound instantly upon impact. This of course didn’t stop him from bleeding profusely now. Still, he also wondered if the Great Fairy’s blessing had somehow mitigated the damage to his body. His wounds really should have been a lot worse than they were. He’d have to thank her later...

Meanwhile, a pair of travelers were already seated by the community fire when he arrived. They paused mid-conversation and stared intently at the shirtless, hooded, wounded traveler in front of them for a bit, before continuing their conversation.

“So anyway. The tin can’s lid basically sliced my finger open,” the first traveler said. “It was the most painful thing I’ve ever experienced in my life...”

“Aww, that’s rough!” said the other. “I can’t even imagine how much that would have hurt! I don’t think I could have handled it!”

Link turned his attention to the arrow in his forearm. He gripped it tightly with his right hand and
snapped the tail off, suppressing a grunt as he did.

“What’s the worst injury you’ve ever experienced?” asked the first.

“Hmmm… I’ll have to think about that.” replied the second. “But I did skin my knee when I was really young once, and that was pretty awful.”

Link grabbed the remaining half of the arrow by its tip, braced himself, and slid it out as quickly as possible. It briefly snagged on the way out, causing him to quietly shout in pain as a spurt of blood shot straight out of his-

“Do you MIND?!” the first stranger suddenly yelled. “We are having a conversation over here! Your weird grunts are distracting!”

“Sorry about that…” Link said calmly. He slowly stood up, tossed the bloody arrow into the fire, and began to limp away. “I’ll just go die over there then…”

“Thanks!” They resumed their conversation, as Link made his way over to where another cluster of travelers sat eating their breakfast. There were four of them there, and they all waved politely. He limped over to their fire and flopped on the ground, still shivering from his trip downriver. He pulled his Sheikah stealth top from his bag, tearing some cloth from the arms to use as crude bandages for his leg and arm. At this point, he no longer had the energy to even move around anymore. Barely had the energy to even sit up on the ground. So he just stared at the fire for a while…

He drifted in, then out… then snapped awake. He absentmindedly pulled out his Sheikah Slate, tried a few more passwords, locked it out again. This puzzled him. He didn't remember setting a password...maybe in his sleep? He wasn't sure.

He found himself too tired to even reflect on his extended flashback from a few hours ago. His wounds throbbed, his chest hurt, but he was too wired to actually fall asleep.

And too broke to afford a bed at the stable inn.

He peered in his bag, and smiled. The note was still in there, sealed safely in the waterproof bag he’d put it in. The presence of this note seemed to calm him, especially knowing the words they had conveyed to him… and right there, sitting by the fire, he finally passed out.

"From here, we'll make our way to Goron City." Zelda said. "Then, we'll need some adjustment on that Divine Beast so Daruk can manage it as easily as possible."

It had been two weeks since their ceremony. The pair was walking down a road through a small clearing of trees, on their way back from the Tabantha region - home of Revali and the Rito tribe - to meet with Daruk to check his progress. Zelda was dressed in her own version of the Champion's tunic, blue shirt with gold accents. The shirt's stomach and chest were textured white, and she wore black tights with knee-high boots. She seemed to be in quite a hurry to get to their next destination, and Link found himself wanting to suggest they ride horses or hire a carriage to get them there faster. But her inexperience with horses, combined with her insistence on relying on her own two feet for their mission, made this an extended speed-walking marathon for the both of them. Not that Link particularly minded all that much. He quite enjoyed the exercise.

The princess was weaponless, and oblivious to her surroundings. As usual. She stared at her Sheikah Slate as she walked, picking up readings from each of the Divine Beasts. She seemed almost exuberant, excited, free, now that she was outside the confines of Hyrule Castle - and outside of her stifling duties as the princess of Hyrule.
"He's figured out how to get it to move..." she said of Daruk, "However, it's apparent that we still have much more to learn."

Link walked a few feet behind her, only somewhat paying attention to what Zelda was saying. His eyes scanned the road, ever-aware of any potential dangers they might face, any potential threats to Zelda's life. This was, after all, the first time the princess had explored anywhere outside of Hyrule Castle without the full entourage of Royal Guards that usually accompanied her.

Now, she had only Link. And he wasn’t about to let her be harmed under his assigned watch...

"But to think," Zelda continued, musing to herself, "that Divine Beast was actually built by people..." She continued her brisk pace, as if she were trying to out-walk Link. "That means we should be able to understand how it works and how to use it to our advantage."

"These Divine Beasts... so much we don't know... But if we want to turn back Calamity Ganon, they're our best hope." Her brisk pace slowed suddenly, and then she stopped walking entirely. A somber, sullen look grew on her face as she slowly turned her head sideways to look at Link out of the corner of her eye. Link realized she couldn't even be bothered to look at him directly...

"Tell me the truth." She said, still refusing to make eye contact, "How proficient are you right now, wielding that sword on your back?" She paused for a second, then continued.

"Legend says that an ancient voice resonates inside it. Can you hear it yet... hero?"

The word ‘hero’ was like a poison from her lips. Link could feel the resentment, the weight of indignation echoed through her tone.

Of course he'd heard the voice inside the sword. Fi, the sword’s spirit, had spoken to him the moment he tried and succeeded in pulling the sword from its pedestal. Even now, he could sense Fi's presence, could feel her intense joy at being useful to the master again.

But with Zelda’s present attitude, with her vexing exasperation, he was inclined to not give her a proper answer.

His silence remained. She shrugged, turned, and continued on her way...

Delirious, Link snapped awake again. He’d been caught in the dream for just a few minutes, but all of the travelers at the fire had already left as the morning sun continued to climb its way through the clear skies. He shook his head, reached for his bag, grabbed a piece of meat and began to slowly chew through it. He was so tired that he could barely move his arms, could barely move his jaw...

But neither trauma, nor injury, nor exhaustion, was ever going to stop him from satiating his demanding appetite.

He finished eating, swallowed, and reached over to toss another log into the fire. And as the flame’s image grew and danced and spun and flailed across the crespice of his eyes, he zoned out once again...

It had been one week since their trip to see Daruk and Vah Rudania. Impa and Purah had met Link and Zelda in Goron City, and they watched as Daruk slowly and steadily got the hang of the Divine Beast’s controls. Link was quite happy for Daruk, but Zelda seemed just mildly satisfied as she immediately turned her attention to their next stop: Vah Naboris, and the Lady Urbosa.
After their weeks-long trek to Death Mountain, the home of the Gorons, Zelda was finally convinced that they needed a more efficient method of transport. So they stopped by Hyrule Castle on their way to Gerudo Desert to borrow some steeds from the Royal stables.

Link’s personal horse, Epona, had been assigned to him by the Royal Guard upon his induction two years ago. Unfortunately, she was still recovering from a training incident so she was not in any condition to be ridden by Link during his current travels. So instead, he borrowed Lieutenant Relk’s own horse, Onyx. She was a gorgeous steed, brown in color with a black mane.

Zelda chose a solid white horse, part of a special breed reserved only for use by the Royal Family. After fumbling about for some time, she at least got the basics of riding down. And so they were off on the road to Gerudo town.

Like a child in a toy store, Zelda would positively freak out every time she came across one of the mysterious shrines that erupted from the ground. These ancient Sheikah constructs sprouted out from the dirt with relative frequency across the land of Hyrule - another hint to the possible return of Calamity Ganon. Every time she’d spot one of these mysterious buildings, she would tell Link to stay behind and set up camp while she ran ahead to investigate. And every single time, Link would follow her - only to get chided by her for not obeying commands. He was a bit irritated that she would nag him for doing his job, but he tried to remain as non-intrusive as possible as he hovered around to ensure her safety. But she continued to hint that Link shouldn’t even bother, that he should leave her alone with her work.

Now, Zelda stood alone in front of yet another shrine, tapping her Sheikah Slate on its pedestal in a fruitless effort to get it to open...

"Nothing. Just as I thought." She looked up towards the shrine. "Hmm... It appears that this structure was designed to be exclusively accessed by the sword's chosen one."

She found herself growing irritated at this notion. She looked back down at the pedestal. "...But designs can always be worked around, at least I hope. How do I get inside...? I need to activate it somehow." Zelda resented that fact that everything seemed to revolve around the chosen hero. Why him?

Surely she could circumvent his necessity, at least in this one instance.

The sound of a horse's gallop echoed behind her, growing louder and louder. She turned to see the source, but she already knew who it was. An irritated scowl grew on her face.

As Link arrived, he stopped next to Zelda's horse, leaping to the ground before jogging over to where the princess stood, glaring. She had ridden to this shrine early that morning, abandoning Link at their campsite about an hour’s ride away. She’d told him the night before that she was perfectly fine on her own, and that he should return to Hyrule Castle immediately. Regardless of the King’s orders.

So much for that.

"I thought I made it clear that I am not in need of an escort." She said with indignation. She placed her hands on her hips, stuck her nose into the air. "It seems I'm the only one with a mind of my own.” She gestured at herself. “I, the person in question, am fine, regardless of the king's orders." She began to walk past Link, her fists curled at her sides.

"Return to the castle. And tell that to my father, please."
Link stared for a minute, then he followed after her, matching her pace. He knew this move would irritate her but he really could not be bothered to care at this point. As he prepared to say something to her, hoping to calm her down, she spun around suddenly, narrowed her eyes in a glare.

"And stop following me!" she yelled. She stared at him, angrily, for about ten seconds. Then she clumsily mounted her horse and rode away into the distance...

Link snapped awake again, and rolled his eyes at the memory. *Hope I was getting paid well enough to deal with all that,* he laughed-

“It’s the naked chef!”

A woman’s voice from nearby. He glanced over, peered his eyes, then flashed a tired grin once he recognized the source.

Her name was Asha. She was a middle-aged woman, short and stocky, very kind. Link had first met her at the Dueling Peaks stable several days before, as she had been part of the great feast that Link and several others had carefully prepared for the stable's many guests.

Link sat himself up off the ground. He’d apparently collapsed during that last dream. The sun’s high position indicated that he’d slept a bit longer this time, at least until noon. He reached up and shook Asha’s hand.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again,” he said to her, nodding. “Though, I’m a bit surprised you remember me…”

“How could I not?!” She asked. She sat down next to him. “You single-handedly made my entire week! I’d been subsisting off of acorns and charred steak for months before you came along! I still can’t get over how delicious your peppered crab was!” She winked.

“Besides, a shirtless young man is a nice bit of eye candy for a weary traveler - especially when he’s cooking for you!”

Link laughed, painfully. “Well, I’m glad I could provide *some* form of entertainment at any rate. So...

what can I do for you now?”

Asha shrugged. “Actually, *I* should be the one asking you. I saw you just laying there on the ground. And I thought I’d point something out to save you some embarrassment…” She gestured at Link’s shoulder.

“It looks like your arrow is showing.”

Link laughed again, glanced at his shoulder himself. “Ah, so it is. How mortifying.”

“Would you like some help with that?” Asha asked. “I doubt you’re going to be digging that arrowhead out yourself anytime soon.”

Link shrugged. “I don’t want to trouble you-”

“No trouble at all!” she shook her head. “I *insist* you let me operate! I may not be much of a cook, but I’m a decent medic.” She pulled some small medical instruments from her bag, along with a bottle of some rice liquor. She handed it to Link. “Check it out.”

Link looked over the bottle. “To sterilize the wound?” He asked.
“No. For the pain.”

“...Ah.”

“Have as much as you like. You’ll need it.”

Link smiled in gratitude. “I’m the last person you should say something like that to.” He uncorked the bottle and chugged the whole thing in a few short gulps.

The alcohol immediately began to work its magic. Link glanced up at the stranger, laid down on his stomach, and grinned. “Let’s do this.”

It was a messy, painful operation. But Link gritted his teeth and bore with it. He even pulled one of his belts out of his bag and stuck it in his mouth to keep his teeth from grinding together. After some digging around in his shoulder, she was finally able to remove the arrow. It left a jagged scar behind, but he didn’t mind so much.

*Scars make me look tough...*

“So, I think you probably know what’s coming next...” Asha said, as she put the finishing touches on some stitches for the wound.

Link knew. “You probably want to know how I got into this mess, right?” he asked.

“Precisely.”

He looked up at the sun, shrugged. He wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon anyway. So he gave her a brief synopsis of his experience. He’d done the same thing enough times and to enough people, that he actually had the whole thing down to about two minutes, three tops.

“...And so, here we are now. I’m lost in the middle of nowhere, no money, no way to travel... no way to get to Zora’s Domain.”

He paused, grinned. “But that’s enough of my sob story! It could be far worse. Why don’t you tell me about your-”

“Have you thought about renting a horse?” Asha interrupted, as she tried a few more passwords in Link’s Sheikah Slate.

Link tilted his head. “Wait, you can do that?”

“Yup.” She reached into her pocket, producing two red rupees to cover the fee. “Here you go, this should cover it.”

Link shook his head. “I absolutely cannot accept that. At least let me-”

She forced the rupees into Link’s hand and shook her head. “You are really too kind, and what you’re doing is far more important than what I could ever hope to accomplish. Please, take it...” She paused in thought for a minute, then smiled.

“All I ask, is that you give Ganon a good smack for my sake!”

Link grinned widely, and shook her hand. “It will be my pleasure.”

He said his goodbyes to Asha, and limped over to speak with the stable operators. After proving his membership with the identification card he’d received at Dueling Peaks, he found himself heading
eastward on a new spotted white and blue steed - *Cloud* - who galloped happily down the dirt road. The stable owners had even thrown in a map of the country for good measure. According to the map, he’d apparently floated down somewhere far, far west of the Great Plateau. Zora’s domain was at least a week’s ride northeast along the main road.

But he hardly cared. He’d already made up his mind.

It was finally time to return home.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a short recovery chapter by all accounts. For myself, and for Link. Hope you enjoy. Next is Chapter 13: On the Threshold.
Link traveled across the plains of Hyrule for several days. He was making excellent time, although
his rented steed, Cloud, was still nowhere near as fast as Inferno was. Still, she had a very gentle
disposition, and she dutifully galloped along the faded pathways with relative calm and peace. This
was good. With the hypnotizing rhythm of gentle hoof-steps easing him into a meditative state, Link
finally found himself with ample time to analyze the recovered memories of his past.

As always, he had far more questions than answers.

He wondered if any of his other old friends in Zora’s Domain were still around. He wondered if
they’d even remember him. He thought of the Champions and the bond they seemed to have shared,
found himself wanting to know more about each one of them - even Revali.

And most of all, he wondered if the person most dear to him was even still alive. He missed Mipha
terribly. He longed to return to her. And after poring over memory after memory of better days, Link
was well-beyond determined to assist the Zora people with whatever troubles they currently found
themselves in.

His eastward travels remained relatively uneventful, aside from another comically unremarkable
encounter with a Yiga Clan member. Still, he had his good days as well as his bad. His resolve was
strengthened by the joy he felt in returning to the place he once called home. Yet this joy was
undermined by the undercurrent of fear, and of worry, and of sincere longing. He decided he would
have to simply prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

But like all great platitudes, this was far easier to say than it was to do.

His brain was a tug of war between optimistic hope and pessimistic doubt. His heart was being split
in two. And the intensity of this only increased as he drew nearer and nearer to his destination. Storm
clouds grew and billowed in the distance, as if foreshadowing the ominous future he’d soon face.

After returning Cloud to the Wetlands Stable - just west of Zora’s Domain according to his map -
Link made his way towards the tower he’d seen during his first excursion in the area. There was a
conspicuous absence of Lizalfos at the massive river-top fortress where he had first met Sidon. A
handful of stragglers were present, but these were dispatched with ease. He also encountered very
little resistance as he made his way towards and up the mountain ahead. And in no time he’d scaled
the looming tower there and activated it with the Sheikah Slate. He was grateful that this
functionality of the slate at least still worked. Even in its locked-out state. This was a rather curious
find.

But even more curious, was the rather quirky Zora male he encountered at the top...

“WOW! I cannot believe it!” the blue Zora said, holding his hands up in shock. He shook his head,
regained his composure. “…Excuse me! Yes, You! I am Gruve of the Zora!”

Link pulled back his hood and shook Gruve’s hand. “Well, I… am Link. Of the Hylians! I guess.”

Gruve nodded in recognition. “It is apparent that you are a Hylian, but I thank you for specifying!
It’s also apparent that you are a traveler. But may I ask what brought you here?”

Link chuckled. “I could ask you the same thing!”
“Hmmm, how astute of you!” replied Gruve. “An excellent query indeed! I, by order of Prince Sidon of Zora’s Domain, am searching for a Hylian. Or I was… but then I fell asleep. I awoke to a loud noise and awful quaking, and now here I am.”

Link glanced down at the ground far, far below. The tower itself was already quite tall, but it was also situated atop the foothills of the mountains surrounding the domain. This made the surrounding countryside - as well as the nearby river - appear even farther down and out of reach. He figured Gruve was probably stuck up here. And based on Link’s memories, he knew that the Zora were not particularly good climbers.

But this situation raised an even more important question…

“Are you telling me… that you’ve been stuck up here, without food or water, for nearly two weeks now?” Link asked.

“That is correct!” Gruve said. “We Zora can actually go quite some time without eating, although I must certainly admit that I am rather famished! I would like nothing more than to get down and be on my way… but I’m simply too high up!” He gestured at a bridge spanning the large river below. “Prince Sidon used to patrol that bridge below, but he went back up the river to Zora’s Domain for some reason. I really need to figure something out here…”

Link couldn’t just leave the poor Zora up there. Surely there was something he could do. And as he considered his options, a sly grin began to spread across his face...

“This does not strike me as a particularly wise solution to my predicament… at all,” said Gruve.

Link was currently sitting piggy-back on the tall Zora, who now clutched Link’s paraglider overhead. They stood at the edge of the tower platform, ready to jump and glide down to the mountain river far below.

“We’ll be fine.” Link assured him. “I’ve done this loads of times already.” He figured that if this same paraglider could keep that hefty old man aloft back at the plateau, then surely it could hold up a light young Hylian and a sleek and slender Zora.

“Let’s do it!” he shouted. Gruve shrugged, and leapt from the edge of the tower without hesitation. For a second, they were soaring through the sky with total ease. But as the rate of their descent sharply increased and the paraglider suddenly seemed to give way under their combined weight... an overlooked detail dawned on Link:

*Of course* the paraglider had easily held up that hefty old man.

He was a *ghost.*

*Oops.*

Link wasn’t sure what was louder - Gruve’s screaming, or the roaring sound of air rushing past his ears as the pair plummeted inelegantly through the air towards the river below. The poor paraglider provided its best effort to break their fall, but it was able to do very little more than adjust the angle of their inevitable demise.

Still, Link remained calm, and grabbed control of the paraglider himself. He put all of this weight on the paraglider’s right grip, angling them towards the widest part of the river he could see. If he could just get them there… avoid the tough, rocky shoreline… they might just make it...
They impacted the water simultaneously, both taking crude diving forms as they did. Link quickly breached the surface, swimming to the shoreline as he did. He briefly examined himself at the riverbank, and laughed. No serious injuries incurred - although he certainly re-aggravated his shoulder wound on impact. But he was otherwise no worse off. He pulled off his hood and began to wring the water out of it. Soon, Gruve shot out of the water, paraglider in-hand, and landed on the ground near Link.

“That...was...” he stammered, “…That was so... incredible! I have never experienced anything so... so wondrous! So daring! We must do that again some time!”

Link stood up, collapsed the paraglider, and drew his spear from his back. “As much as I share your sentiment… I think we have bigger priorities at the moment.” He gestured behind Gruve with his spear. Gruve turned around, his eyes widened in shock.

The commotion had drawn the attention of a huge number of Lizalfos. And as expected, they didn’t hesitate to attack these two new strangers in their midst.

Gruve didn’t really strike Link as the fighting type... And sure enough, the blue Zora had already dived back into the water, shouting at Link from up the river.

“Zora’s Domain is just up this path along the river, young Hylian!” he said, as Link fought off three Lizalfos simultaneously. “I would assist you,” Gruve continued, “But... we Zora don’t handle electricity particularly well.”

Electricity? What electricity? Link thought. But while he considered this, an electrified shock arrow buzzed right past him. He spared a glance further up the river, just as a team of Lizalfos archers began to nock more arrows to fire at him. Link charged towards them.

Sure could use a bow of my own right now...

He dodged a couple of arrows then lunged his spear at the first archer he reached. He impaled it through the head, killing it instantly. He pried its bow from his hands, grabbed its quiver, and sprinted past the other two archers.

This’ll do.

He turned and shot a pair of shock arrows at the feet of the chasing Lizalfos, giving them a taste of their own medicine. He merely stunned them, but this was enough to buy him some time to get into a better position to counter. He continued to run alongside the river, and noticed Gruve swimming alongside him again.

“There’s quite a large number of monsters up this river…” Gruve said. “Just thought I’d offer you a fair warning.”

Link rolled his eyes as he ran. “Considering that I’m here to help you, couldn’t you find a way…” He dove to the ground as a huge rock sailed through the air above him, “…to help out too?” he finished. The pair looked up ahead. Round, tentacled creatures with spouted mouths were shooting stones at them with painful accuracy.

Gruve nodded at Link. “I… I’ll see what I can do.”

Link turned and began to fight off the approaching Lizalfos, who lashed our their tongues and shot balls of saliva at him. Meanwhile, Gruve shot through the water towards the rock-spewing creatures, pulled them underwater by their tentacles and sliced them up with his fins. Having quickly slaughtered the Lizalfos behind them, Link continued his way up the path. Gruve once again swam...
up the river alongside him, a pair of disintegrating monsters - Octoroks - floating down the river in his wake.

“Thanks for that.” Link said.

“You’re welcome.” Gruve replied. “Although… it’s only going to get worse from here… a lot more dangerous.”

“Well that’s encouraging.”

“My apologies… I could swim upstream to seek help… but I don’t think anyone will come. Like I mentioned before-”

“Shock arrows, I know I know.” Link interrupted. He paused. “Then… at the very least, just tell Prince Sidon that I am on my way. I should be there shortly.”

As he said this, a horn sounded in the distance. Its call was shrill, but its purpose was clear. Another wave of about twenty Lizalfos began charging down the mountain path towards Link.

“I’ll do whatever I can!” cried Gruve. He dove underwater and began to swiftly make his way up the river and towards Zora’s Domain, slicing another Octorok on his way up.

As Link fired a shock arrow towards the approaching lizard warriors, his soldier’s instinct began to kick in. His mind entered a state of focus, of total calm. And with determination and cold resolve, he began his marathon battle up the long, winding path towards the domain.

Link was growing exhausted. He’d fortunately been able to avoid major injuries during the fighting, though he’d certainly developed a massive headache from the electrocuting effects of shock arrows which occasionally landed by his feet. A couple of arrows had also grazed his shoulder, but his Sheikah armor seemed to be holding up just fine for now.

He’d lost count of how many Lizalfos he’d slain, somewhere around the eighties or nineties. This hardly mattered though. The waves were endless. He figured he was about three-fourths up the river towards his destination. But this fact only seemed to increase the number of Lizalfos charging head-on towards Link, each of them quite eager to be the one to land the killing blow.

At this point, Link knew that he was too far in to turn back. Teleporting was obviously not an option either. On top of this, he found himself in the midst of an incessant rainstorm that seemed to grow in intensity the closer he got to the domain. It reminded him of the rainy seasons he’d spent here, an entire lifetime ago. Although he didn’t recall any downpours ever being this heavy. He wondered if this was related to the trouble that Sidon had mentioned to him during their encounter…

Link ducked, slid on his knees, and batted down the leader of the charging Lizalfos by its legs. A sword-swipe at his left, a tongue lashing at his right, he dodged and countered and slew two more. His muscles were starting to burn and ache. His aggravate shoulder was starting to throb. Time seemed to slow down around him as he rolled past another enemy, letting loose a flurry of jabs into its back. Unfortunately, one of the Lizalfos warriors got the better of him, kicking Link down as he dodged a sword swipe aimed directly at his head. He rolled backwards, crouched down, looked around him.

He was surrounded.

Another group of about ten Lizalfos had joined the pack, forming a large semi-circle with spears
pointed directly at him. They began to attack simultaneously, and Link briefly considered diving into the river behind him in an effort to escape—

“Yaaaaaarrrrgh!”

A blur of shimmering fins and scales exploded out of the water behind him. A group of Zora, various colors, landed one after another on the attacking Lizalfos. The last one landed right in front of Link, spun around to face him.

A sharp red face, a familiar pose, glimmering teeth…

Sidon!

And he was joined by several others, who seemed to be paying no mind to the Lizalfos archers preparing to rain down a volley of shock arrows from the cliffs above. Link immediately re-joined the fighting, sniping down these archers with his new bow. He fought side-by-side with the other Zora warriors, mowing down their lizard-like foes with accuracy and efficiency. It was a beautiful dance of violence, a near-choreographed display of talented spearmanship. And as a lull in the fighting began to set in, one incredibly tall, black Zora turned and faced Link.

“Greetings friend.” the Zora said, crossing his arms. “Bazz Brigade, at your service.”

Sidon coughed nearby.

“...Oh, and Prince Sidon as well, I suppose.”

Link peered at the black Zora’s face in an effort to recognize him... But in the end, it was really quite obvious.

“Fluffy white clouds…?” Link offered, with an old boyish grin.

Bazz smiled back.

“...Clear blue Zora.”

The fighting died away and the heavy resistance decayed as the four Zora - plus Link - mopped up the remaining Lizalfos stragglers along the path. Despite being severely outclassed, the monsters still seemed determined to charge aggressively towards their now-certain doom. Link would occasionally run up ahead and pick off any shock arrow-wielding archers, but the group otherwise faced very little danger the rest of the way. Soon, they were making their way across the elaborate bridge that connected the mountain path to the heart of Zora’s domain. Prince Sidon lead the way, while Link reconnected with his fellow brigade members behind him.

“I must sincerely apologize, Link.” Sidon said. “I really did try to keep your return a secret—"

“He tried, yeah,” interrupted Gaddison. “But as soon as we heard that a Hylian warrior with blonde hair and a ponytail was fighting his way up here... the fish was out of the net. So to speak...”

Rivan shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll get in trouble for abandoning our posts...” he said, “But I’m going to go ahead and say it was definitely worth it.” He patted Link on the back. “It’s so good to see you again, Master Link.” Gaddison and Bazz both nodded in agreement.

As they walked under familiar archways, Link found himself unable to restrain the immense joy he felt in his heart. The sight of meticulously-carved mountains above, the sounds of pouring water, the
smell of clean air… even in the steady downpour of relentless rain, he was so incredibly comfortable in this familiar place. This was his home. He’d finally returned.

And his friends… were so different now. So tall. Link made this observation known.

“Well, we have aged only about one hundred years since you last saw us.” Rivan said. “And as for you … Well, I must say you’ve aged quite well for a Hylian.” He paused, staring curiously at Link.

“In fact… shouldn’t you be dead? Erm… Sorry, that’s a bit of a personal question.”

Link shrugged. “Reports of my death have been greatly… accurate actually.”

“Really?! So you’re saying… you were revived somehow?” Bazz asked.

Link shrugged. “Something like that…”

Sidon held up his hand. “It’s really quite a long story. We will have plenty of time to catch up later… but for now, we have important matters to discuss.” The group paused briefly, and Sidon turned to face Link. “I will run up ahead and inform the council of your arrival. They will surely want to meet with us immediately!” He grinned at Link. “And my father will most definitely be quite pleased to see you!” He sprinted away excitedly.

Link, Bazz, Rivan, and Gaddison stared after him, before continuing their walk towards the main area of the domain.

“I have to say…” Link said, “That I am having a rather hard time seeing Sidon leading you all around. I can’t help but still imagine him as that hyperactive little goofball that you could barely take seriously.”

“Oh, believe me,” said Gaddison, “That part of him has hardly changed. ...But after an incident with a giant Octorok in Hateno Bay, you’d be hard-pressed to find anyone in the entire domain who didn’t respect him.”

"...Oh, I definitely have to hear this story." Link said.

Rivan nodded. “It is quite impressive actually, I must admit. And that's not all... his skills and good looks have also made him rather… popular with the ladies too. He's got his own fan club. Lucky guy…”

“You’re married!” shouted Bazz. “You have no room to complain!”

“Oh right, I forgot.”

“You forgot?!”

Bazz and Rivan began to push each other around playfully, while Gaddison rolled her eyes. And Link began to laugh. It was wonderful to see that, even after one hundred years, his old friends had hardly changed… He was looking forward to catching up on the missing century between them later.

As they walked onto a walkway leading into the main square of the domain, a purple Zora placed her hand on Rivan’s chest, stopping him.

“AHEM…” she glared at Rivan with mild disapproval. “You were supposed to be on guard duty, father.”
Rivan rubbed his head sheepishly. “Right...right. Sorry Dunma.” He ran over and took his position opposite the walkway from her. He gestured towards her with his Silverscale Spear.

“Master Link, this is my daughter, Dunma.”

She nodded cordially at Link, who returned the gesture.

“And it seems I must return to my guard duties. But we’ll surely catch up later, right?”

Link smiled. “Of course we will.”

“Perfect!” said Bazz. “Gaddison and I had better return to our duties as well. I expect to get chewed out by my father - er, Sergeant Seggin - later. But it was well worth it.” he winked at Link. “See you later!” He ran off towards the throne room. Gaddison also began to run away, then turned briefly in Link’s direction. “Oh, and Link,” she said, “you might want to... avoid talking to any of the older Zora while you’re here. They do not think particularly highly of you... at all.”

“Why’s that?” Link asked.

Gaddison stopped for a moment. “You... really don’t remember?” She asked him.

Link shook his head.

Gaddison’s face turned crestfallen, sullen. She looked away.

“Link... they hold you responsible for Lady Mipha’s death.”

“I will not allow it!” shouted Seggin. “This is the same Hylian Champion who was unable to protect Lady Mipha from Calamity Ganon! I cannot forgive it.”

“I am in total agreement!” shouted Trello, Rivan’s father. “How dare he even show his face in this place again, after what he did to Lady Mipha. I should punish him where he stands!”

They were standing in the throne room of Zora’s Domain. King Dorephan, even larger than he was a century ago, towered over the council of elderly Zora. The previous council was already quite elderly when Link was a child, so he figured they must have already died out. The remaining elders - Trello, Seggin, Jiahto, and Muzu - had been summoned to deliberate on whether or not to receive help from this familiar Hylian in their midst...

Sidon stood nearby, ready to defend Link. “How can you all stand there and show such disrespect to your King?! We are not in a position to turn down help from someone as talented as the Champion Link!” he said. “Besides, after all this time... you still blame him for what happened all those years ago?”

“Not just Link!” chimed in Jiahto. “Hylians are wholly responsible for failing to defeat Calamity Ganon! Their silly plan did nothing! And we bore the punishment for their reckless abuse of ancient technology...”

Link wanted to defend himself, to explain the tremendous guilt he already felt... but he could not bring himself to do it. He was still emotionally reeling from Gaddison’s revelation earlier. Besides, not only was he unable to recall the specifics of how he himself had failed to defeat Ganon, but a twisted side of him also felt that he was getting precisely what he deserved. These were men that he
had greatly respected and admired in his youth. It seemed fitting to be scolded by them. Still, he found himself fighting off the creeping frustration, the incredibly deep sorrow in his heart. Fighting off the desire to tell them that there was no possible way that he hadn’t done everything in his power to protect Mipha...

Muzu spoke up from nearby. Like the others, he also hadn’t aged particularly well, his green scales bearing the wrinkles of age and wear. “To ask a Hylian for help...“ he said, “Why, the very thought of it curls my fins! We could not trust them back then, and we certainly cannot trust them now!” Although Link had remained expressionless up to this point, he frowned at Muzu. The other Zora elders had formed a resentment for Link over all this time… but Muzu was just as hateful and intolerant as Link remembered him.

King Dorephan sat silently during these deliberations, carefully considering his words. But he still could not hide the grin that was spreading across his colossal face. After some consideration, he finally spoke up.

“Hylian Champion… Link… It is so good to see you, my friend.” He closed his eyes, as if stolen away by a dream. “My mind is overflowing with nostalgia. So many memories! I had heard a terrible rumor that you had fallen in combat, but it appears you managed to survive! Extraordinary!” His voice echoed through the chamber, commanding and demanding the attention of everyone in the room.

Link spoke up. “I’ve…well, I’ve been sleeping actually.”

“Sleeping, you say? Ah, yes, that’s right. Prince Sidon previously spoke to me about what you told him during your earlier encounter. Still, I truly could not believe you were still alive without seeing it with my own eyes. Yet here you are now!” Dorephan spoke as if deliberately ignoring the pleas of the Zora council, and Link was rather grateful for the brief reprieve from his beratement at the hands of the elders...

“I was also told,” Dorephan continued, “That you were missing some of your memories as a result of your slumber, is that correct?”

Link nodded. In the corner of his eye, he could see the Zora council members shuffling impatiently, quite eager to throw this Hylian out of their domain as soon as possible. Dorephan also noticed this, but continued to pay them no mind. “At the very least… you do remember Mipha?” he asked. “You two were so close. Surely your heart recalls this?”

Link bowed his head thoughtfully, regretfully. To him, words could not express the mix of joy and sorrow that he felt every single time he recalled his memories of Mipha.

Dorephan reeled back, satisfied. “That look on your face tells me all that I need to know. And it does my heart good to know that her memory remains with you.” He glanced over at the Zora council members. “I do not doubt that our friend Link has endured a great many trials to get to this point. And I also do not doubt his willingness to help, nor do I place any blame on him for the events of one hundred years ago. I shall ask him to hear my plea.”

The Zora elders began to protest, but Dorephan held up his hand to stop them. There would be no debate, no deliberation. He’d made his decision, and that was that.

Begrudgingly, the elderly Zora began to shuffle towards the stairs in front of the throne room. It was quite rare for the king to override the Zora council, but this was indeed a special case. And before long only King Dorephan, Muzu, Link, and Sidon remained in the throne room.
“Link,” Dorephan began, “I must inform you that Zora’s Domain is in danger of vanishing because of Divine Beast Vah Ruta. I will speak bluntly. We alone cannot stop this beast. Will you lend us your strength?”

Muzu suddenly shouted in protest. “My liege! I know you have already made your decision… but please reconsider! He is a Hylian! Surely I need not repeat this fact. I absolutely refuse to receive his help.”

Dorephan shook his head. “Muzu, I expected more of you. Why do you still protest?”

Sidon pointed angrily at Muzu, glaring as he did. “Muzu! It is rude to speak that way to your king and his guest. Link is here because I invited him. And that should be enough. We have no choice but to rely on a trustworthy Hylian. This has already been discussed and decided upon—”

“No! You alone decided upon this!” Muzu continued to rant. “I have argued against this from the very start of this entire mess!”

King Dorephan’s booming voice cut through their argument. “It matters not! Muzu, my friend, this is bigger than all of us. Zora and Hylians alike must put aside our differences and band together, before all of Hyrule is swallowed by the sea.”

“Swallowed by the sea…?” Link asked. “You mean like a flood?” He decided it would be best to turn off his emotions for the time being, try to focus. “Is Vah Ruta somehow producing water uncontrollably then?”

Dorephan nodded. “That is correct. The divine beast has great power, and the ability to actually create an endless supply of water. It has been mercilessly spouting water into the air, resulting in the heavy rains you see now. Water and air are as one for the Zora, so you wouldn’t think this would be so critical a problem… however—”

The reservoir!

“Is Vah Ruta still floating out in the Eastern Reservoir?” Link asked. “If so, then I imagine the rain is threatening to overflow it… I remember the legends you told us when I was young, how the reservoir protected Hyrule from floods during the rainy seasons in Zora’s Domain. It would be catastrophic if it exceeded its capacity…”

Dorephan smiled bitterly. “It is good to know that you remember the tales from your youth. You are correct. Should the reservoir burst, immense damage would befall not only Zora’s Domain, but also the area downstream. There, Hylian lives are in very grave danger—”

ROOOOOAAAAAWWWW!

A loud, deep trumpeting sound echoed across the giant valley that was Zora’s Domain. Even through the rain, Link could hear the splashing of Divine Beast Vah Ruta inside the distant reservoir. The ominous sound of its call seemed to serve as both a warning, and a plea…

“The Divine Beast is crying out once again…” Dorephan said. He turned his attention to Link again. “Your princess, Zelda, often studied the Divine Beasts. That is, before the Great Calamity. According to her research, the orbs located on Ruta’s shoulders are mechanisms that control the water it generates. However, they require electricity to work.”

The gears were turning in Link’s head. “And I take it, you believe that they are no longer functioning? And we need to use shock arrows to try and power them again?”
“Precisely.” Dorephan said.

Sidon spoke up. “Seggin, who is actually quite shock resistant for a Zora, hit one with a shock arrow. Sure enough, it slowed the water!”

Link gave a half-smile at this. Even in his old age, that demon sergeant was still an incredible archer and warrior.

“Unfortunately,” Sidon continued, “as you know, we Zora are vulnerable to electricity. His plan likely failed because we were unable to safely strike it with enough electricity at once. The water, naturally, came back in full force.”

He struck his classic pose, teeth gleaming. “That is why I sought a Hylian to help us! I will aid you in any way I can. Please help us stop Vah Ruta’s rampage…”

Link held his hand up in offering. “That was my intent from the start. It was actually Zelda’s plan that I board each Divine Beast and appease them…”

Dorephan suddenly leaned forward in shock, his figure towering above Link like a toppling building. “So then… you’re telling me that Princess Zelda is still alive?”

“Yes. In Hyrule Castle.”

“I do not believe it.” Dorephan leaned back again. “So, she was alive this whole time, just as you were! The events of one-hundred years ago cannot be altered, that much is true. But regaining control of the Divine Beasts might help us seal Calamity Ganon away for good!”

King Dorephan's smile grew. They had a chance to right the wrongs of a century ago. And hearing that Princess Zelda was still alive only strengthened his hope regarding the fate of his own dear daughter...

Sidon shook his head. “And here I was, selfishly thinking only of stopping Vah Ruta. I did not know you had such grand ambitions, Link!” He struck his pose yet again.

“Wondrous! Naturally, I shall help too! Once it has stopped rampaging, you can climb inside it. Let’s appease Ruta together!”

“I’m in. Let’s do this.” Link replied.

Dorephan smiled at their instant camaraderie. Link was still like a son to him, and it warmed his spirit to see Link and Sidon still acting as brothers, even after so many years…

“Thank you Link. Truly.” Dorephan said. “We are in your debt - our goal is the same. That means our meeting was nothing short of destiny.” He reached into the shallow pool he sat in, producing a small chest. “Now then, allow me to offer you this gift as a show of faith.”

From inside the chest, he produced a beautiful hand-crafted armor set. The greaves and shoulder armor were made of the finest silver, and tough scales covered the arms and shoulders of the undershirt. A single white scale was sewn into the cluster on the left shoulder. The armor's torso was blue in color, watertight. It was adorned with gorgeous turquoise stones.

*Mipha’s favorite*, Link remembered.

Muzu looked like he was going to flip his lid as Dorephan handed the armored top to Link.
“This armor is enchanted.” Dorephan explained. “So long as you wear this, you can ascend waterfalls just like a Zora. Please take good care of it…”

“King Dorephan!!” Muzu shouted. “Surely you do not really intend to give this outsider the Zora armor! Countless generations of Zora princesses have gifted that armor to the one they have sworn to marry!” He pointed at the armor in Link’s hands. “Princess Mipha made that one there with her own hands! It is far too important to entrust to a shady Hylian!”

He turned and glared at Link in fury. “He may be a Champion, but Mipha had no such relationship with him. So why should HE receive such an honor?”

Despite this outburst… Link felt that he was somewhat inclined to agree.

Muzu stormed off in a huff. “This is just too much, my liege. I do not understand it one bit…” He stomped down the stairs from the throne room as the remaining trio stared after him.

“Hmmph. That Muzu is not easily swayed once his mind is set.” said Dorephan. “Being that he was in charge of educating my dear daughter Mipha, she obviously means so much to him. Really, she means so much to all of us… losing her to the Calamity only deepened his hatred for Hylians.”

Link shook his head. “I understand… I remember how protective he was of her. I can only imagine how he feels now.”

“I shall try to reason with him, work something out.” Sidon said. “He was, after all, tasked with finding enough shock arrows for us to appease Vah Ruta with. We need him.” He ran off in a hurry to find Muzu.

“Sidon…” Dorephan said, under his breath. “I suppose that means you are going to tell him the truth…” He focused on Link again.

“Link, Muzu is probably down in the square below. I would like you to try speaking with him, if you do not mind. I believe that Sidon is about to reveal something to Muzu that I feel you should hear…”

They were standing in front of a glowing blue statue of Mipha in the town square of Zora’s Domain. Link had seen this statue earlier, but purposefully hadn’t gotten a close look at it. It was truly an incredible recreation of Mipha’s likeness, and he’d intentionally blocked out his emotions at the time in order to focus on the task at hand...

Now, he had entered into an argument between Sidon and Muzu at the base of that same statue. He decided to remain emotionless, unaffected, not wanting to escalate the tension with Muzu even further...

“Hmmph. You came all the way here, but it was in vain.” Muzu fumed. “I have absolutely no desire to speak with you.”

But Sidon remained calm. “Listen well, Muzu. There is something you need to know…” His eyes narrowed, his mood grew quite serious. He appeared confident, demanding. Just like his father. And only then did Link realize, that little, goofy, hilarious Sidon... had really and truly developed into a great leader for the Zora.

“He who stands here…” Sidon continued, gesturing to Link, “the man called Link, is the one whom my sister had feelings for.”

Link closed his eyes. This information wasn’t strictly new to him... but it was both joyful and painful
“I was only a child then,” Sidon explained. “So I did not know it myself at the time. But it is so. I grew up hearing my father tell stories, some of which were about my sister’s undying love for a Hylian named Link. He was always in her heart…”

Muzu nearly jumped out of his skin. “What?! No!” He stood there, shaking in rage. “You cannot fool me with such a fanciful lie. Not this Zora!” he turned and scoffed at Link. “How could Lady Mipha possibly have had feelings for a Hylian like him?!” He pointed at the statue. “Even now, you can tell that he feels absolutely nothing when he gazes upon this statue…”

This was like an offering to Link. He turned and peered at it, analyzing every detail. Every carefully-carved shape was formed lovingly in the likeness of the dear Zora princess. She was posed with her trident, appearing both elegant and fierce. It seemed as if the statue was designed to convey both her gentle healing nature, as well as her ferocious skills as a warrior.

For Link, it captured Mipha a bit too well. As he expected, he was not ready to see her again - even her likeness. His heart broke as he continued to stare after it. His eyes welled with tears, he shook with sorrow. And as he clutched the Zora armor in his hands, ran his fingers over the scales that adorned it, the familiar feeling of nostalgia rushed right back into his heart…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the brief hiatus. Bit of a busy/rough week last week, plus I wasn’t feeling energetic enough to properly sit down and write anything. Decided I’d rather take my time and write when I felt better, instead of just crapping out a weak chapter and calling it good. Hope it was worth the wait.

We’re about to enter the Depression arc of AFooW, which should last all the way to Chapter 21 or so. All the more reason to get mentally prepared to write it, I believe. Anyway, enjoy enjoy enjoy. And see you in Memories of Mipha Pt. 5 - Hylian Mute.
“If I’d known that a delicious meal was all it took to get you to talk, I’d surely have prepared a full banquet for you long ago!” Zelda smiled, as Link scarfed down yet another plate of fried Hylian rice. He continued to eat quietly, offering the Hylian princess a half-grin.

It was true, Link could *never* resist a delicious meal - but Zelda’s recent attitude change also made it that much easier for him to open up to her.

“I must… sincerely thank you again.” Zelda said. “...For saving my life, that is.”

Link shrugged and scooped another spoonful of rice into his mouth. “It was no trouble.” he said. "This is my job after all.” He hadn’t bothered to finish chewing before he spoke, but Zelda hardly seemed to mind, giggling as he said this.

“I hadn’t noticed it before…” she said, “But you really are quite the glutton!”

Link didn’t respond to this. But unlike before, his silence was no longer uncomfortable or irritating to Zelda. She took a deep breath, looked around them, and sighed happily.

The traveling pair found themselves in the middle of a large field, far north of Hyrule Castle, and on their way back to Goron City once again to make some adjustments to Vah Rudania. They’d come all the way back here from Gerudo desert, where Link had dramatically rescued Princess Zelda in the eleventh hour from mysterious shadow warriors of the Yiga clan. His timing had been just a little bit *too* perfect, leading her to wonder if he had *intentionally* delayed defending her on purpose - just to prove a point.

In either case, she figured she probably deserved it anyway.

“Well, job or not…” she said, “It was a selfless act. And I appreciate it nonetheless.”

This encounter had ultimately given Zelda an entirely new perspective on Link. From that moment on, she had decided to make a concentrated effort to try seeing things from *his* point of view, rather than staying so fixated on herself. And this effort had completely changed the dynamic of their relationship.

Now, two weeks into their travels to Death Mountain, Zelda was using her impressive cooking skills to finally get Link to open up to her. And little-by-little, it was actually working.

“I suppose… I should stop beating around the bush.” Zelda said. Link raised an eyebrow at this. But in his mind he knew that she had merely been making small talk so far, in an effort to break down the barriers between them. She wasn’t all that hard to read in the end.

Still, he appreciated that she was finally going to be plainspoken about things...

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a while now,” she said.

“But. Why are you so quiet all the time?”

Link shrugged. “It’s a bit hard for me to explain. But I will do my best to…”
Zelda was a bit surprised at his abrupt response.

Link sighed lightly, continued. “With… so much at stake, with everyone’s eyes bearing down… and the incredible responsibility of what we have been tasked to accomplish…” He paused. “I suppose it slowly became a habit to just stay strong and silently bear it all.” He held his hands up. “Over time, I just stopped expressing my thoughts and feelings to others at all. What use is a chosen hero… who is way too emotional?”

Another lull in their conversation set in for a time. Zelda figured that Link was finished speaking, but was caught off guard when he began to talk once again.

“I’m certain you understand where I’m coming from in this.” He looked up at her, smiled slightly. “All this time, I’ve watched you deal with your own struggles. I cannot help but respect you for bearing that heavy load on your own.”

Zelda’s eyes widened. “I… I had no idea.” She looked away, frowning. “How could you possibly slight yourself by comparing your situation to mine? I’ve done nothing but act like a petulant, selfish child… I believe that your response to pressure has been far more admirable than my own…”

True or not, Link wasn’t going to argue with that. Another beat of silence between them, and the pair began to clean up their mess and load their horses to set out once again for Death Mountain. As they rode away, the mountain’s lava-capped peak looming far, far off in the distance, Zelda spoke again.

“In my short-sightedness… I have failed to see that everyone has struggles that go unseen by the world. And I apologize for failing to see yours. I truly hope that you can forgive me someday.”

Link nodded, but remained silent.

He’d already said his piece. And that was enough.

“That cut doesn’t look too bad, actually. You’re fine for now.”

Zelda put the finishing touches on a bandage for Link’s forearm. The gash was actually quite deep, but she found it necessary to downplay its significance - after all, the Hylian Champion had just finished slaying several dozen attacking monsters in no time at all...

“But you know,” Zelda continued, her tone sounding more like a stern mother than a concerned friend, “there’s a fine line between courage and recklessness. As brave as you are, that does not make you immortal.”

From the appearance of things, however, she wondered if this assessment was somehow inaccurate…

The pair stared down towards the pile of monster bodies littering the foothill of Death Mountain. Numbered amongst them: about twelve bokoblins, four or five moblins… and three silver Lynels. The princess had known Link was gifted, talented, and incredibly skilled as a soldier. But seeing the results of his many, many years of hard work… was still quite shocking indeed.

“It seems that, not only is the frequency of these types of attacks on the rise,” Zelda observed, “but the scale of the beasts we are facing is intensifying as well.” A troubled expression appeared on her face.

“I fear that-” She closed her eyes. “I fear that this is an omen which portends the return of Calamity Ganon.” She stood up, patted the dust off her derrière. “And, if that’s the case, I’m ready to expect
the worst. We’ll need to make preparations as soon as possible.” She briskly marched ahead. Link stood up and quickly joined her as they began to make their way down the hillside towards the valley below.

Zelda suddenly paused for a split-second, pulled out her Sheikah Slate, and captured a snapshot of the breathtaking view of the enormous river below. Hyrule Castle was a mere dot in the distant landscape, and Link found himself still taken aback at the staggering scale of the countryside of Hyrule.

“We shall make our way to Zora’s Domain next.” Zelda said. “I feel that Daruk’s control of Vah Rudania is more than sufficient for the time being.” She began to poke around in her slate. “Still, I cannot seem to understand these weird energy readings shown in these schematics.” She spun the Sheikah Slate around, pointing to a wireframe model of Daruk’s divine beast. “You can see that there are channels all along the interior that seem to redirect power to a central point in the beast’s head. Do you suppose… that this is some sort of super-weapon that can be activated under special circumstances?”

Link shrugged. He was absolutely the last person to be bouncing technical hypotheses off of. And he wasn’t particularly engaged in the conversation anyway. Not when his mind was filled with the excitement of returning to his home again after so long…

Zelda noticed his distracted state, but paid no mind. She’d gotten quite a bit better at reading him in recent weeks. And she was starting to see glimpses of the reckless, confident young boy that was hidden beneath the calm waters... flashes of the mysterious personality buried under years of considerable pressure.

She shook her head, holstered her Sheikah Slate at her waist. “Perhaps we’ll shed some light on this mystery as we work on Vah Ruta. It should take about four or five days to get there on horseback. I’d suggest we stop and rest a bit… but I’m afraid there’s simply very little time for that anymore…”

As Zelda pondered the mysterious energy readings in Vah Rudania, she found herself also becoming distracted with thoughts of Zora’s Domain. She’d only recently found out about Link’s close relationship with the Zora people, noting that it really hadn’t been just a mere coincidence that she’d seen him at the domain during the pilot selection meeting years prior. He’d actually grown up there.

As her mind drifted towards thoughts of the domain… of King Dorephan… and finally, of Lady Mipha… a question found itself on the tip of Zelda’s tongue...

“Link, I have something to ask you. It’s… it’s about Lady Mipha.”

Link’s eyebrow twitched slightly, but Zelda didn’t notice.

“I know that… you spent a lot of time in Zora’s Domain in your youth. So you… Mipha…” she paused mid-sentence. And suddenly, her brain decided to veer off from the original question.

“...She has healing capabilities, is that correct?” She abruptly pointed to Link’s arm. “Perhaps we can knock out a couple of birds with one stone on this trip.” She grinned politely, as Link nodded in her direction.

That was far from the question that Zelda had truly intended to ask. But she decided that it hardly mattered. It was clearly a bad idea to pry too much into his personal life, especially when she was only just starting to penetrate his cold exterior. And besides - as a scholar first and foremost, she’d just have to enjoy observing and analyzing the pair’s interactions in-person...
Link’s arrival at Zora’s Domain was met with only mild fanfare. Mipha had warned her fellow Zora in advance of Link’s newfound quiet nature and intense focus. And although they no longer questioned it, it was certainly a bit odd for them to see when he eventually arrived.

Due in part to this, Dorephan avoided his typical celebrations for Link’s return. But he was also paying very careful consideration to the enormous tension that had now fully taken hold of Zora’s Domain. Because with Mipha’s return two months earlier, she too had developed a laser-like focus on the task at hand. It was as if her encounter with Link and the other Champions in Hyrule Castle had cast a spell of obligation on her entire existence. Her continued training and research with Vah Ruta, along with her newfound responsibilities, kept her from the domain for long parts of the day - and sometimes, for several days at a time. Every Zora noticed, and every Zora was affected. Some more than others.

While the younger Zora had no problems accepting the new priorities of their princess over time, resentment was growing in the hearts of many of the elders. This did not go overlooked by Mipha, nor was Link ignorant to the situation from the moment that he arrived. As such, the pair found themselves maintaining a relationship that was strictly professional. Much to the chagrin of their young Zora peers. Still, they bore with it, wishing to obey Lady Mipha’s wishes that they carry on with their daily business as usual.

It seemed that Kodah missed this memorandum, however.

“~ Linny! So wonderful to see you again!” She pulled Link into an embrace before he even knew it. “You’ve somehow gotten taller! And even more handsome than I remember!”

It was only Link’s second day back at the domain, and most of the Zora were mingling about in the square as Link and Zelda prepared to set out to work on Vah Ruta. Kodah had been out on a day’s fishing trip with her parents when Link had first returned. As such, she was entirely ignorant to the nuance of current circumstances...

“What’s with the silence? Not so happy to see me?”

Kodah pulled away and tilted her head slightly in confusion. Noticing Zelda standing nearby, she held out her hand in greeting. “You must be the Princess of Hyrule!” she said. “Pleased to properly meet you. I’m Kodah!” Zelda shook her hand as the young Zora began to look her up and down. “You’re even curvier than the last time you were here!” Kodah exclaimed.

Link actually suppressed a laugh at Kodah’s typical boldness. Expecting Zelda to react in a volatile sort of way, he was instead surprised to see her fall right in-step with Kodah.

“I am likewise pleased to make your acquaintance.” Zelda replied. “And since we seem to be remarking nonchalantly about appearances…” She examined Kodah’s lithe frame.

“...Do you ever eat?”

Kodah burst out laughing and patted Zelda on the back. “Sassy! I like you.” She turned her attention back to Link. “You never answered my question, Linny! Why so quiet? It’s so weird to see you like this!”

Zelda made a mental note that Link’s silence truly was an adopted habit. She found herself wondering yet again just what the real Link was like under the stoic mask. It seemed she’d have to continue to chisel away at the facade...

Link merely shrugged, but Kodah fortunately took the hint. “Hmmm… Understood. You hate me
now.” She winked. “We’ll catch up later, how about?”

She skipped away happily, calling back to Zelda as she did. “Pleasure meeting you, thick one.”

Link glanced over at Zelda, prepared himself for the princess to inevitably blow a fuse now.

...But she didn’t.

She laughed.

“I like her.” Zelda said. “She doesn’t pull any punches it seems. I shall certainly get her back for that little quip later.” She smiled at Link. “Shall we get going then?” She strolled ahead of Link, in the direction of the walkway that lead to the eastern reservoir dam. Link held back a smirk as he followed behind her.

It seemed the princess of Hyrule was really quite full of surprises after all.

Mipha had left to work on Vah Ruta very early that morning. She, along with Robbie, Impa, and Purah of the Sheikah tribe, were studying the mechanisms on the divine beast’s shoulders as Link and Zelda finally arrived to supervise and assist in the research.

As expected, Zelda devolved into an inquisitive, hyperactive, fast-talking young child as she excitedly explored the interior of Vah Ruta. This was only her third time seeing the divine beast in-person, but she found herself just as fascinated as ever by this beautiful monument of ancient tech - perhaps even more so than she was with the other three divine beasts, in fact.

The research continued in earnest, and Zelda was incredibly quick to speculate and test the various functions of the great mechanical beast. She even felt she was close to a breakthrough about the orbs on Vah Ruta’s shoulders.

Inversely, however, she wasn’t any closer to deciphering the enigma that was Link and Mipha’s relationship.

They were certainly cordial, that much was clear. Her observations showed that they really were comfortable around one another.

But that was it. There was literally nothing else for her to go by.

There were no notes passed between them. No furtive glances were exchanged. Barely any substantial acknowledgement of each other - short of a few polite words now and then, here and there. At the surface level, the cold wall between them was clear, blatant, apparent. And the inquisitive princess of Hyrule simply could not penetrate it.

But in their hearts and minds, Link and Mipha were perfectly fine with it. They were okay with the space, the silence, the false chasm between them. Because for them, the mere presence of the other was far more than enough just to get them through the day. They were content with the proximity alone, as they focused on their imminent responsibilities.

In fact, this whole thing seemed to trouble Zelda more so than it did either Link or Mipha. She couldn’t help but feel like there was some sort of inside joke that she wasn’t clued in on.

But over time, and only after she turned her primary focus to their objective, Zelda managed to fight off her curious resentment. Much had been already accomplished in their work, and they had even managed to activate the remaining three control terminals that had been powered off since the beast
was discovered. They were making excellent progress; and this helped to alleviate Zelda’s irritation. Helped to keep her thoughts away from her missing powers, her responsibilities, and the pending arrival of Calamity Ganon.

Still. One small, irritating fact persistently irked Zelda more than anything:

They had been in Zora’s Domain for nearly two days now.

And Link still hadn’t asked Mipha to heal his serious wound.

Days passed, and the group continued their work on Vah Ruta. It still came as a surprise to Zelda just how fluidly and easily Mipha controlled the divine beast. It was as if it were an extension of her body, a strong bond between Zora and machine that remained unseen by those around them. Not only was Mipha easily moving the divine beast through the water, but she was also intuitively pointing out problem areas in Vah Ruta’s circuitry or efficiency issues with the overall power flow. This helped Zelda and the Sheikah researchers tremendously. And before long Vah Ruta was nearly fully operational.

There were only two things left to work on now: discovering the functionality of its shoulder orbs, and activating the beast’s mysterious function - one that Zelda was now fully convinced was some form of superweapon…

“When I am operating Vah Ruta’s trunk,” Mipha said, referencing the long appendage that protruded from the nose of the divine beast, “It feels as though it would serve a function other than simply lifting us to higher places, as it has done now. I believe this might be related to the orbs on its shoulders, but I cannot quite articulate the connection…”

They were standing on top of the enormous machine, currently investigating the orbs in an effort to understand their function. Mipha pointed her finger at Vah Ruta’s front-right shoulder. “The diagrams show we should have power flowing to these orbs, but we have yet to successfully trace the stoppage through the... well, through the veins - for lack of a better word - to turn them on.”

Zelda spoke up. “You must be referring to the conduits! I believe this is similar to the issue we faced when adjusting Vah Rudania - age has likely worn down parts of the electrical wiring used to bring power throughout the conduits of the divine beast. A simple scan and repair job should ensure that the electricity is being properly routed from the central core to each of the four orbs. At least, once we figure out what's going on with the transistors anyway. We also seem to have blown some fuses, likely due to an overcurrent problem attributed to our faulty wiring…”

Link felt completely in over his head as he stood by and listened to the incessant fast-paced technobabble spewing from Zelda’s mouth. So far, he’d been utilized more for his brawn than his brains, moving equipment around and generally just lifting heavy objects for the researchers. Not that he resented this or anything.

Mipha, meanwhile, also found herself lacking in technical knowledge, choosing only to speak in general terms when referring to aspects of the ancient technology. And although Link was mildly irritated with Zelda’s constant need to correct Mipha’s technical lexicon - finding it a bit condescending really - Mipha herself was more than happy to continue learning and growing in knowledge from the remarkably intelligent princess.

Zelda reached into her bag, pulling out a pair of gloves and goggles. “It would seem we are on the threshold of a breakthrough. I shall begin maintenance at once!” She quickly peeled back one of Vah Ruta’s roof panels, crawling inside the duct to begin the repair process.
“Hmm, yes,” said Robbie. “A marvelous breakthrough indeed, as expected from our princess.” He struck a dramatic pose, pointing his finger to the sky as he smiled. “I shall join her!” The lens of his strange metal goggles - vaguely resembling the eyes of a Lizalfos - swiveled around separately as they focused on the open duct. He dove inside headfirst, and began to crawl his way after Zelda.

Purah shook her head. “He’s sure got a weird obsession with impressing the princess… Too bad she’s ~ way out his league. Right Link?” She winked.

Link didn’t respond. In the background, Mipha and Impa spoke loosely of their hypothesis regarding the function of the power orbs. But Mipha found herself paying loose attention to Link and Purah’s one-sided conversation…

Purah elbowed Link. “I can see you and the princess are getting along sooooooooo much better than you were back at the castle. So what’s the deal? Did you work your magic?” She snapped her fingers.

Link remained stoic.

“Hmmm…” Purah rubbed her chin. “You really are super boring. Just like my sister…” Impa looked up at Purah briefly, then continued her conversation with Mipha.

Purah smirked. “Anyway. I want to be the first to know if anything develops between you two. I want all the juicy details.”

It was becoming clear to Link that Purah was simply trying to get a reaction out of Mipha. He had, after all, asked Purah the previous day if it were possible for Hylians to extend their lifespans. If anyone knew of such a thing, it would have been Purah. Her genius intellect was matched perhaps only by Zelda's, and her medical knowledge surpassed most of Hyrule’s top doctors to boot.

Of course, the implications of Link’s longevity question were too clear for the Sheikah researcher to miss - though he hadn’t exactly made a significant effort to mask it either.

He was now starting to regret that decision.

“Zelda’s truly grown to be quite the looker, I think.” Purah continued. “~ Anyone would be lucky to be the object of her affection. Too bad Robbie’s luck ran out years ago!” she laughed.

Still loosely tuned in, Mipha overheard Purah’s words… and simply felt happy in her heart. She was so glad to hear that Link and Princess Zelda were finally getting along.

ROOOOOOAAAAWWWW!

The Divine Beast Vah Ruta let out a mighty trumpeting roar as enormous jets of water shot out of its trunk. Zelda’s repair work, along with Robbie’s assistance, had resulted in the discovery of the divine beasts hidden feature- the ability to produce an endless supply of water.

Mipha had quickly mastered the controls for this new function, and was manipulating the trunk up and down to shoot water across the eastern reservoir with ease. It was really quite fun for her, and she spent the entire afternoon getting acquainted with Vah Ruta’s enhanced capabilities. Link watched on in pride, as Purah and Impa continued to coach her. But there was no need for it - she was a natural.

“I underestimated you!” Zelda shouted, as the loud rush of water splashed against the roof of the divine beast. “I must sincerely apologize!”
Mipha shut off the water flow and turned to face the Hylian princess. She nodded her head politely. “No apologies necessary, Zelda. Thank you for teaching me so much more about Vah Ruta. It is very much appreciated.”

The three Sheikah researchers approached the pair, with Robbie standing a little bit too close to Zelda for her liking. She took a slight step away from him.

“My pleasure, of course.” Zelda said. “And I must say, I find myself feeling just a little bit more prepared for Calamity Ganon’s return. But there is still so much work to be done…”

“Indeed.” Impa said. “But… I feel that for once, I’d like to follow King Rhoam’s example - and take some time to congratulate everyone for a job well-done.” She grinned lightly, much to everyone’s surprise.

Purah’s face lit up as she saw this. “~ Finally!” She flashed a thumbs-up to her younger sister. “I’ve been waiting to see you smile for months now!”

Impa’s face became stoic again.

“…And, it’s gone again. Should’ve seen that coming…”

As Zelda and the three researchers began to write and discuss their reports of the work on Vah Ruta, Link dropped down from one of the platforms in Vah Ruta’s interior. He held his hand up to Mipha, summoning her towards him. She nodded, and began to walk in his direction. She noticed that he was carrying a loosely-wrapped bundle in his arms.

“What can I do for you, Master Link?” she asked.

He carefully unwrapped the object, revealed the Silverscale Spear she had gifted him years prior. It was broken cleanly in several pieces.

Mipha grabbed the bundle from him, nodding calmly.

“My apologies,” she said, “It would seem my craftsmanship was not up to standard after all-”

“I used it every day.” Link interrupted. ”It was bound to break at some point.”

Mipha found herself smiling widely on the inside, but she continued to hide it. She maintained her professional demeanor. “I see.” she said. “Very well then. I shall bring it to Dento for repairs.” She re-wrapped the pieces and and put them in her bag, crossed her arms across her chest.

“Is there anything else that you might need repaired?”

Link shrugged. Nothing really came to his mind...

Mipha paused for a moment… then she smirked, nodding her head in the direction of Link’s arm. He glanced down, finally seeing that his arm was… dripping from his elbow. A vibrant red bloodstain pooled on the floor beneath him.

He cringed slightly. He’d done his best to hide this wound for the last few days, but it appeared the fish was out of the net now. So to speak.

“That’s just a scratch.” he explained.

“Oh, I’m really quite sure it-”
“AHEM!” Zelda interrupted. She stood off to the side with her hands on her hips. “I believe that it is time for the members of the Sheikah Tribe, and myself, to report our findings to King Dorephan…” Zelda and the other researchers began to make their way toward the main entrance of Vah Ruta.

Impa noticed that Link and Mipha were a bit slow in joining them. She stopped and turned. “Is something the matter?” she asked.

Zelda waved it off. “Oh, I believe that these two will be joining us a bit later.” She said. She gestured loosely in Link’s direction.

“It appears they have a mess to clean up!”

“This reminds me of the time we first met…” Mipha said.

They were sitting together on the tip of Vah Ruta’s trunk, as it slowly raised the pair high above the waters of the eastern reservoir.

They were finally alone. No more interruptions, no more distractions.

Nothing left to hide.

“You were just a reckless child.” Mipha said. “Always getting yourself hurt at every turn.” Her hand glowed a familiar blue hue, as she healed the deep gash on Link’s arm.

“Every time… I would heal you. Just as I’m doing right now…”

Mipha paused for a moment in reflection. Her face was serene, peaceful. Loving.

She continued. “I thought it was funny how, being a Hylian, you looked grown-up so much faster than I did.”

Link turned his head, and he began to stare carefully into Mipha’s vibrant yellow eyes. The cold feeling in his heart was melting away...

“I was….” Mipha paused. “I was always willing to heal your wounds. Even back then…” She said this carefully, as if hoping to reassure Link that he need not worry about inconveniencing her with a simple healing request. It was clear to her that this was the reason he’d hidden the wound from her for all this time…

Her hand glowed brighter, and before long the deep gash had disappeared entirely from Link’s forearm. Hesitantly, she pulled her hand away from Link as he examined his newly-repaired skin.

Mipha turned and stared wistfully at the horizon. The sun was beginning to set now, the sky glowing a brilliant blend of orange and yellow in front of them.

“So if this Calamity Ganon does, in fact, return, what can we really do?” Mipha lamented. “We just don’t seem to know much about what we’ll be up against…” Link leaned in slightly towards Mipha as she spoke.

“But know this: that no matter how difficult this battle might get… if you-” she turned her head towards Link, returning his gaze. “-if anyone ever tries to do you harm… then I will heal you. No matter when, or how bad the wound…I hope you know that I will always protect you.” She suddenly turned away again, Link’s close stare leaving her mildly flustered on the inside. Her hand were clasped together just above her lap, their grip tightening more and more as she spoke.
“Once this whole thing is over… maybe things can go back to how they used to be when we were young… You know.”

She paused for a second, before turning her gaze fully towards Link.

“Perhaps we could spend some time together…?”

Her smile was absolutely radiant, and Link found that he could not help but return it. She always had a way of breaking his guard down, in the most graceful of ways. And he loved her for that. The cold ice around his heart began to break, to shatter. A feeling of warmth and comfort entered into his soul.

Mipha calmly looked away again. She didn’t expect a response from Link, and that was fine. That he even cracked a smile at all was good enough. For now, she’d said all that she needed to-

“I… also want you to know…” Link spoke suddenly, to Mipha's surprise. His face was serious, focused. His voice was calm and assuring...

“…I want you to know that I will fight to the death for you….for all of you. I'll do whatever it takes to bring down Ganon.” A brief moment of silence settled in between them, but Mipha was pleasantly shocked. This was the most she had heard Link speak at one time, since the moment he'd arrived that week.

Since the moment he’d left Zora’s Domain two years ago, in fact.

The weight of responsibility and criticism he’d endured, in the years they'd been apart, had taken an obvious toll on his spirit. This much she had been certain of, even well before their subdued initiation ceremony many weeks prior.

When he had lived in Zora’s Domain as a child, Link had an awful habit of retreating into himself when under duress. It was a persona that she was all-too familiar with: the strong, mysterious, silent Link. But back then it was an incredibly rare state for him to be in, and he would snap out of it rather quickly.

So with all the pressure on his shoulders, this appeared to be his default exterior now - making it all the more precious to hear him speak at all. Especially in the midst of the storm they found themselves in. Yet in the otherwise confident words he spoke, she still noted the barely perceptible tones of weariness and sorrow in his voice. She knew him far too well to miss that. And this grieved her greatly. Her mind began to formulate a response to him, but Link spoke up again.

“Most of all,” he said, “…it will be my pleasure to see this whole thing through to the end,” he looked away briefly, before slowly turning to face her again - just as she had done to him moments before. “Especially knowing that you are waiting for me on the other side.”

He flashed a boy-like grin, perfectly sincere, seldom used.

Mipha’s yellow eyes lit up and she smiled again. She couldn’t hide the look of sheer joy on her face. Because the Link that she knew and loved - playful, confident, kind and compassionate - was still there after all. She suddenly pulled Link into a tight embrace, and he slowly reciprocated.

But Mipha simply couldn’t help herself. After all, that same courageous, sweet boy she once knew - now hidden in the cold-focused exterior of a young man - had emerged again.

And she was going to savor every precious moment of it.
“Perhaps there are… other scars on your body that you would like examined? Your torso, maybe?”

Now, with any other girl, Link would have suspected some kind of ulterior motive in this. But this was Mipha - innocent, sincere Mipha - and he trusted her. He had spent most of his time shirtless while living in Zora’s Domain anyway.

Still, he couldn't help but tease her about it.

“You're just looking for an excuse to see me with my top off again.” he said, calmly but playfully.

Mipha fell right in step, her eyes narrowing slightly as she continued looking at him.

“Well...I am neither going to confirm nor deny that.”

Link chuckled silently.

“Shirt please.” she insisted.

Link did as he was told, then turned and laid flat on his stomach. The stone exterior of the divine beast's trunk was cold against his bare flesh, but this didn't bother him much.

“Ah, now that is more like it.” Her fingers began to trace a line across the jagged remnants of a scar that stretched from his right shoulder blade all the way down to his tailbone.

“I am certain that there is a funny - and potentially reckless - story behind this one…?” she ventured.

Link grinned at himself, recalling the memory of that injury. He began to recount a ludicrous tale about his efforts to take down a massive one-eyed monster - wearing only a towel and wielding a farmer’s pitchfork. As he recanted the story, he began to grow more and more animated in his expression.

“In all fairness…” he said, “it was not reckless strictly by choice. We weren’t exactly expecting a Hinox of all things to attack in the middle of our annual rock-climbing contest.”

“...Wearing only a towel?” Mipha mused.

“That was a dare!”

Mipha stared after him, unmoved.

“...Okay, I suppose that was a bit reckless.”

A comfortable silence set in between them, and Mipha continued running her hands along Link’s scars, using her healing powers to help reduce their visibility. Link couldn't help but notice that she was being a little more hands-on than she normally would, if his memory of childhood healing sessions was anything to go by. He also noticed her hands briefly venturing to areas he knew were scar-free, before returning quickly to the project at-hand. It wasn’t unwelcome to be sure. He had missed Mipha terribly during their time apart. But he found himself speculating about the extra motions across his back...

...Copping a feel? No no no. Not her.

Curiosity? Possible, but unlikely.

Measurements?
...Maybe.

With his basic knowledge of Zoran courtship and rituals, as well as the tone and meaning of her words earlier, he could speculate as to the real purpose behind her deliberate hand movements across his back and shoulders. But again, this was honest, innocent Mipha. He was more than willing to give her the benefit of the doubt in all this. Nothing sinister to be found here.

And besides, if it was for the actual reason he was thinking of, then he truly wanted nothing more than for it to be the perfect surprise.

For the both of them.

They made it as far as the main entrance to Vah Ruta. They lingered there, saying nothing. Both spared a glance, noticed each other's hesitation, laughed quietly.

Night had firmly settled in, bathing the landscape in sheer darkness. The mood was quiet, solemn, and peaceful. And they simply didn’t want to leave. Not now. Not yet.

After standing there for some time, Link finally took the initiative. He grabbed Mipha by the hand, leading her to the pedestal sitting near the entrance. They sat down there, side by side, backs against the column, gazing out across the calm waters of the eastern reservoir. The moon was nearly full that night, reflecting its beautiful white light across the water’s surface. There wasn't a single place in the entire world that either of them would rather be.

It was nearly midnight. Surely the others would be wondering just what was keeping the pair away from the domain for so long. But both Link and Mipha found that, in this moment, they could not be bothered to care.

Link produced a small blanket from his rucksack, draping it across them. The warmth of their bodies fended off the cool night air, and Mipha carefully rested her head on Link’s shoulder. His right arm found its place on Mipha’s right shoulder, and the two of them sighed quietly.

Their embrace tightened, their eyes slowly closed. And soon, they fell asleep, together, just like that.

Face to face, chest to chest, heart to heart.

“Do you think we can do it?” Mipha asked.

Dento nodded. “I cannot guarantee that it will be quite as good as the original…” He said. “But we’ll give it our best shot.”

Mipha had brought the pieces of the Silverscale Spear to the Zora smithy, Dento. Rather than simply getting it fixed, she was hoping to do something a little bit extra for Link.

Dento was the original creator of her precious Lightscale Trident. He’d gifted the weapon to her on the day she was born, and it was easily one of the finest weapons he had ever produced. Creating a duplicate would be difficult… but he was confident that he could get it done.

Unfortunately, Link and Zelda had quickly departed that morning, on their way back to Gerudo Desert. Mipha was mildly upset that were unable to replace Link’s spear in time for his seventeenth birthday tomorrow. But she was also encouraged by Dento’s confidence in his craftsmanship. If they could complete the weapon in time for the next scheduled rendezvous of the Champions at Hyrule Castle in two months... then it would still be a nice surprise for Link indeed.
Mipha reflected on the memory of Link wielding her Lightscale trident during their battle with the Lynel. She looked forward to eventually seeing him bear one of his very own. She smiled to herself.

*A trident... really did suit him quite well,* she mused.

Meanwhile, Link and Zelda made their way on horseback down the mountain road from Zora’s Domain. They were leaving much earlier than expected. The previous night, Zelda had noticed some issues with Vah Naboris’s readings on her Sheikah Slate. As much as they had enjoyed their brief stay at the domain, their duties sadly remained. They were, after all, reaching the endgame for their preparations for Calamity Ganon’s return - and they simply could not afford to ignore even the *slightest* malfunction of any of the divine beasts at this point. Still, Link found himself mildly frustrated at their abrupt departure. Zelda noticed, but was careful not to remark on this.

“From what I can gather,” she said, staring at her Sheikah Slate as their horses trotted down the path, “There are some bizarre energy spikes in Vah Naboris’s feet. We’ll have to investigate the situation. These spikes are causing its steps to be erratic, out-of-sync…” she paused, put her slate down, and glanced over at Link.

He was staring off into space, hardly acknowledging Zelda’s words. Her expression turned somber, her eyes became downcast as she looked carefully at him.

Much to her disappointment… Link’s silent, cold persona had returned just as quickly as it had gone.

And reflecting on the scene that she had flusteredly stumbled upon that morning... two souls, quietly asleep in each other's arms... she found herself slowly beginning to share in Link's deep, solemn, profound heartache.

Chapter End Notes

I've been eagerly awaiting this chapter myself for some time. It includes some of the scenes I wrote long before this fic even started, and it amazes me the direction this story has turned, while still adhering to what I had originally envisioned.

Thanks for your readership. And I hope you look forward to Chapter 15: Old Demons.
"What is the matter, Link? Are you unwell?" Sidon asked.

Even Muzu appeared concerned. “Hm? You are quivering like a hatchling.” he said. “Whatever is the matter?"

Link stood there, the Zora armor still clutched in his hands. The vision had lasted only a few seconds. Physically, the flashbacks were becoming much easier to bear. But emotionally, they were just as damaging as ever. He was shivering, shaking uncontrollably. Overwhelmed with emotion, overwhelmed with regret.

“I… I remember.” Link paused. He glanced at Muzu. “I remember… this armor… it’s…”

Muzu scoffed. “WHAT?! Do not mistake me for a fool, Hylian. There is no way you suddenly remembered anything about that armor, just now, when it is most convenient.” He composed himself, his hands returned to their usual place behind his back.

“In any case, without any solid proof, I—”

Link glared angrily, and hastily shed his Sheikah top, donning the Zora armor.

The pang of guilty sorrow sent shockwaves through his body... as he realized that the armor fit him. Absolutely perfectly.

He looked down at himself, then held his hands up in offering towards Muzu.

“What in the… NO!” Muzu cried out. “It cannot be! Lady Mipha made that by hand… and yet it is exactly your size!”

Sidon smirked. “Do you understand now, Muzu? The only way that something like this could happen… is if Mipha had intimate knowledge of Link’s measurements. Surely this proves everything you need to know.” He gestured in Link’s direction. “Mipha’s heart belonged to him, and him alone.” He crossed his arms and stared proudly at Muzu. “You have always disliked Hylians. Even before the Great Calamity. That is why Mipha never told you the truth of the matter.”

Muzu maintained his defiant poise, but he relented just a little. “Hmph. I never would have imagined she would make that special armor for one such as he…” he said.

Standing there, overcome with emotion, with heartache, with love, Link could remain silent no longer. He stared at Muzu coldly, unmoved.

“Muzu. Let my acceptance of Lady Mipha’s proposal... serve as absolute proof of my resolve to assist you.” He walked carefully towards Muzu, and placed his hand on the elderly Zora’s shoulder. The old Zora recoiled at Link’s physical gesture, but did not pull away from him.

“All my life…” Link continued, “I have kept Lady Mipha in my heart. All my life… I have considered Zora’s Domain to be my home. Truly, I say to you that all of the Zora are part of my family. And that includes you.” He closed his eyes.
“Please. I beg of you. Allow me the chance to atone for the mistakes of the past. Allow me to fight and save the domain… and all of Hyrule… in honor of the one that I loved so dearly.” Though the tears didn’t fall, the sincere look of pain and sadness was unmistakable on Link’s face.

And finally, after standing there in silence for some time… Muzu broke.

“I... do not approve of asking for help from a Hylian.” he sighed. “But I suppose it is our only option at this point. I am a very proud Zora. That means I must take responsibility for my… unwarranted behavior towards you.” He turned and faced Shatterback Point, which loomed apparently in the distant - even through the persistent rainfall.

“As promised,” he said, “I shall tell you where you can collect as many shock arrows as you will need.” He pointed to the peak. “A terrifying creature has made its home up there. The awful beast shoots volley after volley of shock arrows. Even a single one could be fatal to a Zora.”

Sidon cried out in shock, his eyes widening. “You must mean that Lynel! He is a man-beast, that one! That beast does indeed wield shock arrows. That is certainly one way to collect them quickly…” He smiled. “He is vicious to be sure. But I am certain Link will rise to the challenge.” He winked in Link’s direction. “After all, this wouldn’t be the first time he slayed a Lynel here at the domain…”

Link shrugged. “That may not be necessary, however.” He buried his emotions for now, and produced a quiver from his back - the same one he’d stolen from one of the Lizalfos warriors he’d slain earlier that day. He counted the arrows inside.

“There’s about sixteen shock arrows left in here. Will that suffice?”

Both Sidon and Muzu smiled at this.

“I had totally forgotten that you had those, Link!” said Sidon. “As expected, from our brilliant Hylian Champion!”

Muzu shook his head. “I would say that twenty would be far better… but I suppose that shall do.”

Sidon held both hands up in triumph. “Wonderful! Together, we shall stop that Divine Beast’s onslaught!” He placed his hands on Link’s shoulders. “Let us meet tonight, and we shall formulate a battle plan! We attack at dawn! Oh my... I must make preparations immediately!” He suddenly ran off, calling back to Link as he did. “I shall see you tonight! Tomorrow’s battle will be a glorious one indeed!”

The unlikely pair, Link and Muzu, stood there in silence for a while. Link stared after Mipha’s statue for a moment, and Muzu did the same. Nothing was said for a time… until Muzu finally spoke.

“I must admit, Master Link, that I have intentionally allowed my memory of your time here to slip away. Back then I never would have imagined that you and Mipha had anything more than a fickle, passing friendship. Oh how wrong I was…” He took a proud pose again, and stared intently at Link. “I... am not sure that I can ever truly forgive the mistakes of the past. But I wish you luck.” He paused briefly.

“I... I have nothing more to say.”

Link continued to stand there, no longer hesitant to dwell on the memories of his time with Mipha inside of Vah Ruta.

One thing that drew his focus… was his old persona of the past. His uncontrollable silence, his quiet, cold attitude. Here he was now, reawakened, disconnected from that lost time, and slowly regaining
his forgotten memories. He was surprised at how easily his emotions now swept him away in the present day. Surprised at how easily he expressed his thoughts and feelings to others.

The contrast was evident. And incredibly jarring.

But it seemed that over the course of a century, and within the throes of amnesia... Link had simply forgotten how to be silent anymore.

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Link made his way back to King Dorephan for a brief follow-up. The memories replayed themselves over and over in his mind as he made his way there. And as he arrived in front of the king, he wasn't quite sure how to begin...

So King Dorephan took the initiative.

“I was so proud when Mipha was chosen as our Champion… but I was also quite distressed about it…” Dorephan said. “When Calamity Ganon took control of Divine Beast Vah Ruta… it all happened so fast. I cannot help but feel that I should have tried harder to keep Mipha from harm. I should not have let her go.”

Link snapped back to the present. He produced a piece of jerky from his bag, chewing it absentmindedly. Food always had a calming effect on him, and he felt he certainly needed this after yet another onslaught of memories.

“What happened?” Link asked bluntly, mouth full of chewed food.

“You mean… what happened to Mipha?” Dorephan asked. “Not even I know that. Calamity Ganon took control of the four Divine Beasts… and trapped the Champions inside of them.” He closed his eyes in reflection. “Since then, not a single one of them has returned. It pains me to think what must have happened. All I can do is hope and pray, though I am well aware of the odds that anyone could have survived something like that.”

The tears invaded Link’s eyes, but he fought them back. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could bury his emotions… nor was he sure if he even needed to anymore.

“I always knew… how much you both meant to each other.” King Dorephan continued. “You have always been like another son to me, Link. You are family… and I pray for your success. You are aware of the objective, and we should focus on this for the time being.” Link nodded, and decided it would be best to take his leave from the throne room. There was nothing more for him to say. He walked slowly towards the entrance way...

“Ah, and one more thing, Link.” Dorephan called back. A smile grew on his face.

“On behalf of all of us here at Zora’s Domain…”

“Welcome home.”

________________________________________________________________________

“Linny! I can’t believe it, it really is you!” Kodah’s hands hovered in front of her face in utter shock. “Wow… it’s been such a long time! I had thought you and Mipha… fell to Calamity Ganon.” She leaned on one leg, hand on her hip.

_Same pose as a hundred years ago_...

Link couldn’t help himself, pulling her into a warm embrace. Well, her _midsection_.

“It is good… to see you again Kodah.” Link said, pulling away. “...I still can’t get over how tall everyone is…”

“I’ll bet!” she said. “...Oh, wait. Where are my manners! Link-” she gestured over to a blue Zora standing next to them. “You remember Kayden, right? He was still a baby when you were last here.” She smiled.

“Hello there!” said Kayden, walking over to shake Link’s hand. “I hardly remember you… but it is good to see you again, friend!”

Kodah and Kayden were the owners of the inn of Zora’s Domain. The inn was a new addition, according to Link’s memories. It seemed that the younger Zora, at least, were just fine with accommodating the needs of Hylian travelers with beds to sleep in. Even if the elders weren’t so keen about it…

“Anyway, Link. I’m truly shocked to see you alive and well!” Kodah said. “How is that even possible?” She glanced at Link’s new armor, but decided not to remark on it for the time being.

Link sighed, and began to speak up... But Kodah noticed his hesitation, holding up her hand to stop him.

“Actually, you should just tell me later. I can see from your face… that you’re not exactly in the mood to talk about it right now.” she paused. “...I’m guessing you’ve already encountered the elders here? They hate your guts!”

“Tell me about it…” Link said. “ I never would have imagined that would happen. So much has changed in my absence…”

“Except for your rugged good looks!” Kodah said. “Oh, wait.” She turned to face her husband. “Sorry Kayden!”

Kayden laughed. “Don’t worry about it, dear. You are stuck with your ugly husband for eternity now, after all!” Kodah smiled back at him.

“Ain’t that the truth!”

Link shook his head. Kodah was just as goofy and flirtatious as he remembered her. He returned to the subject of the older Zora. “I wish… that there was a way to make amends with the elders.” he said. “I know that they blame me for Mipha’s fate…”

Kodah’s mood turned serious, somber. “It’s okay Link… the rest of us are well aware of the truth of what happened all those years ago. We’ve argued countless times with the council members, but they’re really a stubborn bunch. I don’t know that they’ll ever forgive you for what happened. However…”

She gestured to the edge of the town square, overlooking the massive lake below Zora’s Domain.

“I do know one thing that might appease them. Slightly. Councilman Trello lost the Ceremonial Trident a few days ago. It’s pretty important… and I’ll bet he’d be grateful if you managed to find it for him!”

Link’s eyes lit up slightly at this. “Well, I’ve got a little bit of time to kill… do you have any idea where it is?”

Kodah smiled again. “I definitely do! It was propped up right at the edge of the town square, and the
wind blew it down to the waters below. I wanted to tell him, but... well, we're not exactly on speaking terms right now."

Link thanked Kodah for the information, and she guided him over to the edge of the platform.

"It’s below... there probably." She pointed to a small waterfall, where Link's new gliding buddy Gruve stood above, peering at the waters below. "I'm sure the water flow has pushed it around a bit, but it should still be in that general area in the lake below. Good luck!"

Without delay, Link ran up to the waterfall above, chatted with Gruve for a bit, then dove flawlessly into the lake under Zora’s Domain. Though it may have been a trick of the imagination, Link found that the Zora armor helped him cut through the water with great ease. It even seemed that he could hold his breath for a bit longer now.

*More than ten seconds, anyway,* he mused, painfully.

After some time, he eventually found it. He breached the surface, and swam to a nearby rock to examine it.

He froze.

It was a near-flawless replica of Mipha’s Lightscale trident. All the way down to the colors and precise etchings.

Nearly overcome with nostalgia, Link carefully strapped the weapon to his back, and swam up the waterfall to look for Councilman Trello.

"Where in Hylia’s name did you find that?!" shouted Trello.

Link shrugged. "Just under the Domain, next to a rock. It wasn’t too hard I suppose..."

"Hmmph." Trello scoffed. "I was just about to tell you to get lost. I can hardly stand to even see your face. In fact... when I first saw you arrive my first instinct was to kill you where you stood." Link’s heart broke at the statement. Trello was the youngest of the elders, and had once been a happy, older, part-time member of the Bazz Brigade. He’d quickly outgrown their adventures, but Link always maintained a feeling of friendship and camaraderie with the wily Zora.

His words discouraged Link, but he remained resilient.

"Councilman Trello..." he began, "I know it hardly means anything to you, but I sincerely apologize. For everything.” He gestured in the direction of the east reservoir dam. “I will be setting out to appease Vah Ruta first thing tomorrow morning. And in case something happens to me, I just wanted you to know how deeply sorry I am.” He began to hand the trident over to Trello, but the elder Zora did not take it.

"Empty words, Hylian. ” He spit the words out in mild disgust.

Link was tempted to drop the trident right there and walk away... Yet the councilman continued.

...Still... I must thank you for your efforts, albeit begrudgingly.” He turned away from Link. “The King has made his decision. I am no longer in any position to argue. Therefore...”

He gestured at the trident in Link’s hands. “Take it with you. Perhaps it will assist you in my stead during your assault on the Divine Beast tomorrow.”
Link grinned. “Trello, I can’t…”

The Zora shook his head, waving Link off.

Link returned the trident to his back. He was incredibly grateful for the gesture. “Thank you, councilman. I swear… that I will not let you down.”

Trello glared. “You’d best stake your life on that promise! Now begone, before I change my mind…”

Link nodded, and departed swiftly.

“And when you succeed…” Trello called after him, “That trident had better be returned to me in one piece!”

“You told the King of Hyrule... that his beard was fake!?” Bazz chuckled loudly. “I’ll be laughing about that one for eternity!”

The Bazz Brigade had agreed to meet Link at the Veiled Falls - their old stomping grounds - for a nice catch-up. Sidon and Kodah had joined them, and Link planned to speak with Sidon privately after the gathering to go over their plan for the assault on Vah Ruta the next morning.

The rain fell steadily around them, but neither Zora nor Hylian were bothered by its relentless pouring. They spoke over the sound of raindrops, the ground around them lit only by the gentle glow of luminous stone clusters surrounding them.

Home again indeed… Link thought, painfully.

“It truly is marvelous to have the whole group back again!” Said Sidon. “Well… I say that carefully. What with my sister’s absence and all.” He looked up and frowned. “I’m terribly sorry everyone, I shouldn’t have said -”

“Don’t fret, Sidon. You can say it.” Said Link, through his heartache. “Besides, you’ve all had to deal with a century of worry… of grief… of not knowing what truly happened to Mipha in Vah Ruta.” He paused briefly. “Who am I to complain? You all knew her for far longer than I ever did…”

“Oh come off it. Don’t kid yourself.” said Kodah. She elbowed Link. “As her fiancé, you have just as much right to grieve as we did.” She glanced at Link’s Zora armor. He hadn’t taken it off since his confrontation with Muzu in front of the statue of Mipha…

“I have to admit,” said Kodah, “She did an amazing job with that armor, Linny. It really does suit you!” Link said nothing, as Kodah stared after him for a while. Her playful grin turned into a frown.

“Linny… I know you may not remember this. But I’m sorry for making you choose between me and Mipha back then. It was clear who your heart belonged to from the get-go. But it only made it worse for me to hear that from you directly.” She smiled again. “I definitely respected you for saying something like that without hesitating… though I wouldn’t have admitted it at the time!”

Link couldn’t help but smile back. Of course he remembered that encounter. He’d felt really quite awful about breaking Kodah’s heart that day… but was once again glad that she’d let go of the whole thing long ago.

“Well, since we’re on the subject of Mipha…” Gaddison suddenly spoke up. “What’s the game plan
tomorrow? When are we meeting?"

What?!

“Yeah!” said Rivan. “How in the world are we going to attack Vah Ruta? That thing rampages against anyone who gets anywhere near it!”

Link shook his head. “No. I’m definitely not going to allow this. It’s bad enough that Sidon is putting himself in danger. But there’s no way I’m letting all of you risk your lives again…”

“I must agree with Link,” said Sidon. “As much as I would enjoy fighting alongside you lot again, we’re talking about a divine beast here. It will be so incredibly dangerous, and I insist that you allow Link and I to-”

“Not happening, Sidon.” Bazz said, flatly. “If Link goes, we all go.”

"Is that so?"

The group jumped, as an elderly but stern voice called to them from the darkness. The figure emerged into the soft luminous light, and the Bazz Brigade all stood up and saluted him.

_Demon Sergeant Seggin._

Link hadn’t gotten a good look at him back in the throne room, but the old sarge was considerably shorter than he had been over a hundred years ago. Far more wrinkled to boot. Still, he carried his same, proud posture. Hands behind his back.

“You shall do no such thing.” Seggin said. He paused for a moment, and a look of sheer disappointment appeared on the faces of the Zora guards.

“Or at least, you shall not do so… without my involvement.”

He continued to walk, straight up to Link. He peered deeply into Link’s eyes. The two stood there, unflinching, for several moments.

“Master Link,” Seggin finally said. “I overheard your conversation with Muzu. I make no apologies for eavesdropping…” The other Zora relaxed, waiting to hear what Seggin had to say.

He examined Link’s armor, closed his eyes in reflection. “Though I am still angered by the events of 100 years ago - even today - I am wholeheartedly convinced of your resolve. I saw how close you were to Mipha, even if Muzu was himself so blatantly ignorant. I saw how much she truly loved you.”

Link closed his eyes, still reeling at the pain of losing Mipha...

“I feel,” Seggin continued, “that I would dishonor the memory of our dear lady if I did not assist you in your endeavors tomorrow. So I shall be the one to lead you all into battle.”

The Zora let out a cheer of happiness, as Seggin turned to face Sidon.

“Now, Prince Sidon. Let us formulate our plan of attack.”

Link laid down on one of the waterbeds of the inn. He’d been given the bed free of charge, courtesy of Kodah and her husband. Despite Link’s insistence on paying, Kodah was not one to be denied. As usual.
Reflecting once again on his newest recovered memories, Link's heart sank to his gut. And yet... he found that the last shred of optimistic hope had yet to tear itself away. If there was even a sliver of a chance that Mipha was still in there, somehow, then he'd cling to that until the bitter end. He would have to feed off his pain instead.

His thoughts turned to the pending assault on Vah Ruta with the Bazz Brigade. For now, there was still a tremendously important job to do. It would be his honor to fight alongside his friends; and especially an honor to be lead into battle by the legendary Demon Sergeant himself. This was, in fact, a dream of his when he was a kid. But he lamented the circumstances that had finally brought the opportunity into fruition.

By candlelight, Link pulled out Mipha’s note from his bag and read over it. His mind wandered again, considering the words of King Rhoam back at the plateau. The old man had told Link that he would have to rescue the souls of the Champions inside each divine beast...

Had he known something that Link didn't? Or was it merely speculation on his part? And why did the king ask him to send his regards to Dorephan... and Lady Mipha? It seemed like such a cruel move, in the light of present circumstances.

Link wasn’t sure if he could handle the worst-case scenario after all. So he refused to accept it. He put the note back in its watertight bag, this time slipping it into a pocket on his armor’s chest. He blew out the candle, and rolled over to try to sleep.

It was just after two o’clock in the morning. Their assault would begin in five hours. He had a feeling it was going to be a very long day.

As he drifted off, he prayed and pleaded to Hylia - in his mind, and in his heart - hoping his words would somehow reach the Zora Princess who he loved so dearly.

Please hang on just a bit longer, Mipha. If you’re still in there... somehow, some way... I just pray that you’re okay.

I want you to know... that I would give anything to be with you once again.

Finally, Link allowed the tears to flow. And the darkness of sleep pulled him into its merciful embrace once again.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this one. Prepare your butts for Chapter 16: Breakwater.

Note: This has been re-posted on fanfiction.net (https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12482358/1/A-Fish-out-of-Water) so feel free to check it out there! Or not. You know, whatever man.
“Right, so… Where’s Link?” asked Gaddison.

It was just after seven o’clock in the morning, and the Bazz Brigade - plus Sidon and Seggin - had just arrived at a resting area next to the eastern reservoir. Vah Ruta loomed menacingly in the distance, threatening the assault team with a loud clanging of ancient gears and the roar of rushing water.

“I’m not sure what’s keeping him...” said Sidon. “When I came to retrieve him from the inn this morning he was already gone. He wasn’t anywhere near the domain either, so I assumed he’d simply come here early... but...”

“He’ll be here.” Said Seggin. “If there is one thing I know with certainty about Master Link, it’s that he is a Hylian of his word. We shall wait patiently for him.”

“YEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGH!”

A war cry echoed deeply across the eastern reservoir.

Startled, the five Zora glanced left and right for the source, before finally looking up at the peak of Ploymus Mountain; Shatterback Point.

A small, narrow figure suddenly leaped from the top. As the figure drew closer, a grin of recognition spread across the faces of the young Zora.

Link’s diving pose was absolutely flawless as he fell through the air from the top of the infamous point. He hit the water with scarcely a splash, and the Bazz Brigade let out cheers of joy and pride. Even Seggin himself smirked a bit at the young Hylian’s daring.

With the help of the Zora armor, Link cut through the water towards the waiting Zora, shooting straight out and landing effortlessly next to Prince Sidon. Pumped with adrenaline, he marched over to Seggin and forcefully shook his hand.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, grinning. “I had a Lynel problem to take care of.” He pointed to a weapon on his back, strapped alongside the ceremonial trident:

A Savage Lynel Spear.

Sidon laughed at this, shook his head in disbelief. “Well then, Welcome to manhood, my dear friend!” He turned his attention to Divine Beast Vah Ruta, which itself appeared to be slowly rotating to face the impending strike team. “It seems everything is in order.” He said. “Shock arrows ready?”

Link nodded, handing eight of his shock arrows to Seggin. The demon sergeant flinched slightly as
he grabbed the cluster, but his high tolerance for electricity allowed him to holster them without issue. The whole team then dove into the water - sans Link, who jumped on Sidon’s back instead. Lined up and ready for battle, the team floated there in silence for a brief moment, waiting for their cue.

For once, Sidon found himself at a loss for words. So Link spoke.

“For Lady Mipha,” he said.

“FOR LADY MIPHA!”

Vah Ruta answered with a massive roar of its own.

And the battle was on.

A swarm of ghastly, flying skulls suddenly erupted from the interior of Vah Ruta as the team approached through the water at high speed. The group split up, encircling the Divine Beast on either side. Link began to snipe these bizarre monsters with arrows from the back of Sidon. The other Zora, wielding Silverscale Spears, took turns launching out of the water and stabbing the creatures in midair. After destroying this initial wave, they regrouped on the other side of Vah Ruta, their initial pass complete.

“That wasn’t so bad…” said Rivan.

“Do not let your guards down!” Shouted Seggin. “That was a new attack I hadn’t seen before. It seems the beast has learned some new tricks…”

“Again!” shouted Link. Let’s aim for an opening.” They began to swim towards Vah Ruta once more.

“Gaddison and I will take the lead as planned!” shouted Bazz. “We’ll clear a path to the first orb!” Another wave of enemies emerged from out of the beast and attempted to block the way to the waterfalls leading to Ruta’s shoulder orbs. Gaddison and Bazz destroyed these new clusters of monsters in front of them, while Link continued sniping them down with arrows. Rivan and Seggin mopped up stragglers that chased them in the back. And in no time, they arrived right alongside the Divine Beast...

“Precision is the key, young master.” Yelled Seggin. “Shock arrows ready!”

“AYE!” Said Link. The rest of the Zora peeled off from the formation as Sidon leapt from the water, launching Link up the waterfall. He began to swim up, Seggin alongside him.

At the top, the pair launched out of the water, drew back on their bows, and fired their shock arrows at the first glowing red orb. An explosion of yellow light. An incredible roar from the Divine Beast. And the first orb began to glow a vibrant green.

Link punched the air in triumph as he and Seggin dove straight back into the waters below. Sidon picked up Link and the group of Zora re-took their formation to encircle the Divine Beast again.

“That’s one down.” Said Seggin. He seemed a bit shaken from his prolonged contact with the shock arrow, but he was otherwise okay. “Be prepared now,” he continued, “I believe we may have angered the-”

SHING!
“What are those things?!” cried Rivan.

Countless glowing blue cubes suddenly appeared around Vah Ruta, spiraling around the beast.

Seggin remained calm. “Those are the ice blocks I told you about…” he replied. “But they are a bit larger than I remember. Phase two. Let us begin.”

Sidon continued to swim at the surface in a perimeter around Vah Ruta. Meanwhile, the other Zora dove underwater, swimming a few feet below Link and Sidon. The ice blocks began focusing on the pair, shooting straight at them one after another. Link shot down each block as they flew towards them. He was taking them down with relative ease from his stable position on the back of Sidon...

...But unfortunately, he was starting to run low on arrows.

After destroying the last one, Link heard Sidon shout out from under him. “This is our opportunity! Are you ready to transfer?”

“Yes!”

“Let’s go!”

Sidon shot out of the lake, launching Link off his back again in the direction of Vah Ruta. Link dove straight underwater, cutting just beneath the surface like a torpedo.

As he did so, a new cluster of ice blocks materialized around the Divine Beast. These attacks continued to focus on Sidon, who now swam the opposite way. They shot after him, one after another, but there was no way they could catch the best swimmer in all of Zora’s Domain - especially without a passenger on his back.

The Zora Prince allowed himself a short glance at the second waterfall as he swam away, with twenty massive ice blocks still giving him chase...

*Did Link make it? Come on… come on… Yes!*

Link and Seggin both breached the surface at rapid speed. Link rode atop the elderly Zora’s back as they made their way straight to the waterfall. They separated at the base, swam up, fired off their arrows once again.

*Two down, two to go…*

At this time, the entire group pulled back and swam out of range of Vah Ruta. The beast let out another angry, trumpeting roar. The flying ice blocks returned back to it, offering the assault team a brief chance to regroup once again.

Seggin coughed a bit. “Excellent work, all of you. Although I do not believe these old bones can handle another maneuver like *that*. You are heavier than I imagined, Master Link…”

Link shrugged. “I don’t think a solitary distraction like that is going to work again anyway. We’ll have to divide its attention between *all* of us now.”

Seggin scowled. “Loathe as I am to put the others at risk… I agree.” He coughed again. “No more redundancy. You and I shall strike the final two orbs separately.” He turned to the other Zora. “*All* of you must serve as our diversion now.” They nodded at Seggin, and yet again swam towards Vah Ruta to begin their final assault…
Unfortunately, Vah Ruta was *adapting*. It seemed to pull out all the stops now, somehow knowing that the attacking group was readying to finish the job. Not only did the mechanical beast send out new clusters of flying skull creatures and ice blocks… But it was now sending out spiked *ice mines* as well, which gave chase along the surface and underwater. These too were unfamiliar to Seggin, and they were utterly relentless in their pursuit.

Link and the Zora were running out of openings.

Gaddison, Rivan, and Bazz continued to pick off the strange skull beasts, dodging an occasional ice block here and there. Meanwhile, these new spiked balls chased after Sidon, Link, and Seggin. Link managed to briefly deflect a couple with his bow… but unfortunately, he was completely out of regular arrows now.

Sidon and Seggin picked up speed, but to no avail. They dove underwater to avoid the floating blocks of ice in front of them, but they simply could not outswim these pursuing mines…

In a mild panic, Link whipped out his Sheikah Slate.

He knew the Cryonis rune had the ability to create, *and* to destroy ice, and he was certain it would do the trick here.

He just needed to get the damned slate *unlocked*…

Seggin peeled off from their formation, hoping to draw the mines towards him - but only three of the projectiles followed. A single remaining mine continued to draw closer and closer to Link and Sidon.

Link wracked his brain, adrenaline pumping, mind racing in a frenzy. He poured over his memories. There *had* to be something there he was missing… something he’d forgotten…

“Link! What are you doing?!” cried Sidon. The mine trailed them by only about ten feet now.

But Link ignored him. He was on the verge of a breakthrough. He thought back to Hateno Village, to the tech lab, to *Purah* - the last person to mess with his Sheikah Slate in any way…

*What had she been so disappointed about again? There was something she kept trying to get him to do, something silly and-*

It suddenly hit him.

He typed frantically on the Slate’s screen...

*S-N-A-P-P-I-T-Y-S-N-A-P*

‘DING.’

‘User Authenticated.’

*YOU’VE GOTTA BE KIDDING ME.*

He tapped around in the Sheikah Slate…

*Runes… Cryonis… THERE!*

He spun around quickly, aimed the slate-…

-and the chasing ice ball EXPLODED into a thousand pieces.
Sidon let out a cry of triumph. “Yes! Astounding! What in Hylia’s name did you-”

“No time!” Link interrupted. “Go after Seggin!”

Sidon banked left, and began to chase after the Demon Sergeant. Using Cryonis, Link destroyed the remaining ice mines that pursued him. He and Sidon drew alongside Seggin.

“I don’t know what you did there, but great work!” Seggin shouted. “This is our chance. We strike at the same time.... Go!”

They split up once more, their path to the remaining orbs now perfectly clear. They ascended each waterfall simultaneously and Link yet again launched into the air and shot a shock arrow at the third orb. Except this time, he whipped out his paraglider afterwards to admire their handywork. Vah Ruta seemed to roar in defeat....

*The job was finished!*

Link glanced over to the fourth orb - *Seggin’s orb* - and his heart sank.

It was still glowing bright red.

*No....!*

*What happened?! Where’s Seggin?*

A shout from below him.

*Gaddison.*

“Link! Seggin’s been hit!”

Link gritted his teeth in anger, his soldier’s instinct kicking in. He began to glide in the direction of the final orb. *Focus. Finish the job. Just need to get a little bit closer-*

**FWWWWOOOOOOOM!**

A shockwave suddenly exploded out from the Divine Beast, instantly launching Link dozens of yards away. Vah Ruta’s incredible roar shook the mountains around them. Link skipped across the surface of the eastern reservoir like a small skipping stone, finally coming to a stop near the shoreline.

Somehow, he remained conscious. And through immense pain, he began to swim as fast as he could right back towards Vah Ruta...

“Link’s down as well!” cried Rivan. He and Gaddison towed the injured Seggin away from the Divine Beast as quickly as possible. The Sergeant had been struck by an ice block, which materialized within the water stream itself as he swam up. His right arm and leg were broken. He was bleeding profusely from the side of his head. His bow and arrows were scattered at the foot of the Divine Beast...

“We need to fall back!” Sidon cried. “I’ll go get Link, and we can-”

He froze. A war cry echoed across the eastern reservoir once again.

-Only this time, it was from *Bazz.*

He’d retrieved Seggin’s bow, along with a single shock arrow. A dozen ice blocks chased him on the
way as he swam up the waterfall, drawing the bow and launching himself out and over the final orb of the Divine Beast.

He drew back on the bow and let the arrow fly, just as a single block sharply collided with him in midair, knocking him aside...

But his aim was true.

A flash of yellow light engulfed both Bazz and the final power orb, a pained roar emanated from the Divine Beast, and all of its ice blocks disappeared in an instant. Vah Ruta was incapacitated, the endless rain ceased. All four orbs were active.

They’d won.

Bazz plummeted all the way down to the waters below. His body shook and convulsed painfully at first, the electricity from the shock arrow’s explosion practically frying his nervous system.

And then he was still.

“BAZZ!” Sidon swam at lightning speed to his friend’s body. It floated there, lifelessly.

No. Please no. He thought. Oh, Bazz...

He made it there first, with Gaddison and Rivan towing the injured Seggin in the direction of Vah Ruta from the rear.

Meanwhile, Link had never swam so fast in his entire life. He arrived at the scene a minute later, fearing the worst.

The corrupted Divine Beast had collapsed into the water next to them in defeat. All of the Zora gathered around Bazz on top of the now-lowered platform leading to the entrance to Vah Ruta. Sidon was desperately pumping Bazz’s chest with both hands, hoping to jumpstart his friend’s heart.

“Back off!” cried Link, as he climbed out of the water. He sprinted across the platform, sliding on his knees to the lifeless body of his dear friend. A memory snapped its way back into Link’s brain in that instant. He’d experienced a similar scene back in his days of Imperial Guard training. A fellow soldier, struck by a shock arrow... He knew what to do.

Link examined Bazz, put his ear to his chest. The electrical currents in the shock arrow had apparently been enough to cause ventricular fibrillation in Bazz’s heart. His breathing was labored, his heartbeats were irregular, fluttering. If Link didn’t act fast... Bazz would die.

Calmly, he pulled his quiver around him, producing a shock arrow. He knew that he needed to deliver a counter-shock to depolarize the heart muscles and treat the dysrhythmia. He snapped the shock arrow in half and leaned over Bazz’s body...

“Step back everyone.”

Link took a deep breath, then gently pressed each half of the shock arrow on opposite ends of Bazz’s chest. ZZRT!

A small flash. He pulled away. Nothing...

He pressed the pieces down again. ZZRT!
Finally, Bazz snapped awake, shaking his head. His heartbeat was normal again, his breathing was steady, stable.

“What’s going on?!” He shouted. “We… we won, right?”

Link shook his head and immediately hugged his friend. “Yes, we won. Thanks to your incredible stupidity.” The rest of the Bazz Brigade cheered for their revived comrade, moving in to join in the embrace.

Bazz smiled up at Link, coughing as he spoke.

“Well, Link... your recklessness… always was contagious after all-”

“You idiot!” snapped Seggin. “You brave, silly idiot!” The old Sergeant hobbled over on one leg to examine his son. The group made way for the old Zora, who plopped on the ground next to Bazz.

Bazz rubbed his head sheepishly. “Sorry father… er, Sergeant. But we were out of options, and I-”

Seggin pulled his son into a warm embrace.

“I’m proud of you, soldier. You did well.” He turned and stared at Link. “And I must thank you, for saving my boy, Master Link. How are you faring, yourself?”

Link shrugged. “A bit bruised, but never better. You’d all better head back… we’re in uncharted waters now.”

“Indeed!” said Sidon. “We must retreat and deal with these injuries. Excellent work, everyone!”

But the uninjured Zora guards did not want to comply.

“I’m not leaving!” said Gaddison.

“Nor am I!” Rivan chimed in. “We’ve made it this far. We have to help him!”

Seggin shook his head. “I’m sorry, but Master Link is the only one who has intimate knowledge of Vah Ruta’s interior. We would simply get in his way - especially in our current state.” He hopped over and into the water, staying afloat despite his own considerable injuries. “We depart immediately. That is an order.”

“...Yes sir...”

As the group of Zora began to swim away - Seggin and Bazz in-tow - they all spun around one last time. The platform lifted up and out of the water as Link stared down after his friends. They began pounding their chests and saluting in respect.

“Show the enemy no fear,” said Sidon. “We’ll see you back at Zora’s domain.”

Link returned their salute.

“I’ll finish the job. See you soon.”

He spun on his heels, and slowly made his way towards the entrance of Vah Ruta.
Link paused and stared at the pedestal in front of the entrance. The same spot where he and Mipha had shared their precious moment all those years ago. He shook his head.

*How in the world... did it all come to this?*

After a few moments, he sighed, and pressed his Sheikah Slate against the surface of the pedestal. It glowed blue, activating the circle behind him. He began to walk into the front doorway leading into Vah Ruta…

A ghostly voice - familiar, but haunting - suddenly called from the Divine Beast’s interior.

“You’re here.”

Link froze at the sound of it.

*Mipha.*

His heart nearly stopped. His blood ran cold through his veins...

"I must say... that I am so happy to see that this day has finally arrived. Now Ruta can be free of Ganon's control..."

Her voice echoed softly through the interior of Vah Ruta - echoed through Link’s mind. Mipha’s tone was tired, weary, longing…

But just as lovely as he remembered it.

“Mipha…?” He began. But she did not respond. He ran into the Divine Beast, searching for the source of her voice. “Mipha!”

An ominous presence seemed to fill the very air inside the beast. Particles of red and purple floated around the interior. The ever-present malice threatened to choke him with its very presence.

Filled with determination, with *anger*, Link clenched his fists and shouted, his voice echoing through Vah Ruta’s chambers as Mipha's did moments before.

“If you can hear me, Mipha, I’m coming for you! Please hold on just a bit longer...”

No answer.

Link was making excellent progress. After scanning his slate and obtaining the map of the Divine Beast, he saw that the five terminals that Zelda had activated many years ago were no longer functioning. He'd realized that he'd have to restore power to these with his slate first, before finally taking ownership of the main control unit again. At this point, he’d already activated three of the five terminals, encountering very little resistance along the way.

A strange mass of purple and black goo permeated various spots on the inside of Vah Ruta. This corruption appeared to be from Calamity Ganon himself, and was apparently the source of the strange skull monsters that had assaulted the team during their battle earlier. Removing these huge masses required destroying enormous eyeballs that protruded from them. *Disgusting.*

Link had made quick work of these entities each time he’d come upon them, and now found himself standing at a doorway to the front of Vah Ruta. Its massive trunk rose high above him there, spraying a continuous stream of water on the main waterwheel at the center of its body. As a machine designed to produce an endless supply of water, many of Ruta’s mechanisms were powered
hydroelectrically using the force of this water shooting from its trunk. Link was able to use his Sheikah slate to move the trunk up and down and manipulate the machinery inside the divine beast to access its power terminals.

In this case, the fourth terminal was located underneath the long trunk itself. So Link used his slate to adjust the trunk all the way down so he could glide to the tip. He used his glider to fly there, and paused for a brief moment.

His heart skipped a beat in remembrance. This was the very site of one particularly intimate healing session a hundred years ago…

He shook it off. Need to focus, concentrate, he thought, as he used his slate to access the terminal underneath. He scanned his slate on the surface of the pedestal, and shut his eyes...

“Just one terminal remaining!” said Mipha’s disembodied voice. “I have faith in you!” With each successful activation, the calm voice of the Zora Champion had continued to address him, offering kind words of encouragement. Link felt a cruel twist of guilt and comfort each time she spoke, and his resolve to finish the mission only increased with each and every word...

His heart warmed anew at the sound of her voice, Link moved to activate the last terminal. Accessing this one required extinguishing jets of flame around it, which acted as a security feature for would-be hijackers. Link remembered nearly getting burnt to death when he first approached this terminal all those many years before. Zelda and Purah had laughed at him at the time, although neither he nor Mipha had found it particularly funny themselves.

“You activated all the terminals!” said Mipha. Link realized he’d been holding his breath in anticipation when she addressed him once again. He exhaled loudly.

Mipha continued. “Now you can start the main control unit. Be careful not to let your guard down…”

Her words carried an ominous tone. Link felt a strange atmospheric change settling into the interior of Vah Ruta. A feeling of absolute malice, of grim foreboding…

He began to walk towards the main control room. He examined his weapons and gear on the way. This was too easy… he thought to himself. Surely there’s more in store than this…

As he reached the main control room - an enormous chamber towards the back of Divine Beast Vah Ruta - he reached over with his slate, placed it against the pedestal’s surface-

FOOM!

...There it is.

Vah Ruta began to rumble and shake around him. A plume of ghastly malice shot out of the pedestal and swirled around the entire control unit. Blue streams of light began to rush out of the malice and into the air behind him, collecting into a great ball of energy that blinded his eyes. The beams of light condensed - and from the center of the light, emerged a hideous creature far more disturbing than anything Link had ever seen in his entire life.

Its body and skin had the same glowing, putrid texture of the black and red masses contained throughout Vah Ruta. Its appearance was like rotting, purpled flesh. Ancient machinery protruded from its center like an exposed skeleton. In its left hand it wielded a glowing blue spear of immense size.
Link’s face curled into a grimace, then relaxed. His instincts kicked in as he took his usual battle pose. He drew his Savage Lynel Spear from his back and pointed it at this disgusting creature.

The large monster let out an ear-piercing shriek, but Link didn’t flinch. He glared calmly at the creature’s face. Its single blue eye glared right back. It was then that Link noticed the enormous mane of red hair growing from the back of its head... Its color and style was reminiscent of the hair on Ganon’s head, according to his vision back at the plateau.

An incarnation of the Demon King?

No matter. He’d slay this blight just the same-

“Please take care…” Mipha’s voice suddenly pleaded. Her words shook Link more than this strange monster had...

“That... thing is one of Ganon’s creations,” she continued. “I put up as much of a fight as I could…”

“...But it proved to be my demise one-hundred years ago…”

Link’s mind snapped.

His soul shattered.

His heart was torn asunder.

In a flash he was on the creature, savagely ramming his spear over and over into its face, unleashing a hundred years of pure sorrow and anguish onto this utterly despised entity.

The blight let out a screech of pain, while Link let loose a cry of pure desolation so tremendously excruciating that he himself cringed at the sound of it.

Gathering itself again, the blight lifted its spear high overhead and stabbed it downward to counter. Link backflipped out of its shockwave, then backpedaled as the monster de-materialized in a flash of blue light, before reappearing across the room.

Link looked down, still furious, and noticed he’d already cracked his Lynel spear in several places. He chucked it across the room, nailing the blight dead-center of its eye. Its face grossly impaled, it shrieked in pain yet again.

“Amazing, Link!” cried Mipha. “Good job!”

But he didn’t hear her. His senses were dulled. His primal rage was fully in control now.

Ganon’s blight de-materialized once more, this time into a small blue ball of energy. Its hand glowed bright white as it reappeared in the center of the room. Still in control of the Divine Beast, it manipulated Vah Ruta to flood the main chamber full of water.

Link swam over to one of the floating platforms that rose up with the water, drawing his bow as he did. He fired a shock arrow right at the beast, but it disappeared just before the arrow collided. It moved across the room and high above, hanging down to face him. Its hand glowed white once more, and a large ice block formed in front of it. Link whipped out his Sheikah Slate and destroyed the block with ease. He drew his bow and struck the blight right in the face with three shock arrows simultaneously.

Electricity danced and zapped across its body as it plummeted into the waters below. Link dove in
and swam across to the platform near the creature, and began to stab the thing repeatedly with the Ceremonial Trident. He was unconcerned with his sloppy form, with his awful posture, with his terrible, primal stance.

His only concern was obliterating this hateful blight. Absolutely annihilating this thing that had stolen the one person that had mattered the most to him in this entire world…

The blight regained consciousness and teleported across the room. This time, it materialized half a dozen ice blocks, sending them right towards Link again.

But Link didn’t care.

Using Cryonis, he created a path of ice pillars across the water, dodging and darting around the enormous projectiles that threatened to collide with him. He landed on the last pillar, elevating it abruptly using his slate. The rising pillar propelled him straight into the air and towards the blight, which desperately sent one last-gasp ice block to stop this rampaging Hylian.

But it was no use.

Link flipped gracefully over the final ice block, shouted out in primal rage-

“RRRRRRAAAAAABHRRHHH!!!”

-And embedded the Ceremonial Trident deep into the head of the blight. The force of the strike shattered the trident - and the creature’s face - into a hundred pieces.

The blight floated through the air, writhing and contorting in agony as a blood-like substance oozed and sprayed out of its every orifice and wound. It shrieked angrily at Link one last time, before EXPLODING in a brilliant flash of purple light.

The water in the chamber drained around him. The air turned clear as the malice dissipated. The battle was over. Link had won.

Yet at the same time… he’d utterly lost.

Panting, Link collapsed on the wet ground. His mind began to clear again. His eyes were wide-open, his fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles were turning white…

A mere pyrrhic victory. He thought. What’s there to celebrate?

Achingly, he pulled himself together and gathered up the remaining pieces of the Ceremonial Trident. Then he slowly walked towards the main control unit...

He scanned his slate on the pedestal to finally activate the Divine Beast for good. He paid very little attention to it. As usual, the pedestal glowed blue with power. A small rumble from Vah Ruta, and that was that.

Link began to slowly backpedal away from the control unit. He sighed painfully. Now what…?

“Hello Link.”

His heart stopped. He glanced around. Mipha’s voice was no longer ethereal, omnipresent.

It was in this very room.
“Because of your courage, my spirit is now free. And Ruta, as well.”

The gentle sound of water drops echoed through the chamber. Link turned to his right as a warm blue glow caught the corner of his sight.

And he saw her.

A century of sorrow returned to him in an instant. A hundred years of pain, of longing.

Her graceful steps sent ripples across the shallow water of the control room as she slowly approached him. A spiral of blue flame surrounded her, magnifying the eerie beauty of her spiritual visage.

“Thank you.” She began. “For I am now allowed by this freedom… to be with you once again.”

But he couldn’t speak. His words choked him, strangled him from the inside.

*How can I tell you…*

Her face was radiant, even in this form. Her familiar, serene expression only magnified his sense of longing for her. A moment of silence settled between them. Link started towards her, but his feet were frozen to the ground...

She continued to speak, her gentle footsteps continuing in his direction. “Since I am now a spirit, my healing power would be wasted on me. I have no need of it. So therefore… I would like you to have it.”

Link wanted nothing more to run out towards her, to embrace her, to hold her once again.

But he knew that he couldn’t.

*How can I tell you…*

She stared at Link, holding her hands up in his direction as they glowed a familiar, vibrant blue light. This ball of spiritual energy suddenly went into him, flooding his very being with Mipha’s love and grace. He could feel her warmth, her spiritual vigor swirling through his body. Comforting his tortured soul. He stared down at his hands, unsure of what to do... what to say...

*How can I tell you?*

“How… how… can I tell you?”

She stopped just in front of Link, examining his armor. She seemed to become slightly flustered in spite of herself.

“…Knowing that… will let my spirit rest in peace.”

Link’s body began to glow with yellow light as Mipha prepared to transport him out of Vah Ruta, back towards the domain.

“I must go…” she said. “Ruta and I have our roles to fulfill. We are both honored to play the role of
support.” She held her hands to her chest and serenely smiled. “We’ll annihilate Ganon together.”

Link’s heart broke again… and yet he was grinning at her words.

Anything to make me laugh…

Finally, Link blurted out the words that had lingered on the tip of his tongue for what seemed like an eternity…

“How can I tell you… just how much I love you?”

Mipha’s eyes narrowed gently, a look of pure serenity appeared on her face.

“Oh Link… you must not worry about that.” Her ghostly hand traced one of the silver pauldrons of the Zora armor. She smiled after Link as he suddenly disappeared in a flash of light.

“...You already have...”
Nearly the entire domain had gathered in the throne room of King Dorephan, eager to congratulate the Hylian Champion and his friends for a job well-done.

Link, Bazz, Gaddison, and Rivan were assembled in a row in front of the king. Sidon stood off to the side, while the Demon Sergeant Seggin stood next to him with a pair of crutches, his arm and leg wrapped tightly in casts...

“I wish to formally commend you all for your efforts in appeasing Vah Ruta,” began King Dorephan. “Putting your lives at risk as you did takes incredible bravery and selflessness - and in Sergeant Seggin’s case, the naive resolve that comes with a mid-life crisis!”

This drew many laughs from the crowd of Zora, but the king held his hand up to shush them.

“As for you, Link…” said King Dorephan, “You did well to survive your trial inside of Vah Ruta! We’ve all awaited your return with bated breath. The violent downpour has disappeared, as has the threat to Zora’s Domain! It is all little more than a bad dream now.”

Link turned his face away, briefly. He was never one for the center of the spotlight. And given the sharp tangles of despair and grief that his heart contended with, he was shirking away from it all the more.

Dorephan didn’t seem to notice. “Thanks to your efforts, there is no longer any danger of a great flood laying waste to Hyrule! You appeased the Divine Beast Vah Ruta, and thusly saved Zora’s Domain!” The king closed his eyes, smiling in thankfulness. “We are truly grateful! What you all accomplished for us is more than we could have ever expected. Especially you Link! Such bravery you’ve shown, in slaying that vile creature within Ruta…”

A huge cheer erupted from the spectating Zora, with a few shouts of Link’s name interspersed among them. Link didn’t hear any of it, deafened in his mind by the whirlwind of despair.

As the cheering quieted down, Muzu spoke up from next to Dorephan. “Link, I must sincerely apologize for my harsh treatment of you. I know that the entire time you were thinking of Hyrule’s and Lady Mipha’s well-being, just as the rest of us were. In my ignorance and prejudice, I failed to accept this. My sincere hope… is that someday, you will find it inside of your heart to forgive me…”

Link nodded his head somberly in response to the old Zora. He’d already long forgiven Muzu, of course. And he wasn’t one to resent anybody for very long anyway.

Muzu continued. “All of the members of our council humbly fold our fins back in gratitude, along with the rest of our people. Perhaps the older generation of Zora, myself included, misunderstood Hylians after all. It would seem so.” He lowered his own head in respect, as Dorephan continued to address them.

“Link! I must reward your efforts!” He gestured towards Trello, who emerged from the crowd. In his hands, a weapon that Link was all-too familiar with:

Mipha’s Lightscale Trident.
"Young master!" Trello called out as he approached, "I want to personally thank you for the truly selfless work you’ve done for us. This weapon was cherished by Mipha. We wish for you to have it as a token of our friendship…” He placed the weapon in Link’s hands. "Please take good care of it!"

Link stood there, blankly, before his mind returned to him. He reached into his rucksack, producing a bag containing the shattered pieces of the Ceremonial Trident.

So much for bringing it back in one piece...

“Councilman Trello… I apologize. This is all that’s left of the Ceremonial-”

Trello interrupted him. “No need to apologize Link. It can be fixed. Do not worry…” he took the pieces from Link and returned to his place with the other elders, smiling widely in gratitude.

Link turned to face Dorephan again, staring down at the Lightscale Trident in his hands. He sighed to himself, hesitantly placing the trident on his back.

I don’t deserve this. Not at all...

“We thank you all from the depths of our hearts for your heroic and selfless work!” Said Dorephan. He turned to his left, where Prince Sidon stood idly by.

“…And you too, my son.”

Until now, Sidon had remained silent, standing out of the way so that all of his friends would receive the glory instead. He turned to face the king.

“As your father,” Dorephan said, “I am proud of you for fighting the Divine Beast alongside Link. We are all so incredibly proud of you. I know you will be a worthy heir to the throne when your time comes.”

Sidon bowed his head humbly. “Father… I… Thank you!”

Another eruption of cheers from the crowd, though this time it was mostly from the female Zora in Sidon’s fanclub.

Dorephan smiled. “The heavy rains have stopped, and the Divine Beast is our ally once again! How glorious! Truly splendid! Wah ha ha ha! This calls for a wild celebration, in honor of our heroes!”

Link cringed internally at this. He hardly felt like celebrating. Rather, he felt more like disappearing completely, to be fully alone with his bitter sorrows...

Sidon began to approach Link, grabbing his hand with both of his. “Link! Thank you so much!” He shook Link’s hand vigorously. “Truly, I could never thank you enough! This calls for a top-tier expression of gratitude!” He stood straight up and began to shout.

“ZO! ZO! RA RA RA! With all my heart, thank you!” He bowed his head and placed his hand across his heart, a gesture of respect for Link.

The crowd joined in on Sidon’s chant. Link’s friends gathered around him and patted their hands on his shoulders in support.

Link wanted to curl into a ball and vanish.
As the loud cheers and cries echoed across the cavernous valley of Zora’s Domain, the mood became boisterous, festive - and the entire Domain looked forward to finally holding a rousing party for the first time in many, many years-

FWOOOOOOSSSSH!

The sound of rushing water roared in the distance, a mighty trumpeting call was heard. The ground rumbled and shook around the Domain. Everyone in the throne room spun around, peering at a mountaintop far in the distance.

It was Divine Beast Vah Ruta.

Having just swum down into the eastern reservoir and through the cavernous depths under the Rutala River, the enormous machine erupted out of a mountain lake just southwest of Luto’s crossing. The beast reared back on its hind legs, then stomped on the ground with another earthshaking rumble. Most of the Zora rushed out of the throne room to get a better look at this commotion, while Link and the Bazz Brigade walked to the edge of the platform and stared.

Vah Ruta’s trunk curled up above its head, as a massive red ball of energy grew between its two mechanical tusks-

SHOOOOOM!

-then fired straight out of its face. The powerful laser beam flew many miles across the plains of Hyrule, eventually colliding dead-center with Calamity Ganon's swirling malice around Hyrule Castle. The explosion sent giant red sparks all across the fields in front of it. It was an incredible spectacle, and the mass of Zora could do nothing more than stand in awe of it.

But Link was not at all fazed. He was completely numb inside.

He stared blankly at Vah Ruta in the distance, fighting back tears. An aggressive game of tug-of-war was taking place in his mind between his sense of duty, and his sense of tremendous guilt-

And the guilt was winning, handily.

He turned away from the commotion, making his way back to Dorephan. The king seemed equally unbothered by the distant event. Link’s friends all patted him on the back as he passed by them, and they took their leave from the throne room in order to give Link and the King some privacy...

“Link…” Dorephan said, “I am truly and eternally grateful for what you’ve done for us. But… there is something I wish to ask you…”

In sheer dread, Link’s heart immediately broke yet again. He knew precisely what was coming.

“You journeyed within Ruta, the Divine Beast of Water… Now you are back, but Mipha has still yet to return…” The king frowned, a pained expression growing on his face. “Is it as I feared? Were we too late?”

Link returned the expression. The tears began to fall before he’d even opened his mouth to answer…

“The creature I faced within… the one I slaughtered…” He paused, sighed. “It had killed Mipha one hundred years ago.” He stared up at Dorephan, wiped his eyes.

“I met her spirit.”
Dorephan suddenly leaned forward in his chair, eyes widening in shock and grief.

“It did what?! ” he said. “So that means Mipha really is… Did… did she say anything to you?”

Link lowered his head again and closed his eyes. He recounted his conversation with Mipha, how she’d given up hope that her soul would ever be set free from the confines of Vah Ruta and the clutches of Ganon’s Blight.

He told Dorephan of Mipha’s great happiness to be able to finally fulfill her role in defeating Ganon, as well as her relinquishment of her healing powers to Link.

And finally, he told Dorephan of his great love for her.

“I see.” Said Dorephan. “My dear Mipha… I simply cannot believe it. There was nothing I could do to save her…” The king wiped his own eyes, and sighed. Even after one hundred years, he had never given up hope that Mipha was still alive. He'd ever let go of the belief that his dear daughter would return to his side once again.

And that hope was all dashed away in an instant.

A familiar sinking feeling began to press against Link’s chest. A tremendous weight of responsibility he hadn’t felt since pre-calamity days. This only seemed to enhance his overwhelming pain of guilt and shame...

I wasn’t strong enough.

Dorephan continued. “Still… Mipha fulfilled her heroic duty as Champion. And she will never be alone… It is my duty as her father to watch over her, even now.”

I failed you.

“Link… She really loved you too, you know. There is no mistaking that even now she is overjoyed to be able to help you. Promise me… that you will always remember her. Promise me that-”

“It’s my fault!” Link suddenly shouted. “It’s not fair!”

He gripped his fists tightly at his sides in rage. “I wasn’t strong enough to protect her. All those years ago… she didn’t deserve to die. It should have been her waking up in that resurrection chamber, not me!” He gritted his teeth, glaring furiously at Dorephan. He placed his fist across his chest.

“We’re united now. I will NEVER forget her. Never.” He was shaking with rage, with absolute hatred for Ganon. Hatred for himself.

Dorephan shook his head. “Link… please do not blame yourself. Nobody could have anticipated what happened-”

“I don’t deserve to have this,” Link said, pulling the Lightscale Trident off his back. He gently placed it on the ground in front of Dorephan.

“I failed you. I failed all of you. I’m... so sorry.”

Link turned away from the throne and began to walk away. King Dorephan attempted to call after the despondent young Hylian, but the words fell on deaf ears. Link pulled out his slate, blindly tapped around on his map to teleport away. He didn’t know where he was going, didn’t care.

Somewhere. Anywhere but here...
Link’s body splintered into a thousand strands of blue light. And before anyone could stop him, he found himself graciously whisked away by the wind’s breath...

Chapter End Notes

Short, and not very sweet. Sorry.
Next is Chapter 18: Error.
“Has there been any word? Any sign of him at all?” Impa asked.

“No, my Lady,” replied Dorian, shaking his head. He shut the door behind him as he entered. “All scouts have reported no sightings of Link in any of the surrounding villages. We’ve sent word to our fellow tribe members all across the land, but to no avail.”

“What about the other races?” asked Paya, optimistically. “We could check with them, perhaps he has simply gone to tame the other Divine Beasts…?”

Dorian shrugged. “I considered that. But just as well, the Gerudo, the Rito, and the Gorons have had zero contact with any Hylians fitting Link’s description. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing to report at this time.”

Impa’s face took on a rare, grim frown. “I… hesitate to expect the worst.” She said. “But if King Dorephan’s words are true, then Link is in a very fragile state of mind right now. We must do whatever it takes to find him.”

It had been well over three weeks since anyone had spotted the young hero. With eyes and ears all over Hyrule since Link’s awakening, Impa usually received updates on his position and activities every two or three days.

But for twenty-four straight days now, the young Hylian had fallen completely off the radar. Needless to say, this proved to be a rather enormous source of panic within the Sheikah and Zora communities.

Impa slowly, painfully, brought herself to her feet and hopped off her set of pillows - leaving behind a decades-old indentation of her small legs. She hobbled over to a nearby chest, producing a small cane and a dagger.

“It would seem that I must undertake this mission personally,” she said.

Paya shrieked in concern. “Lady Impa, you mustn’t!”

“What are you thinking?!” Cried Dorian. “You are in absolutely no condition to leave the village!”

But Impa shook her head, stretched her legs out.

“My dear Paya… and Dorian, my friend… my health should be of no concern to you. We have far greater priorities at this time.” She made her way to the entrance of her home, staring out at the rain-soaked village below her.

“Assemble a new search team. And send word out to King Dorephan. We will set out immediately.”

Back at Zora’s Domain, King Dorephan called together an emergency meeting with the Zora council. A Rito postman had arrived that morning with a rather important letter from Lady Impa of the Sheikah tribe. Dorephan wished to brief the council on the letter’s contents.

Prince Sidon also joined the group, reporting on his findings from the last week. He had resumed his
usual patrols around the wetlands in the area around the domain, yet again in search of a Hylian...

Except this time, he was asking about one particular Hylian.

Link.

“It would seem that nobody in the surrounding area has spotted him,” Sidon said, “Though we should not be at all surprised.” He crossed his arms and frowned to himself. “I... cannot help but feel quite a bit of responsibility for this. With all the celebration and excitement surrounding his successful appeasement of Vah Ruta… it seems that I neglected to factor in his own feelings on the entire matter.”

Nearby, Trello shook his head. “It is not your fault at all, Sidon. We of the Zora council must accept full responsibility for this grievous error…”

“Indeed!” interrupted Muzu. “We burdened Master Link with unneeded shame and guilt from the very moment he returned to the domain. We overwhelmed him with blame... undeservedly so.”

Seggin chimed in also. “And if his words were true, that he did indeed encounter the spirit of our dear Princess Mipha within Vah Ruta... then truly, I understand his traumatic pain. We should not have ignored this.”

Next to Seggin, the scholar Jiahto nodded in agreement. But he remained silent. He had helped lead the charge in vilifying Link for his perceived transgressions, and words simply could not express the regret and remorse he felt as a result of this.

Dorephan quietly sat on his throne, choosing as usual to remain silent as the councilmen deliberated around him. He too felt tremendous guilt for not recognizing the true depths of Link’s pain - until it was too late.

Link was only seventeen years old after all. Still quite young; even by Hylian standards. With the boy's incredible courage and his mature stature, this fact was quite easy for Dorephan and others to forget…

“It is too late to dwell on the past now.” Dorephan finally said. “What matters now, is what we intend to do about it.” He picked up a slip of paper nearby, gesturing to it with his hand.

“We’ve received a letter from Lady Impa of the Sheikah Tribe. Her own scouts have not found even a hint of Link’s whereabouts, and she intends to call together a special team to search for him and ensure his safety. They request our cooperation, if possible.”

He glanced around the room, and sighed. “My duties require that I remain here at the Domain, as much as I wish to join in. I understand that most of you will likely desire to stay here as well. But with that said… do I have any volunteers for this mission?”

The entire Zora council raised their hands.

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*Mipha’s spirit stood atop Divine Beast Vah Ruta, as its powerful laser beam focused itself on the center of Hyrule Castle.*

“*Ruta, we’ve found a way to be useful to Link.*” Mipha said. *She suddenly caught herself, “...And... the other Champions, of course.”*

*She laughed internally at this and smiled. Even now, her mind was ever trained on the brave,*
incredible, courageous Hylian Champion she loved so much.

“Our job will be to help Link as he fights Ganon inside the castle... however we can. Using your ability to drain Ganon of his power is key to our success.” She spoke these words to Ruta like a long-lost friend, walking gently across the Divine Beast’s head as she got a closer view at the castle far off in the distant horizon.

“This is it. This will be our last chance... and everyone’s last hope.”

She bent down to pat the Divine Beast on the head. It seemed to shudder slightly in response to her gentle touch...

“If we seal him away, then we can restore peace to Hyrule. And both your duty... and mine, will be fulfilled...” Her voice lowered as she said this, giving away the slight hesitation she felt in her heart. She stood straight up, and turned to face Zora’s Domain, far off in the valley below her. She could see a crowd of Zora, most of them unfamiliar, peering up at the Divine Beast. But shielded from Mipha’s view... was the throne room of her father, King Dorephan.

“Father... are you well, I wonder...” Her voice choked slightly, as sorrow now flooded her heart again. “I want you to know... I have always followed my heart...”

Her mind once again drifted to thoughts of Link. She longed to return to his side, longed to be with her family again...

But the time for that had long passed. And duty beckoned.

Mipha’s head took a solemn bow as she withheld the tears from falling. She turned away from the domain, calmly staring out at the horizon.

“I’m... sorry I made you worry. I wish I could see you again... Even just once more...

With one final sigh, Mipha disappeared into the ether, waiting patiently for duty’s call to summon her once again...

GASP!

Link snapped awake from his dream, coughing for air and sweating profusely. He looked around himself, took stock of his possessions, exhaled deeply.

He had camped out at the top of the Faron Sheikah Tower, which was situated far, far south of the Dueling Peaks. Surrounding him was a vast rainforest that easily lived up to its name - enormous trees towered above him, barely blocking out the ceaseless downpour of rain that fell endlessly in sheets.

As Link packed his things to set out again, he reflected briefly on his dream. The vision had been so incredibly vivid... so real, that he knew it had actually happened. This puzzled Link. And even moreso, it distressed him. Because that solemn, ethereal memory obviously wasn’t his...

It was Mipha’s.

How?

DONK!

A small rock slammed into the side of Link’s head, bringing him to his feet in alarm. He looked up
and spotted the source of the projectile: A snarling, angry Lizalfos, staring down at him from the top of a high cliff. Link coldly picked up his bow, nocked an arrow, and shot the lizard warrior right between the eyes. It fell forward off of the cliff it stood on, colliding with the ground below with a small thud.

Link fumed to himself. A blow to the head was the last thing he needed to wake up to, in his current state. The burning embers of rage dwelling within his spirit erupted once again into a roaring inferno. His anger at his guilt and shame returned to him in a flash. And as he stared up the looming mountain wall next to the tower… he knew precisely what he could take his anger out on. Further back on the cliffs above him, he could hear the familiar snarls and snorts of several Lizalfos warriors - friends of the one he’d just slain. They’d be joining their buddy soon.

Overwhelmed with fury, Link gathered his things and leaped off the tower to the mountain nearby, nearly sliding down several times in the relentless pouring rain.

Raging waterfalls roared down the cliff faces around him as he furiously climbed. He knew he could have simply used his Zora armor to swim up them - but he’d carefully packed away the armor long ago, having felt that he no longer deserved to wear it.

He’d have to earn that right again.

After pulling himself to the top of the cliff, he stumbled - as expected - upon a large Lizalfos settlement. Immediately, two of the creatures charged at him.

Without any melee weapons, Link would have to get a bit creative in order dispatch them.

Or not.

In a flash he beat the pair of warriors to death with his bare hands, stealing their jagged boomerang-like razor swords and moving on to slay the rest of the entire encampment in a few short minutes. Now pumping with adrenaline and fury, he began to sprint mindlessly along the top of this enormous mountain range.

Better. I need to get better, he thought to himself.

If I wasn’t strong enough then... How could I expect to be strong enough now?

Link continued his marathon run through the unknown wilderness. He glided past enormous palm trees, swam across great rivers - all while avoiding roads and trails at any cost. In his aimless wandering, he began to discover, activate, and complete dozens of trial shrines at breakneck pace. He tested himself. Tortured himself.

But it was never enough.

He didn't bother to check his slate’s map, didn’t care where he was. All he knew was that he was heading eastward - Goddess help whatever monster or evil entity stood in his way. Any bokoblin or lizalfos encampments, any stray enemies were met with total annihilation at the hands of this grief-stricken young man. At one point even, an unlucky Yiga clan member inadvertently crossed paths with Link. Appearing in front of the madly sprinting Hylian in a puff of red smoke, the warrior began to taunt him.

“Yahahahaha! We finally meet, hero of- BLURK !”

Link cut down the Yiga warrior in one smooth motion and continued to run blindly eastward without a second thought. His nonstop running dulled his senses and stifled his overactive mind. Over time,
his brutal, intense focus began to work its magic - preventing any negative thoughts from entering his brain at all. For the time being, he pushed his pain away. Buried his sorrow. Stopped himself from dwelling on anything substantial. This mindless dash went on for several days, and he stopped only to relieve himself, to eat, or to sleep for very short bursts of time.

But he couldn't allow much time for undeserved rest.

He had to get stronger, had to get better. And in the end, he knew of only one way to do so: by throwing himself repeatedly at any and all challenges that came his way. It was an old habit he’d picked up during his time in the brutal Imperial Guard training. And it was quite effective.

Though weary and tired, Link pushed through his physical and mental pain. He continued to raid encampments of monsters that had the misfortune of being anywhere near his incredible warpath. And soon, his silent rampage of destruction found its way to an area far southwest of Hateno Village - a massive bokoblin fort seated just below another shrine on an enormous cliff.

He stood atop a large boulder nearby and briefly considered his many options of attack. He could shoot down the flaming lanterns roped to the ceiling of their skull-shaped base, burning the evil creatures alive with their own explosives. He could pick them off one-by-one with arrows and bombs before they knew what hit them. He could even simply wait until nightfall, and ambush them as they slept...

...Or he could just walk straight up and brutally slaughter them all at once.

He chose the last option.

VREEEEEEW!

Link whistled obnoxiously at the encampment to get their attention as he approached their open doorway. And before long, dozens of furious bokoblins flooded out of the skull-shaped rock, ready to kill this intruder. Link smirked to himself, drew his dual Lizal boomerangs, and got to work.

Several minutes later, now drenched in the blood of his bokoblin enemies, Link found himself descending into the cliffside shrine of trials that sat next to the now-decimated enemy encampment.

'Muwo Jeem Shrine: A Modest Test of Strength' his slate read. Link shrugged.

'Modest?' …I hope they're just being humble.

They'd better have a real challenge in store for me this time...

“He has definitely been here,” said Seggin. “There’s no mistaking it.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Dorian. He walked up alongside Seggin, carrying Impa on his back. “This could have been done by anyone you know.”

“An entire Lizalfos camp?” Seggin scoffed. "Quite unlikely.” He leaned on his good leg, crossing his finned arms across his chest. “In my younger days, I might have been able to accomplish such a feat. But this, is clearly the work of our young master.”

They were standing in the midst of a destroyed Lizalfos camp, examining the carnage before them. The damage was quite thorough, and the persistent rain hadn’t yet washed away the blood stains and lizal body parts that remained strewn about the camp.
Glancing up at the edge of the cliff, Impa raised her eyebrows in recognition. She pointed in the direction of the top of a Sheikah tower that peered just over the cliffside.

“Over there!” she said. “That is one way we might be able to verify his presence here...”

The group of Zora and Sheikah made their way to the edge of the cliff, peering down at the enormous tower before them.

It glowed blue. It was active.

Impa smiled. “It appears he’s been here after all! And it is good to see that his irreplaceable sense of duty remains intact…” she glanced back at the destroyed encampment behind them. “…Even in his apparently unhinged state.”

“Should we leave him be then?” asked Dorian. “I do not know how much longer I can stand to expose you to the elements like this, Lady Impa. Perhaps we should turn back-”

“Absolutely not!” said Muzu.

He and the other Zora elders were exhausted from their week of travel thus far, but still they remained stubborn in their determination. Muzu continued. “I refuse to believe he is truly okay, until I have seen it with my own two eyes. He could easily have activated this tower before arriving at Zora’s Domain in the first place. And all the more, something could have happened to him after he passed through. Nothing at all is certain here...

He folded his arms across his back and stood proudly in front of Dorian and Impa. "Besides," he said, "There is something we all wish to tell him… something that must be said. I will not rest until this is done.”

“I agree,” said Trello. “I’m in favor of continuing the search. No matter how long it takes…” The other Zora elders nodded in assent.

Impa’s smile grew wider at hearing their words. She knew that Link had been incredibly close to the Zora people long, long ago; and it warmed her heart to see that the bond remained so strong after all these years.

“Well then.” she said. "The search continues in earnest. Let us move.”

The group began to march forward, optimistically believing they were on the trail of the wild Hylian they desperately wished to find. Paya remained silent, bringing up the rear. Though her face remained stoic, she smiled on the inside. Because after all this time, hoping and praying for Link’s safety, they had finally found a lead.

And perhaps more so than anyone else in the group, she very much longed to see him once again...

Well that was a waste of time...

Link emerged from the shrine even more frustrated than before. Inside he’d found an advanced version of the miniature guardian scouts he’d seen in other shrines - except this one was fully armed to the teeth, and designed implicitly for combat training.

Not that it made much of a difference.

It wasn’t that Link didn’t appreciate the efforts of the monks to challenge him with creative trials and
such. He just… didn’t really care. Within the shrine, he had entered a state of pure autonomy while fighting the small guardian scout, rolling and dodging around its battle ax swipes and laser blasts, easily parrying away its spin attacks, and ultimately just picking the thing apart piece by piece with ease.

… But he supposed that, on the bright side, he at least had an awesome-looking energy beam battle ax in his possession now.

_Hooray._

Blankly, he approached the edge of the enormous cliff, plopped down on his rear, and stared after the horizon. Despite the chaotic unrest which still held his heart captive, he still had to admit it: the view was incredible.

An endless sea surrounded him on three sides. Seagulls flew overhead, lifted high by the brisk wind that blew out towards the open ocean in front of him. The midday sun rose high above, marking the first clear day he'd experienced in an entire week.

But as he enjoyed the breathtaking view, something in the distance caught his eye.

An island.

An enormous, forested island just off the coast.

Link shot to his feet again. He felt himself strangely drawn to this place, enamored by it.

It represented the realization of his desires: complete and total isolation. He could be purely by himself with his thoughts, alone with nothing but the sea around him. Isolated entirely... with an uninterrupted chance to train and to grieve on his own.

Who wouldn’t jump at such an opportunity?

Without a second thought, Link jumped straight off the towering cliff, assuming a perfect diving form that would have made Mipha herself proud. He hit the deep waters below and began to swim fiercely in the direction of the distant island.

His muscles already ached and throbbed painfully from this week’s sheer marathon of events. His head ached tremendously, his heart hurt even more so. But he was far beyond the point of caring about it. Armed with stupid determination and reckless persistence, his countless strokes propelled him across the enormous expanse of water that separated him from his next destination...

He awoke several hours later, just as the sun set far off in the distance. He’d been lying face-down in the sand, passed out in total exhaustion from his great inverse aquathlon. It had taken him the better part of the day to get here...

But it didn’t matter. He’d _made_ it.

He slowly rolled himself over, wincing painfully as the coarse sand of the island beach rubbed harshly against the enormous sunburn on his _bare_ back-

..._Bare_?!

Link looked down at his body, and a look of confusion grew on his face.

He was _naked_.

---
Wait... My stuff!

In a panic, he leaped to his feet, scouring the area around him. Nothing but mile after mile of empty beach, as far as he could see. His rucksack, his clothes, his weapons, his food, everything...

It was all gone.

Frustrated, he kicked at a nearby mound in the sand.

CRUNCH.

“AAARGH!”

He hopped on one foot, grabbing his toes in agony. He glanced down at the spot he’d kicked. A familiar screen greeted him from the sands.

*The Sheikah Slate.* He picked it up, groaned. This... was it. This was all he had left...

He paused. His eyes suddenly widened with a painful shock of realization.

*Mipha’s armor! No!*

Further enraged, he violently chucked the poor, abused slate at a nearby palm tree. The force of the impact knocked a few coconuts to the ground, one of which fell right on top of Link’s head.

It hardly hurt him, but he collapsed to the ground anyway, screaming loudly in exasperation.

He laid there, quietly, for some time. Just staring up at the sky, tracing the clouds that floated aimlessly with the gentle currents of air above. The ocean wind whispered through his ears, the waves splashed and battered the shoreline in a meditative rhythm that helped to soothe Link’s tortured spirit.

After several minutes of this peace and calm, Link regained his composure. He sighed quietly.

“I’m still here. I’m still breathing.”

He said this aloud, as if trying to convince himself that everything was alright, that everything would be okay. He shook his head at himself, his thoughts finally settling on Mipha once again.

“It’s *never* going to be okay. Never again...”

Now as composed as he’d ever be, he stood up and began to make his way along the beach, picking up his Sheikah Slate along the way. He allowed his cold, stoic survival instinct to kick in. He needed to focus. He’d have to find shelter, food, and water before the sun set fully...

With a twisted sense of purpose at this newfound challenge, Link pounded his chest in invitation, suddenly screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Come on, world! You got anything else to throw at me?! Bring it on!” His eyebrows furrowed, his mouth contorted into a twisted, wild grin...

“Let’s see... if you’ve got what it takes to bring me down!”
And so, the island trials begin. As always, many locations have been scaled-up for narrative purposes. The survival island will be no exception to this. Enjoy!
See you on Saturday (hopefully). Next up is Chapter 19: Swept Under
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day One:

And so ends my first day on this strange, forsaken island. I think I have managed to calm down, regain my bearings a bit. Seclusion has that sort of effect I guess.

Now if only I could just do something about this heart of mine.

So far, my diet consists entirely of coconuts and crabs. It really isn’t that bad, but I’m hoping to find something a bit more substantial. Like steak perhaps. I can hear the sounds of much larger and tastier animals to hunt, deep inside the vast forest here on this island. But alongside those are the vicious-sounding snarls of unknown monsters.

Ordinarily I would just charge straight in without a second thought. Hunger does that to me. But obviously, I currently have no weapons, no armor, no gear at all. So even I am aware that it would be idiotic to hunt inside there in my current state. I am not suicidal after all.

Wild and reckless… yeah. But not suicidal.

So I dare not venture inside, not without proper equipment-

Or at least not without a pair of pants.

The last thing I want to do is go blindly running through the brush with my lower extremities exposed. There are many areas on my body that I can handle damaging. My private parts are not on that list.

Right, so I have never been one to really care much for recording my inner thoughts or anything like that. I am remarkably boring. But it seems appropriate right now, for the unlikely event that I end up meeting my demise here. Perhaps someone will find some amusement in the hilarious events leading up to my death. I know I certainly would.

That said, here is the situation:

This dinky little note-taking rune is basically the only feature enabled on the slate. I have no access to my bombs, or cryonis, or any other applications. I am not sure why this is, as I have not locked it out again or anything. And as far as I can tell I have not accidentally deactivated the features manually either.

I guess the malfunction could be caused by having repeatedly flung this thing around in frustration too often. Oops. That’s a shame though. I thought this stupid slate was much tougher than that. I had hoped to use it as a blunt weapon if the need arose.

Anyway. Another crazy find: this slate is filled to the brim with Purah’s research notes on ancient tech. I know we didn’t accidentally switch our slates out before, so clearly something weird happened when we worked on mine the last time I was in Hateno. If and when I make it off this island alive, I will have a bone to pick with her about this.
Day Two:

A ghostly voice greeted me this morning. I thought I was going crazy - well, crazier - but it was a real voice. The voice of a Sheikah Monk.

“To you who has traveled here,” he said (or something like that) “I present a challenge. You’ve relied on your equipment you’ve found during your travels thus far. You must cast aside this equipment and face this trial with your wits and whatever you can scavenge. Offer up the orbs to the three altars, and I will acknowledge your skill and return your items.”

So this too is a shrine trial. Lovely. I suppose that explains why my slate’s features are disabled...

I say this unashamedly. But the most important bit of information I got from this is that the apparent loss of Mipha’s armor - and my other equipment of course - is only temporary. As a result of this knowledge, I find myself in better spirits today.

In the meantime, I’ve been able to hunt and kill some small animals, including a boar. I skinned its hide and laid it out to dry. I think it will become useful later for the armor set I intend to build.

As for the menu tonight: nothing but delicious pork chops.

It is going to be a very good night indeed.

Day Three:

So much for being technologically challenged. I somehow managed to get my runes working again. All by myself. Take that, Purah.

All it took was a little tinkering. And, well... Beating it against a tree repeatedly for several minutes.

But hey, I got my bombs back. With perfect timing too. I discovered a small group of bokoblins napping by a fire while I wandered the beach earlier. These idiotic creatures left a pile of explosive barrels nearby.

Who does that?

Needless to say, they did not last very long. Thank you, remote bombs.

In the remains of their campsite I managed to recover a set of some old rusted weapons, and an old bow. Spent most of the afternoon polishing and sharpening this gear, as well as making arrowheads from their bones. Better be prepared for when I inevitably stumble upon even more monster camps during this trial.

Ah. And in other news, I have pants now. Leaf pants.

Which means it’s finally time for some real hunting tomorrow. I can already smell the piles of delicious, decadent seared steak now…

Day Four:
Just to note, trousers made of leaves are NOT ideal protection for running through the jungle brush. Ow.

Anyway. I dared to venture deeper into the forest, and what do you know. Another monster encampment. And the first of the three orbs.

But this camp, unlike the one on the beach, was rather elaborate. A tree house of sorts. Five bokoblins lived there, and every one of them wielded bows and arrows. The long-range battle was on. The result? Five bokoblins, five headshots. Eat your heart out Revali.

Deciding it was a shame to let this neat fort go to waste, I decided to go ahead and move camp here instead. I spent the rest of the day reinforcing the walls, demolishing the stairway up, and building a removeable ladder. I do not want anything weird sneaking up on me while I am up here. Besides, I do not really mind the extra work. It keeps me focused, keeps me away from stray thoughts. Of which there are quite a lot these days.

So my days are well preoccupied with the shrine trial at-hand. This is fine.

It’s the nighttime that really gets to me.

I do not sleep very much. The nights seem to drag on forever, my brain tossing and turning inside my skull, replaying my failures over and over and over in a tremendously miserable loop. I came to this place for peace and for solace. What I am getting is precisely the opposite.

Not a single night goes by… where I don’t think of Mipha. Not a single night passes... where I do not long to be with her again.

Imagine, if you will, that you have someone in your life who is so amazing, so incredibly essential to your very being, that your heart is permanently bound to them. Now imagine that same person is suddenly and violently torn away from you. A limb, forever severed. A heart forever shattered.

All of those times you spent together, supporting each other, living, laughing, loving…

You will never have any moments like that again.

You will never again share the joy and comfort you feel from their mere presence next to you.

You will never again lay down together in the peaceful still of the night, holding each other close without worry or care.

You will never love again.

In my life so far, I have been impaled, slashed, struck by arrows, electrocuted, and set on fire. In the memories I’ve regained so far, I have lost many people...

But there has never been any pain like the pain of losing Mipha. It is completely incomparable to anything I have ever known.

And so, I just hope Ganon knows that I am coming for him, with the most extreme prejudice. And when I arrive, his destruction will be so sure, so complete, so absolute, so incredibly thorough... that he will wish he’d never existed. He will be obliterated.

Day Five:
Found a Hinox today. It wears the second orb around its neck. As is usual, I was tempted to challenge the creature immediately, without fear or care.

But I restrained myself. I hesitated.

Because Mipha would not want this.

Her old, familiar glances of disapproval at my recklessness - a common sight from my childhood - flashed repeatedly through my brain in that moment. I could almost hear her calm, disapproving tone... gently easing me away from yet another potentially catastrophic move.

And so I retreated. I will tackle the Hinox once I am better prepared.

It really is quite strange though. This island… it’s doing something to me. Changing me. I have yet to decide if it is for the better or not.

I have nothing else to say.

Bye.

Day Seven:

Something interesting I discovered. Been reading Purah’s research notes to pass the time (or to help me fall asleep, in some cases). She has made several mentions of a mysterious rumored “god” creature that is capable of resurrecting animals. Some sort of great fairy castoff? Or perhaps something far more sinister?

Whatever the case may be, this entity seems to be located somewhere deep in the western Faron region.

Now. Resurrection is an interesting prospect for sure. It certainly raises a lot of questions as well - like, if this being truly exists… is its power limited to only animals? What about people?

And do I even dare to travel down that road?

It seems Purah never actually found this skeletal “god” herself. So it’s a longshot, I know. Besides. The very idea of opposing the divine will of the goddess… resurrecting the dead… fighting against the very nature of mortality... it’s all really rather taboo, is it not? Who am I to selfishly play god?

I have always believed that the afterlife is real. I have always believed that the realm after this one - where all good spirits go - is where both my parents now reside. I have no doubts… that Mipha too is destined to be with the goddesses for all eternity.

But this notion is hardly a comfort for me now, I am pained to admit.

So I suppose that a brief search and a consultation won’t hurt anything in the end... If I just so happen to be in that area some day, if I just so happen to survive this crazy ordeal, perhaps I will indeed pay a visit to this ‘god’ creature.

What have I got to lose?

Everything I knew is already lost anyway.
Day Nine:

Several enormous pieces of information to report on today.

First: My armor is complete. In the forest I found a skull belonging to some creature with curved horns and a flowing red mane. This is my helmet.

On the chest of my armor: boar leather with furry pauldrons.

My gauntlets, pants, and boots are all composed of a bull’s hide, a prize from a big kill two days ago. Dried bokoblin bones adorn the more critical components of the armor, thus finishing the set.

The completion of this armor has been perfectly timed with the second bit of news: I found the final orb yesterday. Well, I found its location anyway. Inside the biggest encampment of moblins and bokoblins that I have ever seen. I spent a large part of that afternoon scouting out their camp from trees just outside of their vision. It is apparent that they have ruled the island unchallenged for quite some time. Figured I could use their lack of preparation to my advantage… or to have a bit of fun.

So I covered my body with elaborate decals using boar blood. I waited until nightfall, and began to patrol the outskirts of the camp, roaring and grunting and snapping twigs. I slaughtered any lone bokoblins that tried to investigate, leaving their remains out in the open to be discovered. I have allowed myself to be spotted numerous times. And it is having the desired effect.

I can hear them talking in their strange language, scared of this hyper-violent entity that terrorizes them when darkness falls. And here on the second night, they don’t dare to travel out of the camp alone anymore.

The thought is pretty hilarious: These evil monsters - the dark minions of a wicked and ancient calamity that devastated the entire world - are afraid of a ghost in the night.

Day Twelve:

Today I decided to slaughter every single monster in that entire camp. Ha ha ha ha ha.

Day ???:

I now possess two of the three orbs. Their names are Lynda and Octavius. It is nice to finally have others to talk to. Lynda is pretty funny, she told me a joke this morning that had me laughing for hours. Her deadpan delivery really brought it home for me. They say humor is entirely about the method of transport, not the contents. But she has got both in spades.

Octavius on the other hand is way way way too quiet. He literally never talks, just sits there quietly. Analyzing, watching, waiting...

What kind of boring person stays silent and intensely focused all the time? There’s no merit to being totally expressionless, just to cover over your insecurities and weaknesses. What a terrible way to live! Anyway. I’m tired of being a third wheel. So I guess it’s time to start planning how to retrieve the third orb - Monty - from the dreaded Hinox. Lynda and Octavius have offered to help, but I had to turn them down. Neither one of them can wield a sword very well.
Day Seventeen (Probably):

The other two altars have been activated, and only one remains. Which means it’s time.

I will be rescuing Monty from the mighty Hinox tonight.

Every trap has been set, I have a full belly, my armor is reinforced, and I have plenty of weapons. I am more than ready to take this thing on.

...But if it just so happens, that this is my final entry…

Just know that I went out with no regrets. That I went out on my own terms. That I left behind a foreign, failed world that I seem to have no real business being in. No business, that is, other than being the hero. Whatever that even means anymore.

Perhaps, one way or another, this trial was meant to show me if I’m the champion that Hyrule truly needs...

...Or to prove that I am nothing more than a mere fish out of water.

Let us find out, shall we?

-Link

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MYUUURGGH!

The enormous black piglike creature climbed to its feet and wrested the arrow from its single eye. Annoyed, it turned to face Link, licked its chops, and began to make its way in his direction. It hadn’t eaten in several days after all. And this strange boney creature that was attacking it looked to be quite appetizing…

Now that the Hinox stood straight up in front of him, Link realized just how massive this one truly was. It had to be at least twenty feet tall. Its apelike arms dangled from its sides all the way down to the knees of its stubby legs. It was almost wider than it was tall, and the great rolls of fat on its body jostled and jiggled to-and-fro as it took each heavy step in Link’s direction.

Link kept his eyes trained on the creature, backpedaling deeper and deeper down the forest path. Above them, a series of criss-crossing vines that he had assembled days prior. He waited for just the right moment… and…

There.

He let an arrow fly, cutting through a single vine tied to a nearby tree. The entire webbed canopy released immediately, raining down a huge cluster of jagged rocks Link had previously set up there. They all piled onto the Hinox, slicing its outer flesh into ribbons, spraying blood all over the immediate area. It fell to one knee for a brief moment, before quickly recovering and returning to its chase.

It wasn’t going down that easily of course.
They continued to make their way up the hill, with Link occasionally firing an arrow straight into the eyeball of the Hinox and slicing it with a sharpened broadsword while it was incapacitated. Though he was certainly weakening the creature, he still had a ways to go before killing it. But if all went according to plan… he’d have this whole thing wrapped up right as night fell.

Just to test the durability of this creature, Link tried exploding a few remote bombs in its face as well. But this seemed to have as much effect on it as passing wind in its general direction.

Before long, the Hinox had chased Link all the way to the ruins of the enormous campsite he’d previously decimated. Link suddenly sprinted all the way across the base, stepping over countless decaying body parts strewn about - evidence of his relentless slaughter many days prior.

The bleeding Hinox began to waddle over towards him. But Link knew he’d at least have a few seconds to do what needed to be done. The Hinox took one step into the base... then immediately fell into a carefully-concealed hole Link had set up. Giant wooden spikes lined the bottom, and the beast found itself painfully impaled through its body in several places. It let out a cry of sheer agony. But this too would not be sufficient to kill the thing either. Sure enough, it furiously climbed its way out of the shallow hole and continued its pursuit.

Fortunately, Link was already clear across the camp by then. He quickly spun around and stopped in front of a huge slab of metal, pulling out his Sheikah Slate as he did. He used stasis on the slab, and began to pound repeatedly on it with an axe he’d found before. Frozen in time, the large piece of metal started storing tremendous amounts of kinetic energy in the direction of the charging Hinox. Link counted down the seconds as he pounded away. He just hoped that he had timed stasis correctly…

Four…

The Hinox began to pick up speed.

Three…

The Hinox was ten feet away, licking its lips.

Two…

The Hinox was five feet away, staring straight at Link with its arm outstretched...

One…

Link paused.

Nothing.

...Uh oh.

And then the Hinox was upon him, bending over to grab him and tear him limb from limb-

FWAAAAAH!

The metal slab EXPLODED straight out from in front of Link, instantly cutting through the Hinox with incredible power before continuing to fly up and over the distant treetops. The towering monster was sheared perfectly in half at the mid-section, its torso spinning and spiraling several yards away. Barrels of gore spurting all across the entirety of the campsite. Soaked from top to bottom with the creature’s blood, Link calmly took on Sidon’s classic pose in victory.
And for the first time in many weeks, he genuinely smiled.

He made his way over to the final orb. The one that would mercifully bring an end to this challenge.

*It’s been fun… I guess. Link thought. But I believe it’s time to finally move on.*

The orb was still tied to the neck of the grossly dismembered Hinox, and Link had a brief problem cutting through the thick rope that bound it. But after some sawing, he’d removed it. He held the orb above his head in triumph, and began to make his way over to the final altar - once covered by the metal slab he’d used to slay the beast.

*And that’s that. Now it’s time to-*

...Wait a minute. What is this?

Soot-like particles of red and purple began to float through the air all around Link. The night sky, once lit brightly by the light of the full moon, now glowed an eerie red. A feeling of foreboding set into Link’s very soul…

The clouds overhead accelerated their movement, rolling and cascading across the sky. The air was saturated with pure malice, burning Link's lungs. And as he glanced up at the sky, he finally saw it -

The moon. It was *blood red*. And growing larger by the second.

Tendrils of dark energy frayed out from it in every direction as it rose. It seemed to be *staring* directly at him, like a great evil eye in the sky - filling Link with an incredible sense of dread-

“*Link… Link…*”

A familiar voice filled his head...

*Zelda!*

“*Link… be on your guard. Ganon’s power grows… it rises to its peak under the hour of the blood moon. By the moon’s glow, the aimless spirits of monsters slain in the name of the light return to flesh…*”

Body parts from countless slain creatures swirled up and around Link. They began to crudely reassemble themselves, formed once again in the likeness of the beings they once were. Puffs of red smoke exploded out across the campsite one after another... and the deed was done - the undead monsters were reborn.

These mutilated, bleeding zombie creatures snarled and roared in his direction, recognizing the man who’d killed them. They appeared quite eager to return the favor...

Link immediately dropped the orb and drew his broadsword, swinging wildly in a vain effort to kill them all, before they’d each fully revived...

And then it hit him.

“*Link…*”

He spun around, his eyes widened in shock and frustration.

“*...Please be careful.*”
Standing right in front of him, the revived black Hinox grunted loudly...

He slid on his knees under the legs of the Hinox and sprinted down the jungle path towards the beach. The revived monsters immediately gave chase, the Hinox bringing up the rear. He replaced his broadsword and drew his bow, letting loose a hailstorm of arrows that managed to take out about half a dozen of them. But soon, his arrows were depleted.

To further hold them off, Link began to throw a steady beat of remote bombs behind him, sending creatures flying left and right.

But there was simply too many of them.

*Just need to make it to the beach... almost there...*

Though the creatures were fast, even in their decayed state, Link was just a little bit faster. He hit the beach several minutes later, making his way across the sand *just* as the massive undead army exploded from the shrubbery behind him. In the distance, he could hear the angry stomps of the revived Hinox, ready to avenge its earlier death at the hands of this Hylian...

The monsters were gaining, so he picked up the pace. He scanned the beach with his eyes, searching for the spot where he’d marked it…

*There.*

A rusted spear protruded from the sands up ahead, and Link made his way to it. He dropped a single remote bomb in the spot, ran a little ways, then detonated it as soon as the first bokoblin reached it-

-But he misjudged the range of the blast.

The explosive barrels he’d buried below the sands all detonated at once, shooting Link across the beach and vaporizing dozens of charging bokoblins and moblins. Their body parts rained down from the heavens as Link rolled onto his feet and examined himself.

He was not on fire.

*That’s a first...*

As the smoke billowed and rose up and above the beach, Link got a good glimpse of the damage. He’d wiped out roughly *half* of the charging army of decayed monsters - but thirty remained, as did the angry charging Hinox.

Link shrugged, drew a large rusty claymore from his back, and took his typical battle pose.

*I suppose in the end... it always comes down to brute force...*

The first two waves of bokoblins descended upon Link. In a flash, he spun around and *slammed* the ground in front of him with his claymore, scattering a handful of the screaming little creatures across the beach. From directly behind them, a weaponless moblin lumbered after...

*Well, this should be easy to kill.*

As if on cue, the moblin reached over, picked up a kicking, screaming bokoblin warrior, and flung it straight at Link.

*You have got to be kidding me.*
He batted the poor helpless bokoblin straight into the ocean, then used the momentum from his swing to begin spinning uncontrollably down the beach, right in the direction of the zombified creatures. The charging moblin was instantly slain, along with roughly a dozen bokoblins. Link continued to spin wildly, slaughtering each and every idiotic monster that blindly stampeded his way.

He was growing dizzy from the spin, growing exhausted from the constant running and fighting, but he couldn’t afford to lose focus now. Not with the Hinox still charging-

*Wait. Where’s the Hinox?*

**BONK!**

Link’s crazy spin attack abruptly ended, his damaged claymore shattering off the tough leg of the angry Hinox that had finally caught up with the fight. Link recoiled, shook the pain from his wrists, and drew his broadsword from his back. Without hesitation, he backflipped from the Hinox’s vicious swipe and slid under its legs again.

Only this time, the monster was ready. It leapt straight into the air and landed on the ground with a large thud.

**CRUNCH.**

Link grunted in pain as the beast’s hefty bottom landed straight on his leg, crushing his bones. The Hinox hopped to his feet, and turned to face him. Link hobbled on one leg, swinging madly at the relentless final wave of monsters. The darkness of exhaustion and pure agony threatened to pull him under, but he remained resilient - even as he was tackled by the final three bokoblins. With the Hinox bearing down directly at him, Link drew a second broadsword and swung wildly in every direction. He looked up just in time to see the descending fist of the Hinox, rolling backwards and out of the way as the last of the bokoblins were crushed beneath the hands of the one-eyed creature.

As Link scrambled to stand on his good foot again, the Hinox reared back and let out an uncharacteristic roar. Its visage was utterly horrifying against the blood-red light of the moon. Bodily fluids oozed out of the seam from its reassembled midsection, its tattered flesh hung around its entire body in strips.

But it didn’t move to strike him. At least not immediately.

It stopped and stared at Link, licking its chops as if it were savoring this moment. As if it were memorizing the picturesque scene of this crippled Hylian standing before the presence of his inevitable demise…

Link stood his ground. He refused to cower, refused to run. It wasn’t like he was going to get very far anyway...

Finally, the Hinox made a move. It reached over and ripped a palm tree straight out of the beach. It slammed the tree to the ground, splintering it in half. It wielded the tree like a blunt weapon, and began to approach the injured Hylian. It began to take hasty swipes at Link, which he somehow managed to dodge -

- until the last swipe caught him right in the chest, launching him clear across the beach again. He hit the ground hard, the air escaped him. He tried to climb back up to one leg, but collapsed on his back again in agony. His breathing was incredibly labored, his head throbbed painfully. He rolled over to his knees and stared at the ground for a while. He coughed violently, spattering blood all over the
sand below him.

The Hinox strangely took its time approaching him again, which gave him a brief chance to gather himself.

_Punctured lung, mild concussion, broken leg… is that it?_

With a great sigh, he examined his leg. Lifted it up, attempted to put pressure on it.

“ARRGH....”

Panicked, he looked around him, found his broadswords laying on the ground near him, crawled over to them on his stomach as quick as he could.

The Hinox barreled down on him, its pace finally accelerating to a full run. And in that moment, Link’s fear completely left him. His intense focus returned. And with a quiet shout of determination, he forced himself to rise.

No matter what, no matter the pain… he’d make his last stand on both feet.

Link leaned forward, ignoring the terrible ache in his leg, and began to run blindly towards the charging Hinox. His leg creaked and cracked under the strain, and he nearly stumbled, but kept on.

The Hinox swung its splintered log at Link, and he rolled under it quickly before jumping straight up to slash at the beast’s midsection. Both of his swords found their marks, and the creature’s blood poured out of it in a massive flow, soaking Link again.

In pain, the beast fell backwards onto its rear as Link continued his counterassault. He crawled up the front of the creature and let loose a mad flurry rush of swipes straight into its eyeball.

The blinded Hinox attempted to leap to its feet and return a flurry of swings with its own weapon. But its movements grew sluggish, its attacks labored with the rapid loss of blood from its stomach. Pure adrenaline flowed through Link's body, blocking out the immense pain in his chest and leg. So he kept his focus, dodging the beasts's slowing strikes with ease.

He had the upper had now. With the Hinox blinded and bleeding out, it was a simple matter of waiting for one last opening, and then-

THUNK THUNK THUNK.

Three arrows cleanly entered Link’s back. He stumbled to his left, collapsed to the ground just out of reach of the Hinox’s blind swings. Link spun his head around wildly, searching for the source.

_There._

A lone red bokoblin stood in the forest nearby, celebrating its successful attack. It reached into its quiver to draw more arrows, hoping to finish the job.

Against his better judgement, Link reached behind his back, _ripped_ an arrow from his own flesh, and shot the last bokoblin with his bow. It fell to the ground, dead. And Link once again turned his attention to the suffering Hinox.

But there was no need.

It had collapsed onto the sands of the beach, a lake of blood surrounding it. Its breathing had stopped. It no longer moved at all.
The Hinox had fallen. This time, for good.

Battered and broken, Link simply stared blankly after the fallen monster. And he allowed himself one last sigh...

His consciousness was waning in and out. The darkness was encroaching. He was dizzy, faint, and fading.

He’d known it instantly from the very moment he was struck. One of the arrows had pierced his heart.

He didn’t have much time now.

Link hobbled over to the cool ocean waters, calmly seating himself on the beach. The blood moon slowly faded from the sky overhead, replaced by a familiar white glow that reflected around him. It was a somber but welcome reminder of a much happier time, now lost to calamity.

His blood pooled around him, his life slowly drained away, his vision began to fade as his brain grew more and more starved of oxygen.

And yet… he felt a strange sense of bliss.

For he no longer felt any pain, no longer felt sorrow. He had no regrets.

*I… can think of far more ignoble deaths than this.* He thought to himself.

*I always imagined I’d fall in battle anyway.*

A grim smile spread across his face.

*Mipha… I suppose I’ll be meeting you again much sooner than expected.*

The thought of this sent a feeling of pure warmth across his cold skin, and he collapsed on his side abruptly. His motor functions failed him. His head bounced off the ground forcefully. He paid no notice, no care.

Finally, the young Hylian warrior closed his weary eyes. He accepted the gentle pull of darkness in his soul, and in his heart.

And with one final, weak, painless gasp, Link quietly perished.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Memories of Mipha Part 6: Hylian Fiancé.
Her father was the highly respected king of Zora's Domain. Her mother, a nurse, was beloved for her healing nature and her quiet, gentle attitude.

After her birth the Zora princess quickly grew into a bright and gifted young girl, taking after the queen in almost every way. Her mother had loved her dearly, and Mipha loved her too. She was her mentor, her friend, her queen... her heroine.

Since childhood, Mipha possessed ethereal healing abilities. Though the effectiveness of this power was uneven and inconsistent at times, she used it frequently for the care of wounded soldiers - and for many other medical needs that arose throughout the bustling domain. This ability, combined with her natural skills as a traditional nurse, made her a beloved figure amongst the populace.

One day, tragedy struck. The Zora queen fell ill while giving birth to the future prince Sidon. And from then on, Mipha felt a tremendous sense of guilt and helplessness at being unable to use her powers to save her mother. The death of the queen affected every citizen of the domain quite deeply. But none so much as the princess herself. And from that day forward, the young Zora princess resolved to hone her healing powers to their maximum capabilities - if only to ensure that she would never lose someone she loved ever again.

Soon, she reached the age of receiving lessons from the royal family’s order of knights. She was adored by the entirety of the Royal Guard - especially the Demon Sergeant Seggin, who saw something quite special in the princess. When eventually pressed about receiving more advanced lessons in spearmanship and combat from this talented sergeant of the Royal Guard, she had immediately responded with a simple, quiet proclamation:

“When shall we begin?”

Her radiance grew, as did her skills with the Lightscale Trident. She displayed a natural gift for spearmanship, and her seemingly limitless capabilities soon became the proud envy of even Seggin himself.

As she entered her primary growth stage at the age of forty, Mipha’s serene, maternal nature grew all the more prominent. Left without a mother to care for him, the baby prince Sidon soon came to see his big sister Mipha as both a motherly figure as well as a dear friend. And alongside King Dorephan, Mipha raised the young Zora prince into a wily, hyperactive, and loving child...

“Sidon. I will not tell you a second time. Fish are to be eaten, not to be used as weapons…”

The young prince danced and spun on the dining table, a Hyrule Bass clutched tightly in his hand. His friends roared with laughter around him, dodging his hasty and playful swipes.

Although Mipha truly had no problems with Sidon’s frequently silly antics - finding them quite amusing, in fact - she figured it was better for him to be scolded by her rather than their volatile attendant Muzu...

Not that Sidon really cared either way.

“That is incorrect, my dear sister!” he replied, as he fenced the air around him with the flopping, dead
fish. “It has been said that our ancient ancestors did precisely that. It is my desire to honor the legendary fish wielders of old!”

“...That may very well be true…” Mipha replied. “...But not at the dinner table. Please. Regardless of facts, you are now ten years old. You must act the part…”

She glanced over at Muzu, who nodded approvingly at Mipha’s scolding. He seemed properly appeased - much to her relief. She nodded back at him, then leaned in carefully to whisper to Sidon as he pouted in front of her.

“...But if you absolutely insist on goofing around like this, perhaps you will join me in some... 'fishmanship' lessons after dinner?” She winked.

Sidon’s face lit up with excitement, then quickly morphed into a serious stare as he retook his seat back at the table. “Ah yes yes, very well my dear sister,” he said. “Please excuse my terrible manners…”

Seemingly satisfied, Muzu crossed his arms and smiled at Mipha.

“I am quite impressed, Lady Mipha. You seem to grow in maturity and grace with each passing day.” He turned his attention to Sidon, who now sat quietly in his chair, nibbling at his dinner. “As for the young prince ... I do believe that a necessary punishment is certainly still in order…”

Mipha frowned at this, though Sidon managed to maintain his composure for now.

“After all,” Muzu continued, “What good is being part of the royal family, if you never learn to conduct yourself in a manner worthy of respect?” He stood up from the table and made his way to the washroom nearby. “I shall think of an appropriate penalty for young Sidon in due time. Please excuse me a moment…”

Once Muzu was out of sight, Mipha glanced at Sidon. She gestured at the salt shaker in front of them with her thumb. A glint of recognition flashed across Sidon’s eyes, and he grabbed the shaker and quickly darted under the table. As their fellow Zora looked on, Sidon popped up onto Muzu’s chair on the other side, and began pouring a heaping amount of rock salt into his water goblet. The other Zora - and Mipha herself - barely contained their abrupt laughter as Sidon quickly made his way back to his chair and resumed his meal as if nothing happened.

Muzu soon returned to the dinner table, his posture somehow even more arrogant and proper than usual as he smiled mischievously at the Zora prince.

“I’ve got it!” Muzu said, sneering happily. “We shall have extra writing practice immediately after dinner, with a few extra pages of work for tomorrow’s math lessons thrown in. How does that sound, Master Sidon?” He sat himself down at his spot, unfolding his napkin back into his lap carefully before continuing.

“Perhaps you will learn, in time, that the dinner table is no proper place for your shenanigans.” Now quite pleased with himself, Muzu reached for his goblet and began to take a sip...

“Oh, Muzu…” Sidon finally said, shaking his head.

PBBBBTTTHHHH -

“...Why do you always have to be so salty ?”

A fountain of saltwater sprayed from Muzu's mouth as the entire assembly roared with laughter.
around him. Even Dorephan himself, quietly observing the unfolding scene up to this point, was chuckling heartily with his trademark laugh.

Muzu glared furiously at Sidon. The young prince immediately bolted from the table as his angry attendant chased after him, screaming and shouting with incredible anger.

Still laughing, Mipha shrugged to herself.

*So much for avoiding Muzu’s wrath,* she thought.

*...But what good is being a part of the royal family… if you never get to have any fun?*

“Sir, if I may? I have a question for you…” Mipha stood at the foot of King Dorephan’s throne, a large bundle clutched in her small arms.

Dorephan smiled down at his young daughter. It was fairly typical of her to address him formally, a bad habit that he could never seem to rid her of…

“Of course, my dear Mipha! Ask away. There is no need to be so proper…”

Mipha smiled back. “Thank you father. My question pertains to something I found when I was cleaning out one of our storage rooms below…” she dropped the bundle, and began to unwrap it carefully.

“I thought that this might have once belonged to you… but I could not be certain. It is, well… it is a bit small. With all due respect.”

From inside the package emerged a beautiful Zora armor set, dark purple in color, with red and gold jewels adorning it. The entire torso area was covered in scale-like chainmail, and the pauldrons and wrist guards were black in color, giving it a rather aggressive look. A single white scale was sewn dead-center of the chest, framed in with metal accents.

Dorephan began to laugh cheerfully, as Mipha handed the armor up to his waiting hands.

“This, my daughter, is one of my most valued possessions. It was an engagement gift, presented to me by your mother many decades ago…” He looked down at himself and grinned.

“...Several hundred pounds ago as well! Wahahahahaha…..”

Mipha stifled a laugh, and glanced up at her father's face with a look of genuine curiosity.

“Engagement?” She asked, “I had always assumed that it was the role of the male to take the initiative to offer marriage to his partner…?”

Dorephan shook his head. “While that is true of many couples here, and indeed most other races, some Zora couples choose to uphold some of our older traditions - particularly, the members of the Royal Family. Your mother and I were no exception!”

Mipha’s face brightened with interest and excitement, as Dorephan continued.

“Do you wish to hear the tale of how this custom began?” He asked her. Mipha nodded her head, and took her usual seat in front of her father. His stories remained an endless source of entertainment and knowledge for her incredibly inquisitive mind…

“Excellent! Well, then…let us begin. In ancient times there was once a king who had no special talent for the art of war. What he lacked in skill with the blade, he made up for in his love for the
people, and especially his love for the queen.

One day, a horde of monsters gathered in the Zodobon Highlands. Word of this reached the king, and he hesitantly steeled himself for war to protect his people. However, the queen knew how terribly ill-suited for the task this king was. Now worried for his life, she wove one of her own scales into his armor, hoping that her love would protect him in his upcoming battle.

As the battle began, it seemed that fortune favored the Zora, and that they would make it safely home after all. But a cunning Lizalfos general saw an opening, seizing it quickly and driving the king’s forces into a corner. Just as the evil general’s sword was ready to crash down upon the king, a miracle took place. One errant sunbeam reflected from the scale on his armor, blinding the Lizalfos and preventing the deathblow from falling upon him.

With this new chance, the king rallied his forces to turn the tide of battle, defeating the general and securing victory. This came to be known as the Miracle of the White Scale - a scale that only female Zora such as you possess. It was this very miracle… that began the tradition of Zora princesses crafting armor for their future husbands!

He paused for a moment, as he stared carefully at the armor in his hands, seemingly swept away by its memory.

“When your mother presented this armor to me… it came as a real shock. While I had known from the beginning that she was the only one for me, I had never imagined that she could be so bold.” His large thumb began to caress the white scale adorning the center of the armor. The king sighed quietly.

“The white scale is more than just a mere symbol of her affection, however. And even more than a simple embodiment of her desire to protect me, at that. It represents... a connection - an unbreakable bond. A part of your mother is with me always, even after her death. It is the promise that we’ll be together. Even until the end of the age.” He paused suddenly, staring down at his wide-eyed daughter. He smiled graciously at her.

“I’m sorry my dear. Perhaps you are too young to understand…”

But Mipha most certainly understood. Though she was still quite childlike in appearance, her mind and spirit were both wise beyond her years. She shook her head.

“I understand quite well father,” she said. “And it is a beautiful story indeed. Though I do have yet another question…”

“Please, please, ask away!”

“…Despite knowing that you will be reunited with mother in death… do you still feel the pain of losing her, just as I do right now?”

Dorephan smiled back, and closed his eyes. “Of course, of course, my dear Mipha. Every single day, every hour, I miss her dearly. I long for her presence. But that does not stop me from loving her just the same.”

“...If he happens to turn out like you when he grows up,” Mipha countered, “I might be better off marrying a Lizalfos.”

The Captain laughed heartily as he smiled down at her, his blue eyes beaming with their usual intensity. Even in parenthood, he had yet to shed his playful, rambunctious nature. And as always, he
absolutely had to get the last word…

“Perhaps you should!” he replied. “A sick side of me almost wants to see how those babies might turn out.” This silly image produced a giggle from the Zora princess, though she did her best to stifle it. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage him in his teasing ways…

The gallant young Captain continued to laugh as he glanced around the town square of Zora’s domain. A group of Zora - both young and old - had begun to gather around him. He had only just arrived, eager to catch up with his old friends - and eager to share stories of his reckless and entertaining travels. It had, after all, been at least five years since his previous visit.

The group soon seated themselves in a half-circle around him, awaiting his epic tales of adventure. He turned to face his audience, as Mipha took her own seat on the floor in front of him.

And so he began.

He captivated the Zora with story after story, described his numerous encounters with incredible creatures from far-off lands, told them of suspenseful and dangerous battles, kept them on the edge of their seats the entire way.

Mipha shook her head in disapproval. This man is going to get himself killed some day… she thought to herself, as he recounted a story of a wrestling tournament with the gorons on the lava-soaked surface of Death Mountain. Numerous were the perilous situations he had often found himself in, and Mipha knew that his careless nature had the potential to lead him on a dangerous path of inevitable destruction...

Still, she appreciated the rousing entertainment. Even if her worry only grew for the safety of the reckless young Hylian - whose responsibilities now included looking after his young, small family.

“...And with a well-placed kick, I sent the goron careening down the mountain face. And thus, I was the champion!” The crowd of Zora let out a cheer of amusement as he finished this final tale. “As for my prize, well…” he reached into his bag, producing an enormous bag full of strange-colored rocks.

“Rock candy! Enjoy!” Another cheer erupted from the crowd as the Captain handed out a seemingly endless amount of sweets. Prince Sidon in particular was completely beside himself with excitement. He immediately devoured a handful of candy, stimulating his already heightened state of hyperactivity. Mipha shook her head in disapproval at this, abruptly standing up to approach the Captain as he beamed at the shouts of praise and adulation heaped in his direction…

“Ever one for the spotlight, I see,” she said, crossing her arms. The Captain rubbed his head sheepishly, as Mipha continued to speak.

“On behalf of all of us at the domain, I sincerely thank you for the gifts. Though I must express my disapproval at your feeding Sidon so many sweets at once…” she gestured towards her brother, who was now spinning on his head like a top and shrieking like a maniac as his friends egged him on.

“...He is going to be like this for several days now, most likely.”

The Captain laughed heartily in response. Despite Mipha’s irritation towards him, the deep tones of his voice warmed her heart.

“That was precisely my intention!” he said. “Crazy Sidon is the best Sidon, I always say!”

He looked down at the young Zora princess, grinning wildly.
She’s really grown… he thought to himself. She's beginning to look just like her mother… A pang of sorrow briefly crossed his heart as he reflected on memories of the king and queen of Zora’s Domain, and the close friendship he had maintained with them in his youth. But he caught himself before going too far with that somber train of thought...

“Ah, that reminds me!” he suddenly said. “I have something for you as well!”

Mipha shook her head. “If you think you can simply bribe your way out of this one, then I hope that you-” She paused. From inside his bag, the Captain produced a small box. And inside it…

...A delectable looking chocolate cake from Hyrule Castle Town.

Her favorite.

“You were saying?” he offered.

“...All is forgiven.” she replied.

As Mipha began to gorge herself inegantly on the gift, the Captain took the opportunity to tease Mipha even further.

“You know… I meant it when I said you’d be a great wife for little Link someday…”

Mipha rolled her eyes. Of course he’d waited to pester her again until she had a mouth full of cake. She chewed quickly, and prepared for her next rebuttal...

“I can tell he’s going to have a taste for Zora women.” the Captain continued. "He's already got an appetite for fish, after all!"

His efforts to tease Mipha were in vain, however. She quickly swallowed her food, and turned her attention to him.

“I will worry about that later,” she said, calmly. As for right now… you had better watch out for Sidon…” She pointed behind the Captain, where her crazed brother was charging straight towards them, mouth agape.

“...He has an appetite for Hylians, after all.”

CHOMP.

“YOWCH!”

The Captain let out a cry of pain, as Sidon’s sharp teeth clamped down hard on his bottom. And finally, Mipha burst out laughing at the scene. There was never a dull moment with the Captain around. She truly was quite grateful for his presence, teasing ways and all.

Not that she'd ever tell him that.

Besides... she found herself hoping that, in his next visit perhaps, she would finally get to meet this cute little Hylian boy she had been hearing so much about...

So... his name is Link, she thought to herself as, she took another bite of cake. What a nice name.

She glanced up at the Captain, who was tossing the wide-eyed Sidon up in the air like a ball.

It's a strong name... for who will most certainly turn out to be a strong person.
“I must admit that I was… hesitant at first,” she said. “But I am starting to believe that I am going to enjoy this quite a bit.”

Having agreed to spend more time with the young Hylian boy, Mipha found herself walking alongside Toto Lake, which was situated high up on a mountain just north of the Domain.

“I still can’t believe you haven’t been camping before!” Link cried out. “You haven’t really lived until you’ve spent a quiet night under the open sky!” He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed. “Me and my dad used to do this every single weekend! Well, I mean, when he wasn’t busy that is…”

Mipha smiled. Link’s exuberance, his excitement, and his adventurous attitude were all quite infectious. And it eased her heart to see that he was finally beginning to work through the deep pain in his heart from the loss of his father, the Captain…

She sighed at his memory. We never did get to learn his name in the end, she lamented. She quickly shook the thought from her head, turned her attention back to Link.

“And I don’t suppose,” Mipha said, “That you have an agenda for our little 'camping' trip today?”

Link grinned up at her with his crooked teeth. “Nope! That’s the fun of it! It’s all about the thrill of adventure. You never know what’s going to happen!” He began to peer through the water near them, his eyes eventually fixating on a small hole near the bottom of the lake. “Where do you suppose that leads?” he said, pointing towards it.

Mipha glanced over and shrugged. “I am not sure. As I said before… I am not at all familiar with any of the surrounding areas here-”

SPLASH.

Link had already dropped his gear, diving into the water and making a beeline straight for the underwater hole.

Mipha shook her head and smiled to herself.

Reckless, impulsive, courageous… just like his father. She quickly dove in after him.

Though he’d only been living in Zora’s Domain for four months now, Mipha noted that Link’s swimming had already improved greatly from his daily sessions with his friends. Naturally, she had no trouble keeping up with him. But she was impressed nonetheless as he darted effortlessly through the water, and into the mouth of the underwater cave.

The interior was pitch black as they entered, but a distant light shone in the distance. Mipha hoped it was an air pocket within the cave… Link was notorious bad at holding his breath after all.

Soon, they reached the light and breached the surface simultaneously with a splash.

“That was awesome!” Link cried, gasping for air. “I thought I was going to die for a second there!”

Mipha rolled her eyes at his recklessness. “I would hardly describe your potential drowning as ‘awesome’, but-”

“WHOA! Check it out!” Link ran down a nearby path, which Mipha could now see was lit by an enormous vein of luminous stones. Their blue glow illuminated almost the entire cave, reflecting its
light off the damp, eroded walls.

“It’s another cave!” Link shouted. “Where do you think it leads?! I bet it goes on forever!”

Mipha smiled at Link’s excitement. “Well then…” she replied, “I suppose we’ll just have to dive in to find out-”

**SPLASH.**

Link had once again dived abruptly into the water without hesitation. And Mipha once again shook her head and smiled as she chased after him.

This marathon of swimming, exploring, and diving continued for several hours, as the pair penetrated deeper and deeper into the cave. Fears of danger gave way to the excitement of adventure, as they began to discover ancient ruins, strange fossils, and odd treasures that had been long lost to the passage of time.

Soon, they entered into a mysterious chamber. The entrance way was marked with the ancient seal of the Zora, three crescent circles facing back-to-back. The walls of the chamber were cracked and worn away with age.

And at the center: two caskets, also near-destroyed with time. A cluster of luminous stones had penetrated one of the chamber walls, bathing the room with its eerie glow. As they approached the caskets, the pair nearly jumped in shock.

Inside was a pair of ancient Zora skeletons, male and female.

Link and Mipha glanced briefly at each other, a look of wonder growing across their faces.

“I wonder… how old these two are now,” Mipha thought out loud.

“I’ll bet they are older than the ancient hero himself!” Link said. He looked carefully over the two skeletons, then suddenly raised his eyebrow in curiosity. He pointed at the male Zora.

“What’s he wearing?” he asked.

Mipha looked over, and finally noticed it. An elaborate piece of armor adorned the torso of the skeleton. It was quite unlike her father’s, that much was apparent. But clearly visible on his chest - a single white scale was carefully sewn in.

“Well Link… that's Zora armor.” Mipha explained. “It is part of an old tradition that is said to have started with some of my ancient ancestors. I wonder… if this might be the very couple that started it in the first place! Though, that is probably just my mind jumping to conclusions…”

She turned to Link, and could immediately tell that he had about a million questions for her. So before he could begin to ask, she decided to give him a brief synopsis of the story her father had told her years before, of the tradition of the Zora armor.

The simple story captivated the young boy, and he stood there patiently and happily as Mipha relayed the tale to him. She wasn’t nearly as good of a storyteller as her father was, not even close. But Link seemed to pay no mind to it.

“As for the white scale itself…” Mipha finished, “It is meant to show that the presence of the princess is *always* with her beloved. She will always protect him. She will always be with him. This is her sincere promise of absolute devotion to the man she loves.”
As she ended the story, Link paused for a minute, deeply pondering her words. After some time he finally broke his silence.

“Well I have to say,” he said, with a youthful, innocent smile, “that whoever you end up giving armor to... is going to be the luckiest guy in the entire world!”

It had been one month since Link’s departure from Zora’s Domain, and his return to the Knight's Academy. For Mipha, it felt like an entire year.

The pain of his absence had yet to wear off, and the freedom she now had in her summertime study break only seemed to highlight the absence of her dear Hylian friend. She missed his presence… the deep tones of his genuine laughter… his intense and loving stare. She missed his incredible sense of humor, his contagious optimism...

And it didn’t help that Muzu constantly found the need to scold her for her apparent absentmindedness.

“Where were you at dinner today, Lady Mipha?” he demanded, as she walked down the northeast bridge leading into the heart of the domain. She had just finished a long afternoon walk to herself, visiting some of the old places where she and Link had spent so much time.

“Oh, well, I… my apologies Muzu.” Mipha said. “I was not aware that I needed to report on my whereabouts at all times…”

“That is not the issue here, young lady,” he snapped. “You have grown ever more despondent since the summer season has descended upon us.” He suddenly stopped, folded his arms behind his back. “You may be on break from your studies… but that does not mean you are on break from your duties as a princess of this domain. And that includes your presence at every formal gathering in the square.” He sighed. “I simply cannot understand your aloof behavior. And just when I thought you were finally free from the influence of that Hylian nuisance …”

Mipha fought back the urge to lash out verbally at Muzu for his slight. She barely managed it.

Instead she continued right past her overbearing attendant, choosing to take the high road for now. Muzu brought up the rear behind her, continuing his rant as he did. But she easily tuned him out, leaving herself alone with her thoughts once again.

The source of her strange behavior was hardly a mystery to her. She knew precisely why she was feeling so isolated, so disconnected with present concerns. But with Muzu’s insistent scolding and scorn nowadays… she now wondered if it were somehow wrong to feel this way at all...

The days soon passed, giving way to weeks. And in time, the minor incident was soon forgotten by Muzu. Soon, Mipha's studies resumed once again. She found that simply burying herself in her work and in her duties provided a much-needed distraction from her confused mental state. So at the very least, she was able to hide her emotions from Muzu in this way - and that was good enough for now.

One day, King Dorephan summoned Mipha to the throne room for a brief discussion. Though Muzu insisted on being present, Dorephan barred him from entering. This was a conversation between father and daughter - one that he realized he should have had many months ago…
As Mipha took her place in front of the king, he sat straight up in his chair as he prepared to speak.

“I believe, that you already know what this is about,” he began. A rare look of austerity was present on his face.

Mipha nodded calmly as she began to speak.

“I am sorry, father,” she said. “I have been lax in my duties, and quite lazy in my studies. But I assure you, it’s only a-

“It’s Link, isn’t it?” he interrupted.

Mipha froze.

He knew…

Dorephan grinned widely at her reaction.

“My dear… I am your father. I am not ignorant to the emotional state of my children. I knew from the very start, that you and Master Link carried a special, unspoken bond between each other.”

Mipha returned her father’s smile. Though it did little to ease her sense of loneliness, his knowledge of her predicament somehow lifted some of the guilt from her shoulders.

“I want you to know…” Dorephan continued, “That there is nothing wrong with the way you feel about him. Absolutely nothing. I want you to find great strength in your affection, not guilt. Do you understand?”

With those words, a feeling of incredible warmth filled Mipha’s heart. She suddenly ran up and hugged her father, and his enormous arms wrapped around her too, returning the gesture.

“You will see Link again, that much is certain,” he said, his voice low and comforting.

“But for now you must take courage, my daughter. You must be strong. After all... Shouldn’t there be no fear... in love?”

Mipha sat at the desk in her guest room at Hyrule Castle, reflecting on the eventful day. Social gatherings had always exhausted her energy, without fail. And although she was truly pleased to have finally met her fellow Champions, she was also quite happy to get some time to herself in order to recharge. Especially since she hadn’t a single moment of rest since her arrival in Castle Town earlier that day.

Leaning over her desk, she scribbled away at a blank sheet of paper with a quill pen. She was planning out her spearmanship training session for the next morning, laying out the sequence of events and exercises she wished to review with the talented members of the Hylian Royal Guard. Mipha had to admit… that she was a bit nervous. As an introvert, she never did handle large groups of people very well. And she wasn't particularly confident in her ability to instruct a group of complete strangers either...

But she reflected on the words of wisdom that Seggin often repeated to her during their trip here:

“It is simply a matter of removing yourself from the equation entirely,” he’d said. “Detachment is key. You are merely a channel for the lessons that need to be conveyed. Remember this, and you will have no problems as an instructor. Get out of your own way, have faith in your abilities!”
With that thought, Mipha smiled. She supposed that Link was doing the same thing with his own objectives as a Captain of the Royal Guard - completely removing his own fears and doubts from his consideration.

She just hoped that his quiet aloofness was not a sign of his taking his detachment too far in that direction…

Feeling satisfied with her written plans so far, Mipha allowed herself a quick break. She took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. Finally relaxed, she glanced over at the opposite end of the room, where an enormous collection of flowers - courtesy of Revali - sat untouched. She rolled her eyes and giggled quietly. What in the world was that silly Rito thinking?

She didn’t even like flowers.

Her thoughts quickly turned once again towards Link, and to her desire to see him. So far they hadn’t had a single chance to be alone together, no opportunity to catch up on their long two years of separation. Her heart longed for his presence.

And she found herself hoping that - like a scene from some lame fairy tale - he would somehow find a way to sneak over to her room to see her that night...

But she shook the silly thought from her head. There was absolutely no way that could happen. He had his duties after all-

THUMP THUMP.

A knock on her door.

Mipha’s heart stopped briefly. Her imagination ran wild with hope and desire.

Link!

Could it be?

...

...No, no. Of course not.

“Yes? Is that you Muzu? I’ll be right out,” she called.

Still, her heart was pounding. Muzu should have been sound asleep by now.

So maybe, just maybe this really was-

CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP-

The distant sound of footsteps. She could hear them outside of the guest chamber as she made her way to the bedroom door…

KNOCK KNOCK-

“Routine patrol, may we enter?” Muffled voices outside of the common room...

Mipha paused for a moment in confusion. Why wasn’t Muzu answering them?

A small slip of paper suddenly slid under her door as she approached it. She picked up the note and
gently opened her bedroom door, entering the common room—just as the chamber patrol burst inside the main doors.

In spite of her shock at this bizarre scene, Mipha remained calm.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” she asked.

“Just a regular patrol madam, we - ah, looks like we forgot to lock the window...” said one of the guards. He stuck his head out briefly before swinging the windows shut and locking them with a loud click.

Mipha tilted her head as she stared at the windows of the common room. It was rather peculiar. Those windows had definitely been shut before she’d gone off to bed. Her fingers rubbed the note in her hand absentmindedly…

Well, well. It would seem we had ourselves a welcomed intruder, she thought, happily.

The first guard wiped his brow as he and his partner began to exit the room. “Please pardon the intrusion, madam. Good night.” They bowed cordially as they exited, shutting the door behind them.

“That was lucky…” their voices trailed off. “If Captain Link ever found out about the windows... I can’t even imagine how he’d...”

Now alone in the common room, Mipha made her way back to the window and unlocked it once again.

In case he comes back... she thought, smiling to herself.

She settled back into her room, and began to read the note. A wide grin spread on her face as she read its contents. Her hunch was correct - it had definitely been Link.

‘You never did answer my question about how your healing powers improved so quickly,’ the note said.

Mipha sighed. The message was simple. Straight-forward. Right to the point. Yet it conveyed so much more than its contents.

Through-and-through... this was classic Link.

As she retrieved a blank slip of paper and began to craft her response, she heard another knock on her door. And her imagination ran wild with excitement once again.

...Perhaps I will get to answer him in-person instead!

She stood up and sprinted across her bedroom, nearly tripping on the rug as she did. She burst out of the room, right into the open arms of-

Sergeant Seggin?!

“OOF, ah... well, I’m quite happy to see you too, my dear. What a night!” The Sergeant nearly stumbled over as Mipha pulled away. She examined him up and down, and sighed.

Seggin was completely drunk, having just returned from a late night of festivities with his old war buddies. And he wasn’t exactly trying his best to hide the fact either.
“I presume… that you have you been drinking tonight?” Mipha asked him.

“Oh, well, only just a little bit!” he hiccuped, holding his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. “Just to… take the edge off, you know? Now…” he glanced around the common room in confusion. “Where… in Hylia’s name… is my room?”

Mipha shrugged, guiding Seggin to his guest room like a mother leading her child.

“Let’s get you to bed, Sergeant,” she said. "A bit of water and some rest, and you will be good as new tomorrow.”

After putting him to bed and fetching a glass of water, Mipha returned to his side. Seggin downed the water quickly, though not without splashing it all over the bed first...

*He is worse off than I realized,* Mipha thought. Her nursing instincts immediately kicked in.

As Seggin lay on his side, Mipha’s hands glowed blue with energy. She used her healing powers to reverse the damaging effects of the excessive amounts of alcohol in Seggin’s body. And after several minutes of this, the inebriated Sergeant fell sound asleep.

After refilling his water glass and placing a damp cloth on his forehead, she kissed her dear friend and mentor goodnight, and quietly shut his bedroom door behind her.

“I simply do not understand the excitement. He is merely a Hylian. What is all this unnecessary fuss about?” Muzu frowned at the group of young Zora who had gathered around Mipha in the town square of the domain.

Seggin, Muzu, and Mipha had only just returned from their excursion to Hyrule Castle, and Mipha was currently informing her friends of Link’s pending arrival at some point in the coming months. Despite herself, Mipha snapped back at Muzu. She’d simply had enough of his excessive complaints.

“The fuss… is no concern of yours, Muzu.” Mipha said, sharply. The other Zora gasped at her outburst, but Mipha stood her ground. “This is a conversation for Link’s friends. Not for those who have zero concerns about him.”

But Muzu was unfazed. “Facts are facts, Lady Mipha,” he said. “That Hylian boy didn’t even acknowledge your presence the entire time we were there. Some friend he turned out to be! Just as I expected, he-”

“Why are you here?” Mipha asked. “*Facts are facts,* Muzu. You did not express any care about Master Link the entire time he was last here. If you are so insistent on cutting him down, then there is no place for you in this discussion.”

Though taken aback at this uncharacteristic outburst, Muzu maintained his poise. “Very well then! I shall take my leave. But mark my words, Lady Mipha. We will be having a discussion about your unruly tongue. I can promise you that.”

With an upturned chin, Muzu spun on his heels and left the group without looking back.

“Wow. That… was totally awesome!” Sidon cried, jumping up and down. “I have *never* seen you so angry in my entire life! Unbelievable!” He punched the air in front of him with proud excitement.

Despite Sidon’s encouragement, Mipha immediately felt a bit of shame at her treatment of Muzu. She would certainly have to find a way to make amends later-
“Is it true what Muzu said?” asked Rivan. “Did Link really ignore you for your entire visit?”

Mipha shook her head. “That was… inaccurate. To say the least. But…”

She paused briefly, considering her words carefully.

“…Link is… different now. Quieter. Aloof. Focused. He has new responsibilities and worries that are much bigger now, and we should respect that.” She looked over the confused faces of her friends and peers before continuing. "I wanted you all to have a fair warning of this for his upcoming arrival…to avoid any potential tension that may arise.”

“There’s no way!” Bazz said. “That doesn’t sound like Link at all! Well… I guess maybe the focused part does. But quiet?”

“Exactly,” said Gaddison. “I truly can’t imagine a silent Link. He didn’t seem all that different the last time he was here…”

But Mipha knew. The small changes in his demeanor were already present during his last visit, though it was obvious that their peers were not exactly as tuned in with Link’s subtleties as she had been. This fact made it all the more important that she spell it out for them now…

After some discussion, the group was convinced. They went their separate ways, reconvening at dinner time later that night. Despite their knowledge of Link’s new persona, the entire domain was still abuzz with excitement of his future return, and their conversations flowed throughout the dining table - much to the chagrin of Muzu.

“You treat his arrival as if he were a king,” he said with irritation. “Your excitement is wasted on one such as he. I guarantee, when he arrives you will all be no more than a mere afterthought to him…” he reached over and took a sip from his water goblet.

PBBBBTTHHH-

A fountain of saltwater sprayed from Muzu’s mouth.

“SIDON!!!” he cried, as he immediately sprinted around the table to chase after the wily Zora prince.

“It wasn’t me! It wasn’t me!” Sidon shouted as he ran away, Muzu following close behind him, screaming in rage all the way.

Mipha rolled her eyes, replacing the salt shaker back at the center of the table.

Sorry Sidon… she thought. She glanced up at her father, and was surprised to see that he wasn’t smiling. He looked down at her, a stoic look on his face. But it wasn’t a look of disappointment. Rather, it was one of deep concern. Though she didn’t know it quite yet.

“Mipha… I wish to speak with you after dinner. Please meet me in the throne room…”

Uh oh.

All her life… Mipha had never once been punished by her father. But her recent outburst and mistreatment of Muzu had surely pushed him over the edge.

Well… I suppose I deserve it. It was inevitable.

As dinner ended, Mipha found herself standing in her usual spot in front of her father, who seated yet again on his enormous throne.
“What is it, father?” Mipha began.

Dorephan closed his eyes, crossing his arms across his enormous chest.

“I heard about your… incident with Muzu earlier.”

Mipha cringed. So it was about that after all…

“And once again,” he continued, “I know precisely why you are acting so strangely.” To Mipha’s surprise, her father began to smile down at her as he spoke.

“Your white scale is coming in soon, is it not? You are approaching the end of your growth stage, I believe.”

Mipha’s eyes widened. This thought hadn’t occurred to her at all. She was so busy worrying about her responsibilities as the Zora champion, so busy worrying about Link…

Dorephan held his hand up in offering.

“If there is one thing that has been made clear from watching you and Link grow up together… it is this: Your heart belongs to only one man.”

Mipha continued to stare after her father. His words were certainly true, and she had no reason to shy away from her feelings anymore. So she smiled back as Dorephan continued.

“So I suppose that, with the chaos surrounding our preparation for war with Ganon, now is the ideal time to figure out precisely what you intend to do about it.”

From behind him, her father produced his old Zora armor. He stared down at it quietly, before pointing towards it with his finger.

“As I said before… your white scale will be coming in due time. In the tradition of Zora princesses of old… perhaps it would be appropriate to begin crafting your armor set.”

Mipha’s eyes widened again. She knew precisely where he was going with this...

“By presenting your armor to Link... wouldn’t it say a lot of your desire to protect him in the upcoming battle?” he winked. “...Among other things?”

Princess Zelda stood on the entrance platform to Vah Ruta, bearing a rather flustered expression on her face. The scene before her: the Zora princess and her Hylian guard, cuddled under a blanket on the ground...

“- Ahem! - Erm… Excuse me... I’m sorry to interrupt-” Zelda said.

Immediately, the pair was roused awake, sitting up and yawning at the same time. They glanced over at each other, and then at Zelda.

“Yes. Um, Link!” Zelda’s hands nervously found their place on her hips as she spoke. “I regret to inform you, but… we seem to have an emergency on our hands. It’s about Vah Naboris…”

Link frowned suddenly.

“While you and Lady Mipha were having your… extra study time with Vah Ruta last night, I noticed some issues with Vah Naboris’s energy readings on my Sheikah Slate,” she frowned back at
“While I have greatly enjoyed our juncture here… time is unfortunately no longer in abundance. We must depart immediately…”

As she fought off her disappointment, Mipha glanced over at Link - and immediately regretted it. Even as he regressed back into his stoic persona, she caught an unmistakeable glint of utter despair in his eyes. Zelda didn’t seem to notice this.

“I have already gathered my things in preparation for the journey. I suggest you make your goodbyes to your friends rather quickly before our departure… shall we go?” She climbed into the small rowboat she had arrived in, waiting for the pair to join her.

As Zelda had addressed Link, Mipha couldn’t help but notice that the princess had some slight difficulty with maintaining eye contact with him.

Why in the world... is she so flustered? She wondered, as she and Link gathered their things and climbed into the boat. Have we done something to upset her?

Of course, Mipha could have easily swam back to the domain rather than taking the boat back with them… but she found it appropriate to take any last-minute opportunities that she could to spend time with Link. Whatever the case, Zelda didn’t question it.

As they quietly rowed back to the domain, Mipha continued to ponder Zelda’s emotional state, as well as her inability to use her sealing powers.

And she began to put two and two together.

Perhaps… Zelda’s inability and outright refusal to process her affection for others was the true cause of her issues. It was possible that, as it was for Mipha with her own healing powers, letting her love flow freely was precisely what she needed to do in order to unlock her abilities.

And maybe… just as he had been for Mipha... Link himself was the ultimate catalyst.

Mipha had nobody to blame but herself, of course. She should have known better than to rely too heavily on Dento for the construction of Link’s gift. After all, he’d recently been contracted to build a massive set of weapons for the Hylian Royal Guard.

Still, without his assistance, she was taking much longer than anticipated to have it built. And much to her disappointment, there was no way this replica trident was going to turn out as good as the original.

And it certainly wouldn’t be completed in time for the next meeting of the Champions, now only a short three weeks away. She’d be departing in just two days - not nearly enough time to finish.

Perhaps… I have overstretched myself just a bit, she thought, as her mind slowly wandered back to her time with Link on Vah Ruta several weeks prior.

Their intimate healing session, among other things, had left such an enormous imprint on her mind. She’d gotten far more from him than she had expected that day - not least, a set of accurate measurements that she’d needed for her other project...

She grew mildly embarrassed on the inside, as she remembered her hands gently sweeping the young Hylian’s back muscles. She had to admit… that she may have been copping a bit of a feel there.
She turned her attention to her other project, hidden away in the storage room below the Domain: a beautiful set of Zora armor, being built perfectly to specification.

Mipha began to pour in some last-minute work on the armor, carefully and meticulously sewing in scale after scale onto its shoulders and chest. She crafted it dearly, for the man that she loved. For her Hylian hero, her Hylian muse...

...and perhaps someday soon… her Hylian fiancé.

Of course, she had reasons to be fearful of the slight possibility that he would reject her.

Yet at the same time, she had absolutely no doubt that he would say yes.

After all… She thought to herself.

*Shouldn’t there be no fear... in love?*

---

*A vast, swirling vortex of emotion. The deepest of sorrows.*

*Infinite, endless, bottomless darkness. The familiar pangs of regret and unfulfillment.*

*These were the memories of Mipha - the memories of a life cut tragically short by powers of evil and malice. Painful reminders of a time that could have been, that would never be.*

*Her memories danced and spun across Link’s mind, filled his heart with both love and grief, before returning back to pure nothingness. It would always, always return to nothingness.*

*Then suddenly, a light. Blue in color, warm to the touch.*

*It filled the very essence of his being, flooded him with life, warmed his heart, comforted his soul.*

*Muffled noises echoed through his dulled hearing…*

“...”

*A muted voice.*

*And he recognized it. How could he ever mistake it?*

“Oh, your eyes…”

“Wake up, Link.”

...Mipha!

*The blue light faded, replaced by a brilliant pure white that overwhelmed his senses, blinded his vision. And after some time, his sight slowly returned to him. He was breathing, seeing, hearing… floating…*

*Then she was there.*

*Mipha was there.*

*And in that moment, he simply knew.*

*Mipha’s healing blessing - the purest manifestation of her life, her love, and her grace - had given*
him life once more. Just as it had always done. Just as it always would do.

A wide grin spread across his face.

“Hello, Mipha,” he said.

She smiled back.

“Hello, Link.”

The sound of her gentle, comforting voice broke him down immediately. He looked down at his feet and closed his eyes. His tears fell like great drops of rain from his face.

Was this real?

Mipha opened her mouth to speak.

“I have to say…” she began.

He looked up at her, still grinning, eyes still full of tears...

“...it is so good to see you smiling once again.”

Link cautiously moved in towards Mipha. He reached out slowly with his hands… hesitating... before quickly pulling her into a tight embrace.

She was most certainly real. He could see her, feel her… hold her.

And he didn’t want to let go. Not again.

“How…” he asked, now cupping her small face between his hands. His eyes stared deeply into hers.

“How in the world are you-“ she held a clawed finger to his mouth, immediately shushing him.

“Now Link,” she said.

“...Did I not once promise... that I would always protect you...?”

The vision disappeared around him. Link awoke with a gasp.

He was standing up on the beach all alone - save for the bodies of dead bokoblins, and an enormous blobby mess that was once a Hinox.

Dark bloodstains marked the sand all around him - his blood. Yet here he was, alive.

He examined himself, felt his back for the open wound where the arrow had entered his heart... Nothing. Just bare flesh, not even a scar remained.

He rubbed his face, felt the warm moisture of fresh tears. Link paused for a minute, then chuckled at himself.

Always getting myself hurt at every turn... indeed.

He took a couple of steps forward, half expecting his once-broken leg to collapse under his weight again. He made his way back to the enormous campsite to retrieve the orb that would finally end this damned trial for good.
Wiping his eyes as he walked, Link found that his tears simply wouldn’t stop. But for the first time in what felt like years, they were tears of profound joy.

His encounter with Mipha’s spirit had lifted an enormous weight from his chest, had filled him with life and love. To have seen and experienced the memories of the woman he loved so much… to have her soul bared to him… He just knew in heart, that he would have the strength to go on.

His words of comfort to King Dorephan had been true after all, he and Mipha were one now. She was still with him, still watching over him; and most of all, united with him. He had to live, had to carry on.

For her sake.

...and for all of Hyrule of course.

Link stared up at the clear night sky, and peacefully sighed.

“Thank you, Mipha…” he muttered under his breath. “Thank you…”

Perhaps it was just a trick of his ears or merely his imagination. But the few precious words he heard, quietly trailing off the wind’s breath, were unmistakeable.

“...It is my pleasure...”

Chapter End Notes

Thus ends the depression arc! And ‘Season 1’, I suppose. We’re basically at the unofficial halfway point of AFooW, and as such I’d like to take the time to thank all of you for your continued readership. Some of you have been here from the very beginning on AO3 (I’d name names, but I don’t want anyone to feel bad for being excluded, haha). It makes me really happy that I’ve been able to entertain all of you guys with this wild story thus far. The feedback has been truly encouraging, and I appreciate your comments and reviews. I read over every single one. It means so much, and I thank you again.

Anyway. I hope to continue to provide more gripping tales of this epic adventure, and to shed more light on this tragic romance between our reckless young Hylian and our favorite red-finned Zora girl. I’ll do my very best, I promise.

‘Season 2’ will begin in earnest in a few days, starting with Chapter 21: Surface. With that, we enter the recovery arc. It should prove to be a bit lighthearted to start out, though we will once again find ourselves on a nonstop roller coaster to the very end once we hit Gerudo Desert.

Hope to see you soon! Thanks again for your readership, and for your tremendous patience.

-James
Waves crashed and sprayed against the vast shoreline of Eventide Island, washing away the blood-drenched sands that marked the furious fighting of the previous night. It was obvious to the Zora elders that yet another great battle had been fought here, as they stepped carefully over the broken weapons and freshly-severed monster parts that littered the beach.

“With this find… I believe there are two likely possibilities,” said Seggin. “Either Link fought valiantly and died a warrior’s death here. Or he has successfully annihilated every single living thing on this island, and is present here as we speak.”

He paused in thought briefly, before continuing. “In either case, I have no doubt that our young master was yet again responsible for all of this. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Impa?”

Impa’s guard, Dorian, glanced over at his fellow Sheikah tribe members. He was not surprised to see that, once again, Paya remained entirely unfazed by the violent carnage. But he was surprised to see that Impa was still rather skeptical of Link’s responsibility for this scene before them...

“I am sorry, but I hesitate to jump to conclusions. In the event that this was not Link’s doing, the perpetrator may still yet prowl this island. We must remain on guard.”

Suddenly, a loud rustling in the nearby forest was heard, putting the group on high alert. Dorian and Paya instinctively drew their weapons - a sword and dagger respectively - and prepared to defend Lady Impa at any cost. Seggin and Trello also drew their own spears, taking a battle-ready stance.

The rustling sounds drew nearer. Heavy steps pounded the ground, as the source clumsily navigated the dense brush straight in their direction.

And finally… it emerged.

It was a ferocious, furry beast soaked entirely in dried blood. Its head was skull-like in appearance, its arms and legs were caked with dirt and sand.

Paya gasped in surprise as she caught sight of the horrific creature. It seemed to notice the group immediately, slowly raising its arm in the air in a threatening gesture as it sprinted straight for them-

But Paya was on it in a flash.

She unleashed a furious flurry of strikes on the surprised beast, swiping and slashing with her knife. She aimed a series of rapid punches at its face, before finally smashing it directly in the head with a well-placed kick-
“GAH! STOP! You can stop now!” the creature gasped, as it fell backwards on its rear, hands held up in surrender.

Paya froze.

She knew that voice…

Could it be…?

The beast calmly stood back up, removing its own freakish skeletal head from its shoulders...

...to reveal the smiling face of a familiar, blonde-haired Hylian underneath.

“Geez, Paya,” the Hylian said, rubbing his head. “I never realized you had so much power in your-”

“LINK!”

A relieved chorus of shouts interrupted him, as the search party all gathered around in excitement and relief. But they immediately recoiled as they caught a whiff of his overpowering stench of blood and body odor...

“Phew, Link...” said Impa, as she pinched her nose in disgust. “Have you been bathing in solid waste this entire time?”

Link laughed heartily.

“Well...something like that.” He glanced around at the group, still smiling.

“...Not that I’m displeased to see you all… but why exactly are you here?”

Dorian suddenly grew livid as he heard this, his pent-up rage and frustration finally reaching its boiling point.

“You ungrateful little- do you realize just what kind of insane ordeal we’ve undertaken, solely to make sure you’re still alive and well?! We’ve been at it for weeks now, risking Lady Impa’s life needlessly, while you’ve been over here... prancing about in animal hides without a single care!”

Link was nonplussed by this sudden outburst, as was Impa herself. But before anyone could say anything, Muzu approached the Sheikah guard, placing his hand on his shoulder to calm him down.

“Now, now, Dorian,” he said, calmly. “Do not forget that we volunteered for this mission in the first place…"

Link found himself raising an eyebrow at this gesture. Never thought I’d see the day where Muzu was the voice of reason, he mused.

As Dorian reeled back and apologized, Muzu turned his attention back to Link.

“I can see that you’ve been through quite an ordeal yourself, young master. I could scarcely recognize you in that… barbarian armor you are wearing!”

Link rubbed the back of his head as he examined himself.

“Yeah. It's a bit of a long story..."

“...One that I’m sure will be quite entertaining to hear,” said Impa. She smiled warmly at him. “Nevertheless, it is so good to see that you’ve finally resurfaced! How, I dare ask, have you been?
We were all worried sick about you..."

Link began to explain the events of the last few weeks, focusing mostly on his time there on Eventide Island. He told them he had only *just* received his equipment back, as well as the spirit orb of the island. For the time being, he decided not to mention his encounter with Mipha’s soul, however...

“I can’t say that the prize was entirely worth the trouble... but I will say that the experience certainly was!” He smiled once again at the search party before him, an inquisitive look growing on his face. “I do have to ask though… why did you all find it necessary to search for me? Really, all I needed to do was blow off a bit of steam. I’m sorry for causing all this trouble.”

“No need for apologies, Link;” said Impa. “You must understand… that you are our last great hope for salvation in this world. The chosen one, after all. With that in mind, I hope you can forgive my desire to… babysit you in your travels, from time to time.”

This produced a laugh from Link. “Fair enough, I suppose.” He turned his attention to the Zora elders. “And honestly, I’m really more surprised to see all of you here.”

“Well, the truth of the matter,” Trello said, “is that we knew precisely why you immediately disappeared from Zora’s Domain upon the defeat of Vah Ruta’s blight. And we realized… that our expression of remorse for the way we treated you was severely lacking.”

Link shook his head. “Oh no, no, Trello, you really don’t need to-”

“Please, let us finish,” Muzu said. “Our unwarranted disrespect for you was quite less than admirable. Incredibly cruel, in fact. Especially given all that you have done for us - both past and present.”

“Indeed,” Jiahto said. “We allowed our bitterness and regret to soil our judgement, letting it fester for all this time. This was wrong of us. Please, young one, accept our sincerest apologies - as well as our deepest and most profound thanks for all that you’ve done.”

Link shrugged. “I’m... moved by your gesture, truly. I appreciate it. But I really hope… that you haven’t gone completely out of your way just to tell me that!”

Seggin shook his head. “Not at all, Master Link. We also have a few things to bestow upon you as well...”

From behind them the hunched-over figure of the Zora smithy, Dento, emerged. And clutched in his arms... was the newly-repaired Ceremonial Trident - and its inspiration: the Lightscale Trident. Dento cleared his throat as he handed these to Link.

“I spent well over a week working on these, reforging them for battle. We hope that you will choose to accept them this time...

...Because we certainly will *not* be taking them back!”

Link smiled cordially as he carefully grasped Mipha’s trident in his hands. It was her most cherished possession, her favored weapon. He’d be certain to treasure it just the same...

“...And finally,” Muzu said. “We wished to give you something that you couldn’t possibly reject - even if you wanted to.”

All of the Zora elders began to arrange themselves in a line in front of Link, drawing their spears as
they did. The Sheikah watched from the side with curiosity, as each Zora plunged his spear into the ground in front of them, bowing their head in a show of utmost respect.

“Master Link…” Muzu said. “It is the distinct honor of the Zora council… to formally bestow upon you, our blessing of your engagement to Lady Mipha…”

The council members then closed in on Link, each placing his right hand on his person.

"We formally welcome you in as an official member of our family."

Link was speechless. He closed his eyes, overcome with emotion at their gesture. All he could manage was to nod his head and smile graciously in return.

Meanwhile, a look of respectful but curious disappointment briefly crossed Paya’s face...

Jiahto spoke again. “We understand… that this will do little to ease the pain of her loss. But as the official scholar of the Zora council, I will at least ensure that your name will be recorded in our history as the great savior of our domain - and the hero who was dearly betrothed to our lady…”

“It is… an honor.” Link finally said. “Thank you all. I... have no words left to say.”

“And no words are needed either, young master!” Jiahto turned to face his fellow councilman. “I believe we have said our piece. Shall we depart?”

“Already?” Link asked. “But you’ve only just arrived…”

“Indeed,” said Seggin. “However, we’ve been apart from the domain quite long enough. Our duties call us home once more…” He grinned at Link, offering a soldier’s salute in his direction.

“Link, please do not hesitate to visit us again, should you ever be in need of assistance. You are family after all…”

One by one, each elder dove into the waters nearby as they prepared to depart back home. Trello and Muzu began to leave as well, then suddenly stopped and faced Link once more.

Intuitively, they felt that there was yet one more thing left to say...

“The Goddesses work in mysterious ways, Master Link,” Trello said. “Their will and their designs are above ours, quite simply. Though I still cannot answer the question as to why Lady Mipha had to die… I can assure you that, at the very least, the continued presence of her spirit in this world indicates a greater purpose for her still. My hope is that you can find some solace in that…”

“But for now…” Muzu chimed in, “We bid you a fond farewell! May the goddess be with you in your future travels.” He paused for a moment, then nodded calmly.

“...And Lady Mipha’s spirit, just as well.”

The midday sun began to rise high up in the sky over the now-deserted island. Link’s eyes trailed after the departing Zora as they soon disappeared far off in the distant waters.

Nearby, Impa and Dorian began to chart their route back to Kakariko, when Link suddenly palmed his face and groaned loudly. Impa glanced over at him in concern.

"Link?” She said. "Is something the matter?”
He shook his head.

"That's going to be at least a week's trip for them to get back to the domain. It just occurred to me that I should have offered to transport them back using the Sheikah Slate..."

“I see. Tempting as that offer is... it would be incredibly ill-advised,” Impa calmly explained. “Warping just one person is dangerous enough. But long ago, when we tested the teleportation functionality with multiple people at a time... well... let’s just say that they didn’t always make it one-hundred percent intact on the other side. I'd rather not take that risk right now.”

“A lovely visual…” Link said. “And that naturally applies to our situation as well.” He turned to face the distant coastline of the mainland, and shrugged.

"Seems we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way! Do you think we could make it to Hateno Village by tomorrow?”

“That might be pushing it…” said Dorian, irritably. “Besides, there is no need for you to travel with us. We’ve made it just fine so far on our own. Why don't you just... teleport on your merry way and leave us be?”

Link could tell that Dorian was still fuming over having been dragged all the way across the southwest wilds just to ensure his safety. Nevertheless, he persisted.

“Please, allow me to escort you to Hateno,” Link said. “It’s the very least I could do for all your troubles…”

And besides that, he thought, I’ve got a few words to share with Purah about this stupid malfunctioning slate here...

“I think it is an excellent idea." Impa said. "I for one am not about to turn down such an offer!” She hobbled over to the waiting raft climbing aboard on her own.

"Let us depart immediately."

Despite Dorian's protests, Impa found herself rather grateful for Link’s presence - given her fondness for the young Hylian. But she was also glad to be allowed the opportunity to monitor his mental state firsthand as well...

They soon shoved off on the raft, sailing briskly in the direction of the distant coastline. Paya stood in the back of the boat, arms behind her back, quietly observing Link. He was solemnly examining one of his new tridents, polishing its metal surface with a clean rag. A peaceful grin was evident across his face.

After taking some time to gather up her courage, Paya finally dared to speak with him.

“Lin-Link! Pardon my intrusion…” Link glanced over at her, and she resisted the urge to cover up her face in embarrassment. His blue eyes seemed to pierce straight into her very soul…

“I’m not entirely sure what’s going on,” Paya said, “But you haven’t stopped smiling from the moment we found you on the island…” She paused for a moment, as if catching her breath. “…Did something happen during your time there? Er... I mean, besides the Sheikah trials. Of course.”

Link’s face showed a mix of both peace and sorrow, as he reflected on his encounter with Mipha.

“I...met someone,” he said.
“Who?”

“Someone very dear to me. The spirit of Mipha, the Zora princess. The woman that I loved...”

Paya’s face still bore a look of confusion - and minor disappointment - from the Zora’s ceremonial blessing earlier. But still, she forced a smile.

“Well, I don’t… I don’t really understand,” she said. “But it is…good to see you in high spirits.”

Link smiled back at her, and Paya immediately glanced out towards the rushing water nearby, unable to make eye contact with him.

“I sincerely thank you Paya,” Link said. “For your genuine concern…” he stood up on the boat, made his way over to her.

“You truly are a good friend...” He suddenly pulled Paya into a strong, warm embrace.

And she instantly melted through the floor of the boat.

After several days of travel, the group finally arrived at Purah’s ancient tech lab in Hateno Village. Her age-boosting rune complete, the mad Sheikah scientist had now physically grown six more years, to the elderly age of twelve.

But her mannerisms remained just as childish as before.

“Linky! Snap snap! It’s ~so good to see you ag- BLEGH!” She pinched her nose in disgust as Link’s scent immediately burned her nostrils.

“Okay, you aren’t allowed to speak to me until you’ve had a proper shower and a change of clothes....” she waved him off dismissively.

“Symin will show you the way…”

She turned her attention to Link’s companions, while Symin grabbed Link’s shoulder and guided him towards the back of the tech lab.

“Impa! My dear old sister, oh, it’s been so long!” Purah’s voice trailed off. “You are looking positively ancient ...”

The door shut behind them, and Symin began to show Link around their facilities.

“There should be some towels in the closet there, you will find some soap and scrubbers in that tray. Try not to use too much water, we rely on the rain to replenish our supply…” his voice grew silent as he examined Link up and down. He shook his head at the bizarre outfit, the bloodstains, that distinctly awful smell.

“I... shouldn’t ask, right?”

“Long story.”

“Thought so. I’m sure Purah won’t even acknowledge you again until you’ve shed that… aromatic clothing of yours. I hope you have a change of clothes with you...”
“Ah... so running around naked isn’t an option?” Link asked with a grin.

Symin just stared blankly.

“...Right. Well, uh, thanks for all this.”

Symin left the room, shutting the door behind him. Link turned his attention to the bathroom mirror, finally getting a detailed look at his reflection. He withheld the urge to burst out laughing.

He looked utterly ridiculous.

With some hesitation, Link finally shed his carefully-constructed armor - his only companion during his crazy ordeal on Eventide - and he began the intense, strenuous work of finally scrubbing himself clean.

It didn’t take a terribly long time, though he did find it a bit difficult to do so while rationing the tech lab’s water supply. He was also surprised at how hard it was to remove dried Hinox blood from his skin and hair, ultimately scrubbing his flesh raw in some places. Still, he found some satisfaction in wiping away the last remnants of battle, starting out fresh again with a blank slate.

New beginning... new horizons. Let’s just hope this feeling lasts...

As he toweled off and began to clothe himself, Link retrieved Mipha’s Zora armor from his bag. His finger loosely traced the single white scale adorning the left side of the chest. It was the last remnant of Mipha’s physical presence in this world.

Though the pain was still ever-present in his heart, much of it had been replaced with newfound courage and determination. And with the knowledge of the tremendous love that had been poured into its creation, Link couldn’t help but feel a sense of growing warmth as he donned the Zora armor once again.

After cremating his barbarian clothing - paying his respects with a short prayer as he did, Link quickly returned to the main room of Purah’s tech lab, ready to confront her about his recent misadventures with his Sheikah Slate…

“...But I do think I figured out what happened! When I restored the Camera rune during your last visit, I used a backup of my own personal Sheikah Slate. It would seem that I accidentally overwrote my security settings too!” She playfully crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue as she said this.

“An unexpected side-effect. But I’m sure it wasn’t too much trouble.”

“I almost died!”

“...Like I said, not too much trouble. Besides, I finally got you to say it!” She struck a dramatic pose, snapping her fingers in Link’s direction. “Snappity-snap!”

But Link was in no mood to play around. Like a defiant teenager, he turned to his side, sticking his hand out in a thumbs-down gesture to express his displeasure.

Purah pouted, placing her hands firmly on her hips as she swayed to and fro.
“You. Are. No. Fun,” she said. “Just like my sister.” She glanced over at Impa, who was tinkering with Purah’s custom Sheikah slate.

“What do you think, Impa?” She smiled, excitedly running up to her sister's side. She began to hop up and down joyfully. "Can you believe my age-reversing rune was a success? We could try it out on you next, if you’d like!"

Impa smiled back at her sister.

“Oh, I admit that I’m rather impressed with your work. But I believe that I’ll be quite content with simply living out my life and passing away at a good old age…”

Purah rolled her eyes.

“Yup. Just as I expected. Why don’t we try out the age-boosting rune on you instead, in that case? I’ve got a dustpan on hand, for when you instantly disintegrate into a pile of dust!”

Despite his irritation, Link couldn’t help but laugh at the playful banter between the two siblings - though Paya looked utterly embarrassed at her great-aunt’s perceived disrespectful nature…

“I-I’m… sorry about my aunty Purah.” Paya said. “She doesn’t quite know how to hold her tongue…”

Link shrugged. At this point, he was pretty much used to Purah’s immature, quirky behavior. But Paya seemed to have moved on from that train of thought already, as she carefully examined Link’s new armor.

“I… can see that you… have replaced your Sheikah top.” She paused briefly, trying to find her words. “I have to admit… begrudgingly… that your new armor suits you well.” She recoiled, as if she’d just uttered something wildly offensive.

“Sorry! Um, is that… okay-”

“Linky!” Purah turned her attention back to Link, interrupting his conversation. “Back to business! Joking aside, I really am sorry about the… unfortunate mishaps with your slate. Please, let me to make it up to you!” She ran over to her guidance stone, powering it on.

"...How about a free rune upgrade? We’re pretty strapped for funds here… but I think we can make an exception in your case,” she winked.

Satisfied with this development, Link finally responded with a playful ~snap.

After spending the rest of the day resting and relaxing, Impa decided it was time to for their congregation to part ways. Dorian in particular seemed rather anxious to get home, after all.

“I… apologize for acting so rudely towards you, Link,” he said, as he crossed his arms and sighed. “Allow me to explain. Before our departure, I started to receive increasingly violent threats from members of the Yiga clan. Threats aimed not only at me, but at my two children - Koko, and Cottla. My duties must prioritize Lady Impa, of course. But I’m deeply concerned about my children, you see…”

Link shook his head.

“No harm done, Dorian. It’s certainly understandable...”
“Still, you should have nothing to fear,” Impa said, calmly. “The other village guards should have your children under careful watch at all times. I have no reason to doubt that they are safe and sound, waiting for your return…”

Impa hobbled over to Link, pulling him into an embrace. “I am quite pleased to see that you’re alive and well, young one. But please… be mindful of your emotions. I have to warn you…” she pulled away, taking on a scolding look of a concerned parent, “…that a broken heart is not necessarily fitting for a hero to be fueled by.”

Link smiled at Impa, despite himself. “Well, if you’re telling me to bury my emotions in some cold effort to maintain concentration and focus, then I can assure you - respectfully - that I will be doing quite the opposite. Because if you ask me… from what I’ve gathered so far, it’s precisely this suppression of emotion that got us into this mess in the first place.”

Impa smiled back.

“Ever-defiant… and ever so bold.” She reached up and patted Link on the shoulder.

“Never lose that side of you.”

And with that, the group made their goodbyes.

“I’ll come visit you soon, I promise!” Purah called out after her fellow Sheikah, as they made their way down the mountain road. “Well, probably after this guy saves the world, that is!”

Once Impa and company were out of sight, Purah and Symin guided Link to the back of the lab as he prepared to continue his own travels.

This time, he’d be setting out in the direction of Gerudo Desert.

And to do so, he would need to enlist the help of his trusty old friend...

“She’s been quite a handful…” Purah said, gently stroking the horse’s mane. “But she’s really a sweet animal. Aren’t you, you cute little thing, you…”

_Inferno_!

The gorgeous black horse neighed joyfully as she finally caught sight of her missing master.

Link reached into his bag and produced an apple, taking a large bite before tossing it into Inferno’s waiting mouth. As he began to soothe her himself, he turned to face Purah, yet another question lingering in his mind…

“When I was on the island, I stumbled upon some of your weird research notes in my Sheikah Slate,” he said, his mouth full of chewed apple. “Probably a side-effect from your tinkering last time.”

“Really?!” Purah said. “That’s shocking. I hope there wasn’t anything... _embarrassing_ in there!”

“Unfortunately not,” Link said. “...But what I did find… was an entry about a strange creature that lives deep in the Faron wilds. One that is able to bring back dead animals…”

“-You must be referring to Malanya!” Symin interjected. “Purah and I have spent quite a bit of time researching her…”

“So she’s real?!” Link cried. His mind began to swirl with possibilities...
“It’s only a rumor...” Purah said. “So far, it’s entirely based on hearsay. We haven’t exactly had time to go out and find her, you know. Priorities and all that...” she waved her hand in the air.

“...But wait.” She suddenly squinted her eyes, peering carefully at Link behind her comically huge glasses.

“Are you, perhaps, intending to seek out Malanya yourself? Hmmmm....?”

Link shrugged. “If it’s on the way... just a bit curious is all.”

“Oh, I’m really quite certain that’s the case. But I must warn you, Linky. That... is a dangerous path you might be traveling. Life and death is entirely in the goddess Hylia’s realm of control... not something mere mortals like us should be meddling with.”

“Didn’t you just spend several decades researching how to prolong your life indefinitely?” Link asked.

“Point taken! Let me see your Sheikah Slate...”

She began to poke around Link’s map, looking over several locations along the southeastern coastline...

“Ah-HAH! Lurelin Village.” She turned to Symin, handing him the slate. “Didn’t you first hear about Malanya during one of your visits there?”

“That’s correct, Purah.” He looked over the map, then flipped the screen over so Link could see.

"Link, if you intend to locate this strange creature, I believe your best bet might be to seek information there. Besides... if you’re heading to Gerudo Desert next, then it’s not terribly out of your way to pass by the village during your trip either.” He tossed the slate back to Link.

“Excellent. Thanks!” Link looked over himself, rummaged through his rucksack, saw that all of his gear seemed to be in order.

“Then... I guess it’s time to set off! I really do appreciate the information... and your hospitality.”

“Our pleasure,” Symin said flatly. "But I do have one last request in return."

"Sure. Anything."

A stern look crossed his face as he leaned in close to Link, his eyes narrowing behind his thick-rimmed glasses.

"When you see Malanya... please..." He paused dramatically for a moment. The seconds slowly ticked by, and Link was starting to sweat. He began to wonder if he wasn't going to like this request at all...

"...Take a nice picture with her as proof!” Symin grinned suddenly.

"Without any pics... as far as we're concerned, it didn't happen!"

Link smiled.

“Will do!” He quickly mounted Inferno, turning her towards the direction of the winding pathway leading back into Hateno Village from Purah’s lab.

“Guess I’ll be seeing you-!”
“Hold on just a second.” Purah said. “Before you leave…” Link turned to face her once again, though he was shocked to see that her face appeared stoic, concerned. It was oddly disconcerting for him to see…

“Linky… I just need to ask before you go.

Are you... truly okay?”

Link sighed, crossing his arms as he tried to find the right words to answer her with. With the whirlwind of events since his encounter on the island, he hadn’t had much time to truly articulate how he was feeling about anything really.

After some time, he finally spoke.

“Purah… to be perfectly honest, I’m just taking it day-by-day. Some days… are better than others. I’m still here. I’m still living. Mipha’s spirit is still with me. And I still have a job to do.”

He smiled at her, grimly yet sincerely.

“...But it’s just never going to be the same.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally had a blurb here about the announcement of the Champion's Ballad, my fears of it contradicting my canon, yadda yadda. It's all good now. Bit of an easygoing chapter to start with here, but after the endless drama from the last ten chapters, I definitely needed another breather. Next up, we have series of lighthearted tales from Lurelin Village, in Chapter 22: Separator. See you soon!
“Many, many years ago, a giant octorok began to reside in Hateno Bay. This monstrous creature was big as a mountain, its long tentacles powerful enough to pull entire boatloads of fishermen down into their watery graves. Its reign of terror sent shockwaves down the coastline, and word of this colossal, destructive enemy eventually made its way as far inland as Zora's Domain. There, a young prince found himself compelled to do something about this evil threat…”

“Father, please, you must allow me to assist these Hylians. We are the only race that is suitably equipped to deal with this monstrosity—”

“I am sorry, Sidon,” King Dorephan interrupted. “But I cannot allow it. I have already lost one of my children to the forces of darkness... I absolutely will not let it happen again. This is selfish of me, I know it well. But that is my decree. And that is final.”

Since childhood, Sidon carried a rather reckless, courageous streak. But even he hesitated at his father’s sharp rebuke of his intentions. Rather than continue to fruitlessly argue his case, the young prince nodded respectfully, then took his leave from the throne room.

As he made his way down the stairs and towards the main square of the domain, he sighed quietly to himself. Sidon had, after all, just finished his growth stage. He was a full-fledged adult now, ready to take on the world. Why couldn’t his father see that he was old enough to make his own decisions? That he was more than capable of taking care of himself?

As he wandered through the domain in deep thought, the familiar sight of a large, blue sculpture soon entered into his view - the likeness of his long-lost sister, Lady Mipha.

It had stood in the center of the square for well over a year now, crafted carefully and lovingly over several years by the domain’s most skillful artisans. Its presence there served as a persistent effort to honor the memory of their beloved princess. Yet Sidon still found he couldn’t quite get used to the sight of it. He missed his dear sister terribly. And not a single day went by when he didn’t long for her unlikely return.

“You’re looking rather downcast there, Sidon. That’s odd.”

Sidon turned around, the smiling face of a gray-scaled Zora greeted him.

“Ah, Gaddison! Greetings, my friend.” He attempted to smile at her, but he still could not fully hide the troubled look on his face. “I was just… admiring the beauty of my dear sister’s—”

“He said no, didn’t he?” Gaddison said.

Sidon frowned. “That… is correct.” He crossed his finned arms across his chest. “My father doesn’t think it is wise for me to undertake such a dangerous mission. Especially not after what happened to… well, you know.”

Gaddison nodded. “I had a feeling it would be something like that. It has been… well, about fifty years now, since that dark day. Since we lost Mipha. Since we lost Link…” She shrugged. “And yet the pain of loss is still fresh in my heart, even now. I could understand why he wouldn’t want to risk losing another child.”
“Nevertheless,” Sidon said, “I have been trained by the finest warriors of the domain. I have fought many a great beast in my time, and countless octoroks at that! Surely, I could handle this. Surely, there is nothing for him to fear…”

“Then why don’t you go anyway?” Gaddison asked. “You already made your mind up about going before… what’s stopping you now?”

“I refrain, solely out of respect for my father.” Sidon said. “If he fears putting me in danger, then I must obey his wishes.”

“But that’s never held you back before,” she said. “In fact… that never held Lady Mipha back before either!”

Sidon didn’t respond. They just stood there silently for a while, listening to the familiar sounds of flowing water which snaked through the winding paths of Zora’s Domain...

“Perhaps this is naive to say…” Gaddison finally spoke. “But if you ask me, it’s far more dangerous to know you have the power to oppose evil… and yet do nothing about it. We’ve been under Ganon’s shadow for far, far too long now. And I have to say, I’m pretty tired of living in fear!” She turned back to face Sidon.

“So for what it’s worth, if you decide to go, you’ll have my full support. And if you decide not to, well… then perhaps I will have to go and play the heroine in your stead!”

She began to make her way back to her guard post to resume her patrols. Sidon stared after her, carefully considering her words. And after some time a wide, razor-sharp grin began to grow across his face…

“With newfound resolve - and a mild sense of gleeful rebellion - the Zora prince quickly snuck out of his home, making his way to Hateno Village to offer his assistance. It was a perilous journey, full of danger, excitement, and wonder. But with his considerable skill and his courageous resolve, he made it through the Hyrulian wildlands, arriving in the village just after sundown.

*His arrival was met with much fanfare as the villagers flocked to catch a glimpse of this strange foreign warrior offering them aid. But in no time, a crew of brave fishermen volunteered themselves to be lead into battle by this wily aquatic warrior. They set off immediately to hunt down the enormous, destructive octorok...”*

Sidon swam alongside the fishing vessel as it sailed out from the shoreline of Hateno Bay, crewed by a group of a dozen brave fishermen warriors.

“It normally patrols in this area around this time,” explained Rozel, a young volunteer from the distant Lurelin Village. “Although, it is a bit strange that we haven’t even seen a glimpse of it yet. Usually the beast is perfectly visible from miles away…”

Sidon immediately dove underwater to investigate, returning a few moments later to swim alongside the boat once again.

“Well, my friends,” he said, “I have good news and bad news. The good-”

He paused.

“...Well, actually, I will spare you the wordplay.” He suddenly stopped swimming, the group of fishermen staring back as he called after them.
“Our target… is right below us.”

A loud sound of rushing water was heard, as the ocean exploded around the group. An enormous shiny dome - dark blue in color - began to rise from the surface. The sea parted, sending huge waves out and away from the center of the protruding mass. The fishing boat nearly capsized in the chaos, but just barely managed to stay afloat as their enemy finally revealed itself. It loomed over the group of warriors, blotting out the entire sun behind it.

Prince Sidon laughed loudly at the challenge before him. It seemed that it wasn’t mere hyperbole after all - the creature truly was as big as a mountain!

“And so, the battle was on. The brave warriors put up a brief fight, but the octorok simply proved far too much for them to handle. Their weapons could scarcely penetrate its thick skin, their arrows were swatted aside like so many flies. Their fishing vessel was immediately destroyed by a mighty swipe of the octorok’s tentacle. And before long, Sidon alone was left to face the monster.”

“Fall back to safety!” Sidon cried. “I will handle this on my own!”

The fishermen piled into their lifeboat, frantically attempting to row back in the direction of the distant shoreline. Seeing that they were safe, Sidon glanced back at his opponent, just barely managing to dodge an enormous boulder that shot from its mouth. The large waves generated from the splash nearly toppled the lifeboat.

“You must return with us!” Rozel yelled back. “It’s too dangerous to go it alone!”

“No chance!” Sidon turned back to the fishermen, struck a pose, and grinned widely.

“In the name of the Zora, I swear to you, I will”-

SCHLOOP!

“Instantly, the octorok inhaled Sidon whole. Such was the sad fate of many strong warriors who had gone to slay the octorok - and not one had come back alive. Just as it seemed that Prince Sidon would be counted among them, the giant octorok suddenly twisted in pain...”

“What in the world is that?!” One of the fishermen yelled. The crew turned in time to see a crescent-shaped speartip suddenly shoot straight out of the side of monster’s stomach with an incredible spray of blood.

“That’s… that’s Sidon’s spear!” Rozel yelled, as the speartip began to stab itself out repeatedly from the inside of the octorok. The beast let out a shriek of pure agony that reverberated across the entire bay.

“...No longer able to bear the pain, the octorok coughed up the prince and scrambled to escape. With the creature bleeding out and almost certainly dying, the fishermen decided not to give chase. The Zora prince returned to the side of his fellow fighters, reveling in their cheers and congratulations. As the crew returned to Hateno Village, led by their victorious Zora champion, Sidon let out a raucous shout of happiness and triumph.

“Marvelous!” He said. “I cannot wait until my father hears about this!”

“...And ever since, the fishermen of Hateno Bay have passed down this heroic tale: The Prince Who Slew the Fell Octorok.”
Link grinned as he reeled in yet another catch - his tenth one within the hour.

“That’s quite the story, Rozel,” he said. He netted his fish - a mighty porgy - and threw it in with the rest of the day’s catch. They were sitting on a large fishing raft, far off the coast of Lurelin village. From this far out, Link could barely make out the mass of land in the distance - though the growing collection of storm clouds overhead hardly helped with the visibility. But even with this persistent source of unease, Link couldn’t help but find himself at peace. Out here on the open ocean, he felt free. He felt alive.

He felt like he was home.

“I’ve known Sidon since he was a child,” Link explained, “so it’s always interesting to hear stories about him. I’m sure he made his father proud...”

Rozel raised his eyebrow at Link’s comment. It had, after all, been fifty years since he’d fought alongside Prince Sidon in that great battle. And based on looks, Link couldn’t possibly have been any older than seventeen years of age. He knew that this mysterious blonde-haired warrior had quite the backstory to tell, but he was hesitant to press him about it at the moment.

“At any rate…,” Rozel said, “I suppose with that, it’s time to tell you the true reason I brought you all the way out here…”

Link thought for a second, then laughed abruptly.

“Well, I had a sneaking suspicion that catching fish wasn’t the only thing on our agenda for today...”

Rozel puffed from his pipe, removed it from his mouth, and gestured towards Link with it. A wild expression appeared on his face.

“My boy... I hope you’re properly steeled for this. Because today… you’re going to help me defeat that same giant octorok, once and for all!”

A roar of thunder signaled the arrival of the approaching storm, and rain began to fall in sheets around the pair. The sea grew choppy and rough waves crashed around them, as Rozel calmly explained the situation.

“It would seem… that Prince Sidon didn’t quite finish the job all those years ago,” he explained. “The creature hadn’t been spotted since that day, kept at bay since its last encounter. Only now has it returned, patrolling all of our usual fishing spots. And it’s only a matter of time before it begins to rampage again… which is why we need your help!”

Link shrugged. “You know, I sort of wish you’d asked me before we left on this fishing trip, instead of being all dramatic about it,” he said. “We’re not really equipped for battle here on this dinky raft of yours…”

But Rozel only smiled. “You’re underestimating me!” He reached into his long storage basket, producing a pair of large harpoons from the bottom. “I’ve long prepared for this moment! Have a look.”

Link carefully examined each one of the harpoons and sighed loudly in exasperation.

The tips weren’t even sharpened.

“Is that it?” he asked. “How exactly are you expecting to penetrate its thick skin... with these?”
Rozel shrugged. “I figured you could just figure that out for us, once we got to that point!”

“You’re insane.”

“...Am I?” Rozel grinned.

“Yes!”

“Ah, well. I suppose it doesn’t matter. There’s no turning back now…”

Another crackle of lightning, another mighty rumble of thunder, and a massive looming figure began to show itself in the distance as the pair sailed farther and farther into the horizon.

Link’s mind immediately entered a state of hyperactivity as he formulated a plan of action. With his knowledge of octorok behavior - as well as the toughness of the giant octorok’s skin - he began to cram all of their large fishhooks, harpoons, and other equipment into Rozel’s storage basket. He even snapped their fishing poles into dozens of jagged pieces, placing these into the basket as well. For a finishing touch, he threw a pair of remote bombs from his Sheikah Slate in as well.

*Time to see if Purah's rune enhancements are all they were cracked up to be...* he thought.

Satisfied, he turned his attention to the once-distant creature, now only a short ways away from them. And in no time the mountainous entity descended upon them. It let out an enormous roar, signalling the start of the battle.

If they were fortunate... it would be a rather short battle indeed.

Rozel immediately steered the small sailing raft to the right, barely dodging a large tentacle that slammed into the water next to them. As they swerved around the creature at high speed, Link spotted an enormous jagged scar on the beast’s side - the result of Sidon’s handy work several decades before.

*That’s it!*

“Rozel!” Link cried, “Let’s try to circle the beast for another pass. I have an idea....”

The old fisherman playfully saluted Link and nimbly steered their raft in a wide turn around the octorok, which attempted to turn and face the pair once more. It continued to attack with its tentacles, and Link found himself rather impressed by Rozel’s incredible boating skills. It seems he’d underestimated this crazy fisherman after all…not that he’d admit it.

Realizing its inability to land a blow on this agile target, the giant octorok prepared for its next move. It began to inhale the raft directly into its huge, suckerlike mouth.

*Perfect...*

“Steer into it!” Link yelled.

“What?!”

But Rozel did as he was told, and the raft began propelling itself straight towards the open mouth of the beast. They were only a few yards away from it now, drifting closer and closer to their likely demise...

“Here we go!” Link lifted up the basket, full of shrapnel and explosives, and hurled it straight at the beast. He pulled out his Sheikah Slate, and waited. The basket entered the creature’s mouth first,
with the raft only a few yards behind it. But before the pair was sucked in themselves, Link immediately detonated his remote bombs from inside of the octorok, tackling Rozel to the floor of the raft as he did.

BOOOOOM!

The explosion from his enhanced bombs absolutely *rocked* the interior of the octorok, sending jagged metal and shrapnel erupting out of the creature’s flesh at every angle. Briefly stunned and wracked with pain, the giant creature shut its mouth and rolled over on its side, its old scar exposed to the open sky.

Link immediately seized the opportunity, leaping from the raft and onto the octorok’s face. He climbed its slick skin with rapid speed, drawing the ceremonial trident as he approached the old wound. He began to stab repeatedly at the scar, opening a hole just big enough for him to slip through.

Link turned to face Rozel once more, and smiled.

“I’ll just be a minute.”

He dove into the open wound with perfect form, leaving the stunned fisherman alone on the raft, shaking his head in disbelief.

Once inside, Link took a second to admire his efforts. Hundreds of tiny holes littered the octorok’s interior, letting in precious light for him to work with. As he squinted his eyes, he finally spotted what he was searching for - an enormous boulder, still unfired from the octorok’s mouth. Link activated his Stasis rune, grinning widely...

Outside of the beast, Rozel attempted to steer his raft away from the stunned octorok. It was only a matter of moments before the thing would recover, beginning its furious attacks anew again. What in the world was this crazy Hylian boy thinking?

Soon, the monster did indeed recover. Its gigantic red eyes opened up, and it spotted the wooden raft in front of it. Blood spurted in every direction from its open wounds, and it writhed in agony as it slowly righted itself up once again. It let out one last shriek of fury in Rozel’s direction, causing him to brace himself on his raft.

Rozel began to scour the raft for a weapon - any weapon - but there was none. Link had wasted them all in his initial attack, which had appeared to be for naught. And only *then* did Rozel truly begin to panic. He dared to wonder if it had been a mistake dragging this strange warrior out for such a reckless endeavor...

FWOOOOSH!

A loud noise shook the interior of the octorok once again, and an enormous boulder rocketed out the side of the beast’s head in a great shower of blood and gore. Rozel’s eyes widened in shock. The octorok let out a final shriek of misery as it rolled over on its side once more, finally perishing for good.

The battle was already over.

Soon, the familiar sight of a smiling, blonde-haired Hylian emerged from the gaping hole in the octorok’s side. Link stood there triumphantly, rain pouring ceaselessly around him, hands on his hips. The look of a true hero….
“We won!” Link yelled.

“You’re insane!!” Rozel yelled back.

But Link just grinned in return.

“...Am I?”

A gentle breeze blew through the open doorway of the cabana inn, rousing Link awake. His ears perked up at the relaxing sounds of waves lapping on the shoreline of Lurelin Village. The sunlight was breaking in the distant horizon, its rays just barely illuminating the interior of his room.

He rolled off the bed, stretched his arms to the sky, and sighed.

It was the best sleep he’d had in quite some time.

After gathering his things, he took a moment to speak with Chessica, the owner of the inn. Like the other citizens of Lurelin, she had dark, tanned skin and dark hair. Also like the other citizens, she was quite loud and very friendly.

“Please, allow me to make it up to you.” Link said. “I don’t have much money… but surely I could offer something in exchange.”

“No happening!” she said. “It’s on the house! Least I could do for our village’s new hero! Honestly, I feel like I actually haven’t done enough to express my gratitude...”

Link wasn’t about to argue with that. “I see... Well, in that case, maybe you could help me with something else then! There’s a certain… creature I’m searching for. A ‘goddess’ of sorts...”

“Oh, you mean Malanya?” she said. “I heard from Rozel, the village leader! We’ve been asking around the last couple of days, but have yet to hear anything on it. I’ll certainly keep you posted.”

Link frowned a bit at this, but shook it off. It was already his second day in Lurelin Village, and he still wasn’t any closer to finding this mysterious entity.

*Might just have to head straight for Gerudo Desert at this rate…*

“I do know something that might help you in another way, however.” Chessica said. “That is, if you have a bit of time to kill.”

“As a matter of fact I do!” Link said. “Rozel and his family are treating me to a congratulatory dinner tonight, so I’ve got the entire day to myself.”

“Excellent! So... you said you’re a bit short on money, right?”

Link shrugged. “Only have about twenty rupees or so, yeah...”

“Oh, well, there’s a man named Cloyne, he runs a… well, a ‘business’ just up the way. A gambling game. If you play your rupees right, you could get pretty rich there!”

“Sounds like a total scam to me,” Link said flatly.

“Oh yes, yes. Cloyne’s definitely a crook. He makes a *killing* from ripping off travelers who pass through and play his game. Or at least… from those who don’t know his secret!” She winked.
Link immediately felt uncomfortable as he entered the dimly-lit hut that housed Cloyne and his treasure chest gambling game. Cloyne himself was a rather shady-looking Hylian, and his beady eyes narrowed to slits as he peered at Link from behind his desk. Empty bottles of liquor littered the floor behind him.

A drunkard. Great.

“How'd you like to be rich... without having to work for it?” Cloyne began.

“That’s the kind of attitude that destroys societies you know,” Link countered.

“Fair enough! But hey, I’m not talking about anything illegal here. I’m talking about a game!” He gestured over to a set of three treasure chests placed along the wall behind him.

“See those chests over there? How about a little wager on 'em? The idea is you pick any chest you want and open it. Simple, right? The best part is whatever chest you open, you get all the money inside. Course, only one chest is worth opening, heh heh. Don't come crying to me if you pick wrong!”

Oh, I don’t think I’ll be the one crying after this, Link thought.

“Before you go opening any boxes, you'll have to show me what it's worth to you.” Cloyne continued. “What's a bet, after all, if you don't stand to lose a bundle on it? That's the part that really gets a man's heart racing! The more you bet, the more you stand to win. Man like you must have expenses. Couldn't hurt to make some quick cash, eh? Am I right? I know I’m right.”

Simply being in this guy’s presence was making Link’s skin crawl. But he persisted nonetheless.

“I’m in.” Link said.

“Attaboy, attaboy! Now... how much will you wager?”

“Ten rupees.” Link replied.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

Cloyne shrugged. “Sounds like you’re really hurting for some money then. Can’t say you’ll make much with that kinda bet... but suit yourself.”

Link handed him the rupees, and Cloyne set up the chests for the game.

“And there we go! Step right up and take your chances! Take all the time you need to choose a chest to open. Look, listen, smell... taste 'em if you think it'll help.”

Link was quite put off by Cloyne’s cocky little grin, but returned one of his own. He walked straight up to the middle chest, opened it up... and produced three-hundred rupees from inside.

Cloyne’s smile faded a little. “How did you… I mean. Ahem. That’s some luck you’ve got there, boy!” His full smile returned again. “Like I said, the more you wager, the more you stand to win. How’s about another bet?”

Link nodded, handing him all three-hundred rupees as his next bet.

“All of it! Heh heh. Way to live on the edge there, pal! That recklessness - er, fearlessness - almost
reminds me of me! All right then. Let me set up the chests again. No peeking!” The game continued for several minutes, with Link opening chest after chest in each round without hesitation. Each time, he multiplied his winnings. And each time, Cloyne’s smile gradually faded more and more into a desperate scowl. Before long, Link had won over twenty-thousand rupees from the game. At this point, Cloyne was utterly drenched in sweat from nervousness and worry.

“Listen, um, buddy. Look,” he stammered. “You’ve… totally cleared me out here. Seriously. Have a little mercy will ya?”

“Them’s the breaks,’ right?” Link said.

Cloyne shook his head, laughing nervously. “Right right. You got me. But hey, um… I’ll tell you what. If you’re game, maybe we could work out a little deal here.”

“I’m not so keen on participating in another scam.” Link replied.

“This isn’t another… I mean, this isn’t a scam. I swear. Listen.” He pointed out the door and towards the eastward road. “I got a hut down by the beach over there. I never use it. Beachfront property, it’s prime. Waddya say we make an exchange? Your winnings, for the house?”

Link… actually liked the sound of that. It would be quite nice to have a place of his own to rest and recuperate. There was just one thing-

“Half.”

“Half?” Cloyne said.

“Half my winnings.”

“I, um, well…”

Link shrugged. “Or we could just go another round then…?”

“Okay! Okay! Half your winnings. Deal.”

Link smiled. “But, I do have to see the place first.”

Cloyne wiped his brow in relief. “Of course, of course. Right this way…”

“Let’s have a toast!” said Rozel. “To Link’s selfless heroism… and to his new home!”

“Aye!”

The group clinked glasses, and took their sips of rice wine - a gift from Rozel for such an occasion.

“I don’t know how you did it,” said Sebasto - Rozel’s son - as he glanced around the interior of Link’s new beachfront cabana. “But I gotta say, it’s quite a feat to pry something like this away from ol’ Cloyne. And it’s about time he got a taste of his own medicine!”

They were sitting in the front room of Link’s new house, enjoying their celebratory dinner over the defeat of the legendary giant Octorok. The laughter of Rozel’s grandchildren echoed through the interior as they scampered from room to room, dancing and playing. As they ate their dinner, the family marvelled at the sheer amount of food Link was able to shovel into his stomach - and his sheer lack of manners to boot. But they nevertheless enjoyed his company. This young Hylian was quite friendly and funny, and really good with children. It had been quite some time since they’d had this
much fun with a stranger from out of town. And they made this fact known to him.

“...But I suppose I’m your neighbor now, rather than a mere stranger!” Link said, laughing.

Kiana, Sebasto’s wife, giggled along with him.

“Ain’t that the truth!” she said. “And I’m sure you’ll make a great neighbor indeed!” As she said this, she also took the time to glance around the interior of Link’s home. Her eyes eventually fixated on a certain ornate trident mounted on the nearby wall...

“That’s a beautiful weapon you have there. It’s something rather… special, I take it?”

Link looked over to where she was pointing, and sighed quietly.

“Ah, that. It’s... really quite precious to me. I was hoping to store it here for a time. It once belonged to my fiancé.”

Belonged. Past-tense.

Kiara decided not to press him any further on that. Sensing the mood was beginning to sour slightly, Sebasto decided to change the subject instead.

“Well, young hero, I’ve got some good news to break for you,” he said. “It’s about Malanya.”

Link stopped himself mid-bite, eyes widening.

“Have you learned something?” he asked, unable to mask his excitement.

“Indeed! We asked around the village, and it would seem that a recent traveler actually found the very spot that she’s located! She refused to see him, however.”

Link dropped his utensils and leaned across the table.

“Please, tell me you remember the location!” he said excitedly.

“Even better! I have a map. Check it out.” Sebasto handed Link a paper map, which he examined thoroughly.

Link smiled. Her location wasn’t too far out of the way, on a mountain somewhat off the main road. Right along his planned route to Gerudo Desert.

“Thank you so much!” he said. "This is tremendously helpful. I’ll head that way first thing tomorrow!” He began to shovel even more food into his mouth, chewing happily.

“It’s our pleasure,” Rozel said. “It’s the least we could do for your troubles…” he paused briefly, then glanced over at Sebasto. “Although… we do have one last request. If you’ll hear us out.”

Link shrugged. He’d already done quite a bit for these people, but it was still very much in his nature to help out however he could.

“The giant Octorok… wasn’t the only thing disrupting our fishing patterns lately.” Sebasto said, stroking his goatee absentmindedly. “There’s a monster encampment. Right along the beach far west of here. Rozel and I used to frequent there, and it’s a prime spot for catching fish. Unfortunately, it’s far too dangerous to sail out there anymore. And to make matters worse… they’ve stolen something from us. A treasure of sorts, which they're guarding quite aggressively now.”
“...And I take it, you need me to clear them out for you?” Link said, mouth full of chewed food.

“Yes. But I understand if it’s too much trouble-”

“I’ll do it.” he interrupted.

“You will?!” The family members all sighed in relief.

“You have our gratitude!” Sebasto said. ”Seriously. You're a lifesaver!”

Link shrugged. “Whatever it is they stole... it had better be pretty amazing. If I’m going through all this trouble…” He winked.

He was joking of course - he'd undertake this mission, with or without a prize of course. But his sense of humor seemed to fly right over their heads.

“Oh, well, of course it’s amazing!” Rozel said. “A wonderful treasure - it’s an artifact that we’ve held in high esteem for some time now. Something glorious… magical. Something that would surely help you in your journey, should you manage to retrieve it!”

Link smiled. “Well, I like the sound of that. So what is it?”

Sebasto smiled back. “You’ll just have to find out when you get there!”

Link paused briefly, then rolled his eyes.

Why is everyone always so cryptic about these things…

“I’ll head straight there on my way out tomorrow morning,” Link said. “You have nothing to fear.”

“Excellent!” cried Sebasto. “Let’s have another toast to that!”

“Aye!”

As they clinked glasses once again, a feeling of warmth and comfort spread in Link’s heart. The laughter flowed freely, his worries melted away, the tightness in his chest was lifting.

He truly felt at home here, truly felt that this was the place that he belonged.

I think I’ll just retire here, when all is said and done. Link thought to himself, smiling inside as he sipped his wine.

Retire… and die alone.

No longer weighed down by two weapons, Link found that his combat speed was much-improved as he buried the tip of the ceremonial trident in yet another bokoblin warrior. He’d already slain a dozen of these creatures, but they seemed to be crawling all over this enormous floating fortress like a colony of ants. And to make matters worse, these bokoblins were far tougher than the typical red-colored monsters he’d previously encountered. Some were blue, some were brown, but all were aggressive and ferocious. They even seemed a bit smarter… if that were at all possible.

Not wanting to waste much time with this mission, Link’s mind turned to his remote bomb runes in his Sheikah Slate. And as with his encounter with the Lizalfos in their rivertop fortress months earlier, he hesitated to use them, at risk of destroying the entire fortress...
Link began to hurl glowing the enhanced explosives left and right with reckless abandon. Bokoblin bodies were tossed left and right with ease, plummeting to the waters below and disintegrating in a puff of blackish smoke. The explosions ripped the ocean fortress apart at its very foundations, causing a chain reaction that sent the entire thing toppling over into the sea.

In just a few short minutes, Link had obliterated the entire encampment.

Mission accomplished.

He swam over to the bokoblins' treasure chest, which floated amongst the debris and ruins of their former home. With ease, he towed it across the water and back towards the main beach, eventually tossing it into the sands as he made his way out of the shallows.

Link felt a mix of excitement and anxiety as he prepared to open the chest. With the key he’d procured from one of the fallen bokoblins, he carefully unlocked it. A bead of sweat rolled down his moist cheek. He rubbed his hands together, moved them to either side of the lid.

And he began to open it, breath held, eyes wide.

The sun’s bright rays began to penetrate the dark interior of the chest. And as Link peered inside, no longer able to contain his sheer exhilaration, he saw it: The prize he’d gone through all this trouble, all this destruction to obtain.

The reward to end all rewards.

The prize to end all prizes.

The very thing that these monstrous creatures had fought to their deaths to protect.

It was a boomerang.

Chapter End Notes

The feedback has been very, very encouraging for this story, and I’m incredibly humbled by all of your reviews and comments. Let’s hope we can carry this momentum forward! I’ll continue to strive to make every chapter as good as it can possibly be. And yes, it’s decided. The DLC and any subsequent news about it will have no bearing on the plans for this story. Onward we go.

Next is the conclusion of the recovery arc, Chapter 23: Eternity Road. See you then…

Wanted to give a few of shout-outs to a few influential fanfiction writers. First: Schell21 on fanfiction dot net, author of Zelda: Legend of the Sam'kemesa. This was one of the first fics I ever read as a kid, and therefore a much older one. As a big fan of Saria, the story really showed me what was possible with a big imagination, your favorite characters, and a bit of spare time.

Second: Tairis Deamhan, also on fanfiction dot net, author of Razor's Edge - a TaliXShepard Mass Effect novelization. I followed this story years ago, and I credit it in
part for giving me the idea of doing a BotW novelization. If you’re a fan of the original ME trilogy as well as Tali’Zorah, I highly recommend it.

Finally: Taylortot on AO3, author of heartstrings, a Miraculous Ladybug fic (and I think one of the most popular ones on the site). I don’t even watch Miraculous Ladybug, nor do I consider myself a fan, but there’s something about this fic that resonated with the gooey romantic inside of me. It’s an entertaining read for sure, especially if you like straight fluff most of the way through (as opposed to the occasional fluff you find here in AFOoW). It’s also responsible for introducing me to the AO3 website in the first place.
The rain poured ceaselessly around Link and Zelda as they took cover beneath a mossy tree. While the young princess of Hyrule seated herself in front of a nearby stone, Link took the time to practice his skills with the master sword. His swings and swipes cut through the air with fluidity. His movements were seamless and efficient - nothing wasted. As usual.

Zelda looked up at the cloudy sky, sighing calmly as she did.

"I doubt this will let up anytime soon," she said, over the gentle patter of rainfall. She turned her attention back to Link's swordplay and smiled.

"Your path seems to mirror your father's," she said. "You've dedicated yourself to becoming a knight, as well. Your commitment to the training necessary to fulfill your goal is really quite admirable…"

Link continued to cut through the rain with his sword, imagining a horde of enemies charging his way. He appeared unaffected by Zelda's comments - at least on the outside. But he was definitely listening.

"I see now why you would be the chosen one..." Zelda finished. Her tone had changed, her mood seemed to turn somber - or at least, more somber than before. Link noticed that she had grown to be quite careful with her words as of late, ever since they left Zora's Domain just over a week before. He had quickly gotten over his own disappointment at leaving Mipha once again, knowing that there was still so much work to be done. Yet Zelda still seemed troubled by something. And it seemed she was finally ready to start talking about it...

"What if..." she began.

Link lowered his sword, turning to face Zelda fully.

“...What if you realized, you just weren’t meant to be a fighter? Yet the only thing people ever said... was that you were born into a family of the royal guard. And so no matter what you thought, you had to become a knight...” She looked away from Link as she said this, her eyes downcast, face sullen.

"If that was the only thing that you were ever told... I wonder, then…” She glanced back up at Link, smiling bitterly.

“...Would you have chosen a different path...?”

The vision left as quickly as it came, smoothly fading from Link’s mind. With his memories returning to him with greater frequency in recent days, he found that his brain was beginning to adapt to these nostalgic episodes with hardly any trouble. As such, he quickly turned his attention right back to the task at hand - and the growing raw pain that was settling into his sore fingers.

Similar to his earlier vision, the rain poured on him relentlessly as he climbed this sheer cliff face before him. Hoping to find a better vantage point to see the path ahead, he’d made the decision earlier to scale this mountain in order to gain his bearings. But about halfway up the wall, a rather
inconvenient downpour had instantly begun. It was as if the gods were purposefully toying with him, laughing at him as he slipped and sputtered his way up, challenging him with the most inconvenient situation they could possibly devise in this moment.

In all, this was yet another prime example of his typical day-to-day luck.

To make matters worse, the raucous sounds of a familiar yet alien musical instrument permeated the air around him as he climbed. It grew louder and louder with each foot of his ascent, and Link’s frustrated mind was slowly beginning to formulate a brand new goal: throttling whatever stupid man or creature was playing this ironically energetic song in the midst of the chaotic rainstorm.

With bloodied fingers and angry resolve, he reached the top of the cliff and pulled himself over the top. He laid there, panting heavily for a brief moment...

But he wouldn’t allow himself much rest. He was on a mission. He leaped to his feet, peering through the thick rain to locate the source of the music.

And after some searching, he finally found it.

It was a bird. A large bird.

Another Rito!

This one, however, looked quite a bit unlike Revali did. He was light blue in color, with a large black beak dominating his face. His build was incredibly tall yet stocky. He wore a leather chestpiece with a white scarf and matching pants. His instrument was a strange, boxlike device with yellow buttons - an accordion, Link finally recognized.

Between the jolly, colorful, and welcoming look of this Rito musician - as well as the joy with which he played his strange instrument - Link found his anger was instantly subsiding as he approached this interesting character.

Yet he remained as blunt as ever.

“You're a bird.” Link said.

The musician raised his brow in wonder as he finally noticed Link.

“...have you...never met a Rito before?” he replied.

Link shrugged. “Oh no, I have. Just stating the obvious.”

The musician immediately laughed at this, placing his instrument on his back and crossing his arms. “Well then,” he said, “In the spirit of redundancy… you’re a Hylian! And I can't imagine you-

He paused briefly for a second, as he caught sight of Link's Sheikah Slate. "Wait a minute, that there... on your hip... could it be...? Ah! Never mind! It's nothing.” He took a bow, smiling as he did.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name... is Kass! I'm a traveling bard!"

Link smiled back, taking a bow of his own.

"Well I... am Link! And your instrument is actually kind of annoying!"

Kass laughed at this, knowing that Link was only joking. "As a bard," he explained, "I spend my
days traveling this land in search of ancient songs. These songs sing the praises of a hero who beat back the Calamity in an age past."

Link’s ears perked up at this. He was naturally very interested in tales of his predecessor - if only to shed some light on how he himself could avoid failing Hyrule once again...

Kass continued. “It just so happens... that I know a song about this place! Would you like to hear it?”

Link nodded aggressively, taking a seat on the wet ground.

"Excellent! Without further ado..."

He pulled out his accordion once more, and began to play and to sing:

“...Where the forest dragon splays its jaws,
A shrine sleeps with noble cause,
Courageous spirit, one must bear,
To earn the treasure hidden there...”

The song was rather short, but Link found Kass's voice and musicianship to be quite pleasing to the ear after all. He was starting to regret his earlier frustration at hearing this same tune…

...As well as his previous desire to throttle Kass.

"The forest dragon...." Kass said. "Hmmm... I've never actually seen a dragon in a forest around these parts!"

Link picked himself up, brushed the mud from his rear as Kass continued.

"Though... I suppose the forest from the song could be the Damel Forest, due west of here. It's near the Dracozu River, a place that some have described as the 'Serpent's Jaws.' Who knows? Perhaps you shall find something interesting there!

Link’s adventurous spirit immediately made his decision for him. “Looks like I’m heading for the Damel Forest next!” he said, with mild excitement.

Kass smiled down at him. "Excellent! There's definitely a secret lying in wait - it's just a matter of tracking it down!"

Link spun on his heels, making his way in the direction of Damel Forest. “It was a pleasure meeting you!” he called back to Kass as he departed.

“May the light illuminate your path!” Kass replied. “And… be careful.”

Link paused, spun around once more to face the tall Rito.

“While I have never seen a dragon in-person,” Kass said, "I’ve heard many a legend of their benevolence - as well as their violence. He might be a helpful sort, eager to assist you…” Kass shrugged.

“...Or he might just eat you instead.”

The thought of this produced laughter from Link, but Kass remained stoic.
“I’m not kidding. He might actually eat you.”

“...Oh.”

The path up Dracozu River was wet and treacherous. So much so, that Link decided it was best to leave Inferno back at the main road as he made his way to this mysterious place known as the ‘Serpent’s Jaws’. His Sheikah Slate was entirely blank in this area, so he relied heavily on his paper map to navigate. That is, up until it began to completely dissolve in the constant rainfall. The poor thing was in tatters at this point, almost entirely unusable.

But no matter. He had practically memorized the whole thing at this point anyway.

Enormous palm trees towered along his path, offering some minor reprieve from the downpour. But around him, the menacing eyes of ancient dragon statues peered at him at every turn. With these sights and sounds all around him, Link couldn’t help but feel an unsettling sense of familiarity with this place.

And he also couldn’t shake the feeling... that he was being watched.

In fact, he knew that he was being watched. Not by the strange statues themselves, but by something - or someone - otherworldly. Something unseen.

Yet this knowledge provided a strange sense of comfort rather than fear, as he finally arrived at the mouth of the Dracozu River.

A volley of shock arrows instantly greeted him, as an army of Lizalfos drew back on their bows in defense of this ancient place. With great accuracy, Link dispatched these archers with several shock arrows of his own. He landed headshot after headshot, each warrior falling with ease. Even a dark-colored Moblin warrior at the entrance gave him little trouble. And as Link finally replaced his battle-worn trident on his back, he placed his hands on his hips and sighed happily.

An incredible structure stood before him. It was an enormous stone monument, worn away with age - but still impressive nonetheless. The entrance resembled a serpent’s head, threatening to swallow him whole.

The 'Serpent's Jaws.'

And contained within them was yet another statue of the goddess Hylia. He cautiously approached the glowing statue, waded through the shallow pool around it, and waited.

And waited.

...And waited some more.

Well... I'm here... he thought to himself.

...Now what?

After some time, the air around him suddenly grew still. The ever-present sounds of chirping creatures slowly faded to dead silence. Even the rainfall itself seemed to grow eerily quiet.

And in that moment, Link realized... that whatever creature or entity that had been watching him this entire time... had finally arrived.

“You have done well to make it back to this place, young Hylian!”
A booming voice entered Link’s ears from all directions. He spun around, searched for the source of the voice, but found nothing.

“Above you. Look.”

Link obeyed, and was instantly blinded by an incredible green light. As his eyes adjusted, he could just make out the creature in the sky before him.

Its face was menacing, a great yellow horn protruded from its forehead. A large scaley mane erupted from the back of its head, and small arms and horns protruded from all around its snakelike body. The air around him began to buzz with electricity, and the great beast seemed to slither through the air above him, flying straight into the gaping mouth of the giant serpent statue before coming to a stop just in front of him.

Only then did Link recognize the creature.

It was a dragon.

“My name… is Farosh.” This booming voice still seemed to flood Link’s senses as it addressed him.

“I am the servant of this ancient Spring of Courage, and the great spirit of lightning.”

Link nodded in recognition. “And I take it…” he said, “That you aren’t here to eat me after all?” He’d already redrawn his trident, ready to defend himself once again.

But Farosh seemed to smile at this remark. “I mean you no harm, hero of Hyrule. In fact… I have come to aid you in your journey.”

Satisfied, Link yet again placed his trident on his back and crossed his arms.

“Will you hear what I have to say?” Farosh asked.

Link nodded.

“Very well. As I said before… you have done quite well to return to this place… Link.”

Link raised an eyebrow at this. “Have we… met before?” he asked.

“We have not,” replied Farosh. “But I know of your exploits and your travels. I know of your history. Because you see… this is not the first time that you have visited the Spring of Courage.”

“Then… I must have traveled here with Zelda long ago?” Link asked. “Is that correct?”

Farosh nodded slowly. “That is correct. As expected, some of your memories have yet to return to you after your slumber. Allow me to explain…”

Another great flash of light, and a vision entered Link’s mind....

Princess Zelda stood in front of the statue of Hylia, clothed in simple white robes. Her eyes were closed tightly, her hands folded across her chest in prayer...

“You accompanied Princess Zelda to this place,” explained Farosh. “She had hoped to unlock the ancient sealing powers of the Goddess Hylia by praying here.”

The princess stood in silence for some time, before shaking her head and turning to face Link. She flashed him a grim smile, before walking right past Link to gather up her things.
Whatever she had come here for, whatever her goal was, it appeared to have been for naught.

A feeling of sorrow and despair entered Link’s heart. But he said nothing. He too began to walk towards the entrance of the serpent’s jaws, ready to move on to their next destination...

This vision melted away, bringing Link’s consciousness back to the present day.

“How... do you know all this?” Link asked. He knew it was an obvious question. And as expected, Farosh seemed to angrily snarl at it.

“I am the guardian of this place! Shall I not be aware of all that occurs within my domain?!”

Link shrugged. “Was just checking. Carry on. ...Please don’t eat me.”

“...As you know, the princess was unsuccessful in her efforts. Just as she was unsuccessful when she visited the other springs that are scattered across this land...”

Farosh closed his eyes for a brief moment before continuing. “...Which brings me to you. It is destiny that has caused us to meet here. You see, there are reasons that Zelda was unable to tap into the powers of her ancestors at that time. One of them... was her lack of courage to face her deepest fears...”

Link couldn’t help but feel the need to defend the princess as he heard this.

“From what I’ve recalled...” Link said, “Zelda was one of the most courageous people I knew... And yet you deemed her unworthy?”

Farosh nodded. “Ah, but you look only upon the exterior. We guardians... can see inside the heart. In that time, I sensed much fear within her. Her thoughts were filled with self-doubt and with caution. She wanted nothing more than to be free of her burdens and of her fate.

Farosh’s eyes widened, his pupils shrinking as he unleashed an enormous, toothy grin.

“But you! I can see that your own heart... is now entirely unburdened by fear. You have taken charge of destiny with your own two hands! And your personal growth will be the key to destroying Calamity Ganon.”

“That is all well and good...” Link interrupted. “But the Divine Beasts... surely you know of them? We failed to use them to defeat Ganon all those years ago. But if I can recapture all of them... shouldn’t that be enough?”

Farosh shook his head.

“The Divine Beasts will do well to destroy Ganon physically. That much is true. But to seal away his spirit for good... to obliterate his malice that has existed for countless eons... that will require something far beyond mortal capability. It will require an ancient power, lost to time...”

Another vision crossed Link’s mind...

Princess Zelda, alone, approached Hyrule Castle to face the swirling mass of darkness known as Calamity Ganon. She raised her right hand, and a set of mystic golden triangles appeared on her right hand. Their yellow glow cut straight through the darkness of Ganon’s malice, their vibrant light was utterly staggering in its brilliance.

“In the eleventh hour, Zelda discovered how to tap into her ancient powers.” Farosh explained. “But
she has only scratched the surface of its abilities. Thus far, she has only been able to hold back Ganon’s calamity - but cannot yet overcome it. Which leads me to you!”

Link snapped back to the present once again, slightly dizzy from the repeated visions.

“The dance of light and shadow... has always featured a strong partnership, forged between hero and princess. Your destinies are intertwined. You must know already... that Zelda's powers grow weaker by the day. In her stead, you must unlock the true potential of her abilities. When the three wielders of the triforce are assembled together once again... the final battle against darkness will begin. You must be fully prepared for this moment.”

Link shrugged. “How… will I know when I am ready? How will I know when we are prepared to destroy Ganon for good?”

“You must visit the other springs, and seek an audience with my fellow dragons. They shall determine your readiness in facing the calamity.”

Link pointed a finger at Farosh. “And what about you? What is your judgement now?”

Farosh smiled once again.

“You proceed with a heart that is unrestrained by fear! You are not afraid to allow your true self to show at all times. And that is precisely why you find success. That is precisely why I... have deemed you worthy of my blessing.”

Farosh closed his eyes, and a single scale began to glow on his body. It separated itself in a shower of energy and sparks, before floating slowly into Link’s waiting hands.

“As a token of your tremendous courage...” Farosh said, “Please take this. Offer it in the Spring of Courage as proof of your achievement…”

Link did as he was told, spinning around and dropping the scale directly in the water in front of the statue of the Goddess Hylia. The spring immediately erupted in an explosion of brilliant light, as the scale offering suddenly disappeared into the water. A spirit orb took its place, which Link collected without hesitation.

“You are heading for Gerudo Desert next, I presume.” Farosh said. “I too will be making my way there soon. Shall I offer you transport there?”

Link shook his head. “You’ve done quite enough already. And besides… I have some… unfinished business in this area. And I can’t just leave my horse out here in the middle of nowhere…”

Farosh smiled at this. “Well, I can always eat your horse instead, if it has become a hindrance.”

Link’s eyes widened in shock, but Farosh simply laughed mirthfully.

“I jest, I jest. Very well. Do as you please.” Farosh began to turn and leave, but Link suddenly held up a hand to stop him.

“There is... one thing you can help me with, however.” Link said.

Farosh turned back and stared at Link intently, awaiting his request.

“What can you tell me… about Malanya ?”
Link was getting close now. He could feel it.

With the the activation of a lakeside Sheikah Tower, just south of the enormous Lake Hylia, Link felt that he finally had his bearings in the area. According to his map Malanya was located just up a small mountain road ahead of him. His mind was abuzz with possibilities as he rode Inferno up the treacherous mountain path.

*A ‘horse goddess’?* he pondered to himself. *What does that even mean?*

*And if she truly can revive horses… maybe her powers don’t stop there? Perhaps… Mipha…*

He shook his head. There was no need to jump to conclusions. One way or another… he was about to find out the truth. Farosh had made it abundantly clear in their conversation, that there were some things he would simply need to find out on his own.

The path winded its way up the mountain, before giving way to an open gap between the peaks. As he entered this place, a familiar sight was there to greet him: a large, thorny flower bud.

Just like the spot of the Great Fairy near Kakariko Village.

Link sighed deeply. He could easily guess what was coming next…

“Sweet boy…” A booming voice emanated from inside the bud as he approached it. “Please… listen to my story…”

“How many?” Link replied.

“How… many?” Link repeated. "I mean… have you ever… wait. What?"

“How many rupees do you need?”

“…One thousand.”

Link reached into his bag, retrieving the needed amount. An enormous, dark-skinned hand emerged from the bud’s interior, awaiting the payment.

“Here you go.” Link said flatly, as the hand snatched up the money and slipped back inside.

The giant bud began to pulsate and throb, a purple smoke shot out of the top…

“Nwaaaaagh… I… am… Revived!!”

The bud exploded outward, revealing a glowing pool of water. A pair of hands grasped the sides, as the giant being - likely Malanya, slowly pulled itself out of the water.

Despite its shocking appearance, Link didn’t flinch a bit. Unlike the humanoid Great Fairies, this being was utterly monstrous. Its hands were severed from its body, floating on either side of it. The being wore a crude horse mask that was adorned in colorful markings. Its crude, patchwork dress was cut off at the waist, revealing a skeletal body that ended at the base of its head. Link could only guess what the face itself looked like, hidden behind the horse mask, as the head spun and twitched creepily in front of him. Only then did Link notice the creature’s eyes, embedded in the ears of the horse mask. They stared at him, blankly, expressionless.

Link just shrugged.

_Eh. I’ve seen weirder._
“Oh ho ho… at last!” Malanya said. “Free of that tiny bud after so long! If my arms were corporeal, they’d have cramped for sure! And you’re the one who set me free, are you not?”

Link’s hands found their usual place on his hips. “I am indeed,” he said. “And you are Malanya, correct? I have a few questions for you…”

Malanya’s head continued to twitch and spin around its skeletal neck. “I am indeed Malanya! I am the god who watches over the horses of this world. Does that answer all of your potential questions?”

“Are you male or female?” Link asked bluntly.

“Hmmm… does it matter?” Malanya replied. “Male or female… I can still eat you!!”

Malanya suddenly lunged forward, threatening to snatch Link up with its hands, but Link didn’t flinch.

“I just finished talking to an enormous, carnivorous, electrical dragon.” Link said, calmly. “If he didn’t eat me, I seriously doubt a skeletal ghost thing is going to either.”

Malanya reared back and laughed raucously.

“Hahahaha, what a great sense of humor! I only jest of course. And for the record, I am indeed female. But don’t you tell anybody!”

The horse god clasped her hands together, staring intently at Link’s face. “It seems I owe you a favor now. If a horse you love passes away from some sort of tragic, fatal accident, it is within my power to revive that horse!”

Link’s heart sank a bit at this. Of course it was too good to be true…

Malanya seemed to notice Link’s subtle mood change.

“You seem troubled at this,” she said. “Perhaps… you’ve killed your own horse?! Is that a guilty conscience I sense within you?! Maybe I should eat you after all!!”

Link shook his head. “That’s not it… I… well, I had hoped that your powers might help me revive someone else. But it seems that’s beyond your abilities–”

“You’ve lost a lover, haven’t you?” Malanya interrupted.

Link nodded quietly.

“I see. You’re not the first to come here, seeking the revival of a loved one. And I regret to inform you… that I currently have no such ability.”

Despite his disappointment, Link felt a bizarre sense of relief at the finality of the whole thing…

“Then I suppose…” Link said, “that I no longer have any business here. I’m sorry for wasting your time. Thanks for the information.” Link turned to leave, prepared to mount Inferno once again, when Malanya suddenly called out from behind him.

“Hold it!”

Link spun around to face Malanya. “Yes?”
“While it is true that the Goddess has only given me the power over horses… that does not mean I cannot help you on your way! I sense that there’s yet another you have lost. Someone loyal, caring, sweet. One that died with numerous regrets, who seeks to be by your side once again.”

Link began to search his memories, but was unable to summon any recollections of such a-

_Epona_

His eyes widened with excitement. How could he have forgotten her?

“Your trusted companion Epona wishes to finish her mission with you,” Malanya said excitedly. "Shall I bring her back?"

“Absolutely!” Link cried, without hesitation.

“Haha!” Malanya’s hands suddenly spun around her body as a swirling vortex of purple energy began to fill the air. She lunged forward, and a beam of purple light rained down from the heavens in the spot right next to where Inferno stood. A flash of light, and a beautiful horse suddenly appeared out of thin air. She was gorgeous, golden brown in color, with a white mane that seemed to glow and sparkle in the darkness. Recognizing her old master, Epona reared back on her hind legs, neighing triumphantly as Link ran up to greet his long lost companion.

He brushed her mane carefully, as Malanya looked on proudly.

“She is a beautiful specimen!” she said. "Take good care of her."

Link looked back at Malanya, fighting back tears. “I will! Without a doubt, I will. Thank you.”

“My pleasure! But be warned-” Malanya continued, “Epona will only be by your side as long as her mission is yet unfulfilled. When you have accomplished your task, she will move on from this world. I want you to be steeled for this.”

Link nodded absentmindedly, burying his face in Epona’s mane. Her sweet scent brought back so many memories, reminded him of his few brighter days back at the Knight Academy. Her presence helped beat back the heartache that once again threatened to bubble to the surface...

“Should any harm befall one of your horses,” Malanya said, “please come and see me! I promise not to eat you - assuming you didn’t kill it on purpose! Hahahaha!”

Link mounted Epona, for the first time in a hundred years, and the pair quickly galloped away. After some time, Link finally sighed aloud - partly in disappointment, but also partly in relief.

This wasn’t at all the result he had wanted from his visit to Malanya... but it was certainly quite a bit more than he had expected. And as they trotted back down the mountain path, Inferno loyally bringing up the rear, Link’s hand gently grasped the shoulder of his Zora armor.

_The search has ended for now, I suppose..._ he thought bitterly. His fingers found Mipha’s familiar white scale, and he smiled. The scale seemed to shimmer in the darkness in response to his touch, though he didn’t notice it. And he sighed again, happily.

Because in the end...as long as Mipha was with him, even in spirit, he just knew that he would always possess the courage he needed to carry on.

"...If that was the only thing that you were ever told…” Zelda said, “I wonder, then. Would you have
chosen a different path...?"

Link stared after Zelda for a while, carefully considering his response. He knew precisely the answer she was reaching for, knew exactly what words could offer her the tiniest, briefest release from her guilt and her responsibilities and her doubts.

But Link wasn’t one to lie. Even for the sake of comforting a dear friend. So he shook his head at her.

“No.” He said.

“No, I wouldn’t. And I didn’t.” He resheathed his sword, crossed his arms as he faced Zelda.

A brief pause, then his face curled into a rare, determined grin. One that seemed to shock the Hylian Princess more than anything else.

“And to be perfectly honest, Zelda…

I don’t regret my decision a single bit.”

Chapter End Notes

Next is the start of the Gerudo arc in Chapter 24: Heavy Spirit. See you soon.
“You mean you haven’t heard?” said Sesami, as he took another bite from his bowl of mushroom stew. His companion, Palme, shrugged her shoulders.

“I… thought it was just a legend. A total myth. How in the world could he have survived all these years?”

“It’s no myth!” said Sesami. “I’ve had many a traveler regale me with tales of his bravery. I heard that he took down a giant octorok. Single-handedly!”

“There’s no way…” Palme said.

“It’s true. He’s already traveled all across the east… rescuing people, destroying countless evil monsters… even held a feast for a group of complete strangers. He might not be a myth… but he’s already becoming a legend for sure!”

Palme shook her head. “So… he’s finally returned. After all these years…” she paused for a minute in awe. “Perhaps we might just have some hope after all!”

The pair stared at the fire for a while, Palme dwelling on this stunning news. After some time, she spoke again.

“Do you think he’s as dashing as the legends say? I’ll bet he’s such a gentleman… full of class… incredibly gallant… the very definition of a great hero-”

BOOOOOM!

A loud explosion rocked the canyon walls causing both Palme and Sesami to duck in cover.

“Out of the way!!” echoed a loud voice. “It’s coming!! Take cover!!”

The rhythmic sounds of galloping hooves reverberated around them, growing louder and louder. The pair looked back towards the canyon, searching for the source of the voice. And suddenly, a beautiful brown horse came rocketing out from behind the wall, followed closely by a dark black mare. Palme’s eyes widened as she finally caught sight of the rider.

He was basically naked.

In seconds, this strange young man was riding past their campsite at the horse stable. His long, dirty-blonde hair flowed in the wind, he was drenched in sweat, his well-toned muscles glistened brightly in the sunlight. His face looked completely ridiculous as he continued to scream at the top of his lungs while he rode past.

“It’s a guardian!!” he yelled. “Hide!!”

As he said this, a supercharged laser blast sailed right over the heads of the pair of travelers, just missing the horses and their peculiar rider. Both Palme and Sesami dove into a nearby bush, and an enormous guardian propelled itself right over their campfire in pursuit of its targets.

As this strange scene made its way off into the distance, the pair looked at each other in disbelief.
“Well,” Palme said, “I hope that great hero makes his way over here sometime soon... Looks like we’re going to be needing his services.”

Link bucked at Epona’s ribs, spurring her to run faster as they continued to evade the chasing guardian.

That… did not go at all as I planned, he thought to himself. He quickly spared a glance into his bag, saw that Mipha’s Zora armor was still safe and sound. Previously, he’d shed his precious armor before engaging this solitary guardian. This was, of course, one piece of clothing he couldn’t afford to have set on fire this time.

The canyon walls eventually opened up, and they soon found themselves galloping into an open desert. The blazing sun bore down harshly on Link’s exposed skin, but he hardly noticed. He had more pressing issues to attend to at the moment.

Epona leapt over a desert shrub, Inferno following close behind, and another laser blast erupted on the ground next to them. Its incredible heat melted the sand below, kicking up a massive cloud of dust and debris. Seeing an opportunity, Link pulled back on Epona’s reins and circled back around the dust cloud. I’ve spent more than enough time running from these stupid things… he thought to himself.

It’s time to fight.

He drew his lizal bow - courtesy of one of the numerous lizalfos warriors he’d slain back in the rainforest - and prepared for the guardian to emerge.

Except it didn’t.

Link paused, waited a few moments.

Nothing.

And then a loud rumble. The earth around him began to shake violently. Puzzled, Link looked around him, and then he finally noticed it: a large mound of sand, traveling at high speed straight in the direction of the dust cloud. It went right past him, disappearing into the cloud. Suddenly, a great eruption of sand exploded straight into the air. Link could hear the disturbing sounds of grinding mechanisms being shredded to bits. Laser blasts were shot at random into the sky in every direction. Ruined guardian parts began to rain down from the heavens, mercifully missing Epona and Inferno as they stood by.

And then all was quiet.

Link waited again. The sudden silence was quite eerie. He could hear his own heart pounding wildly in his chest, but he remained calm.

Finally, after some time, the dust settled. Link peered through the dissipating dust cloud, saw the scattered pieces of the robotic guardian around the desert sands in front of him.

And in the center of the chaos… it emerged.

It was a massive reptilian beast, easily twice the size of the guardian it had just demolished. It had a gaping, elongated snout, beady orange eyes, and a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. Its entire face was adorned with rocklike armor. A massive, webbed dorsal fin traced its spine all the way down to its rear. Link stifled a laugh as he noticed its stubby legs wriggling around on its sides. But his laughter...
subsided as the creature suddenly let out an ear-piercing screech.

He shook his head.

There’s always a hitch... isn’t there?

The monstrous desert creature leapt into the air, burrowing itself into the sands once more. And the battle was on.

Link replaced his bow, immediately pulled back on Epona’s reins, and began to ride away from the scene. As expected, the creature began to give chase. Though Epona was quite a fast horse, especially compared to Inferno, the soft and unstable sands below her hooves seemed to slow her quite significantly. Link spun around, was pleased to see that Inferno was at least smart enough to run out of the way as the burrowing creature continued its beeline straight for him.

He thought fast. Reaching for his Sheikah Slate, he activated his remote bomb runes and tossed a single round bomb into the path of the monster in order to slow it down.

Unexpectedly, the creature actually stopped. From the mound of sand, a large snout emerged, sniffing the bomb in curiosity. Link stopped Epona, circling back carefully to watch the creature’s next move. It quickly gobbled up the bomb, causing Link to grin widely.

Satisfied, the creature dove into the air again - but Link was ready. He detonated the bomb with his slate and the monster face-planted into the sand, rolling around in agony.

They were on it in a flash. Link flipped himself off of Epona, drawing his trident as he did. He began to stab rapidly at the creature’s white underbelly as it lay stunned. Even Epona and Inferno got in on the action, bucking and kicking at the creature’s armored head.

After a bit of this, the creature - a molduga, Link finally recognized - began to come to. Link mounted Epona again, and both horses quickly ran away from the scene. It began to give chase once again.

This is way easier than I thought it was going to be… he thought. Which means...

As if on cue, a loud rumbling sound was heard once again. But this time, it was much louder than before. Link dared to turn his head, just in time to see two more large mounds of sand closing in. But they weren’t aiming for him.

The two mounds quickly converged on the first monster, and there was another sudden explosion of sand in the air all around Link. This time body parts and blood were raining down from the sky above. The dust and debris settled after some time, just as it had before. And at the site of the collision… two more moldugas were waiting. Both of them were at least three times as large as the first.

Link palmed his face in disbelief.

“Come on already…”

He pulled out his Sheikah Slate once more, this time generating two remote bombs. He tossed them in the sand in front of him as he rode away again. Both moldugas gave chase, just as the first one had.

But they ignored the bombs.
Link’s eyes widened as he caught sight of Inferno, running adjacent to him. *She* was their target.

“**Inferno!**” Link shouted. “**This way!**” He gestured to her with his hand - but she was too stubborn. She did just the *opposite*, leading the monsters away from Link and Epona.

“**NO!**” He pulled back on Epona’s reins, veering off in Inferno’s direction as the reptilian beasts burrowed right past him. Link pulled out his bow, attempted to ward off the creatures with a pair of shock arrows. But he was too late.

Inferno neighed wildly as one of the moldugas exploded out of the sands, swallowing his horse whole. Link’s screams of pain and anguish were barely distinguishable amidst the chaos of flailing monsters and raining sand. A feeling of familiar despair entered into his heart. Though he knew that Malanya was capable of reviving Inferno… he nevertheless felt tremendous guilt for the demise of his old horse.

Enraged, he bucked at Epona’s ribs. She responded with a sudden burst of speed, as if she too shared in the pain of Link’s incredible anger. When he drew close to the first monster, Link leapt from Epona and stabbed his trident straight into the creature’s side. It roared in pain as Link produced a shock arrow from his quiver and quickly stabbed it into the open wound.

The molduga thrashed suddenly, sending Link flying across the desert. He skimmed across the ground painfully, the desert sand’s coarseness scraping up every part of his body.

Epona chased after him, nudged Link to his feet, and he prepared to mount her—just in time to get launched in the air once again by the second molduga. This time, both Link and Epona were violently skimming across the desert sands. Epona’s hind leg twisted awkwardly as they came to a stop. She struggled to her feet, nearly collapsed.

Link coughed up sand, wiped the blood from his brow, scrambled to his feet. He was really starting to panic now.

He grabbed Epona’s reins, and the pair began to hobble away as quickly as possible. A small, rocky area towered in the distance. They’d seek shelter there.

That was... if they could make it in time.

Both moldugas roared in triumph, and they leapt into the air and burrowed deep into the desert sands once more. They began to pursue Link and the injured Epona, rapidly gaining ground as their intimidating faces skimmed just above the surface of the desert.

Link began to sprint. And despite her injury, Epona picked up her pace as well.

*Almost there, almost there. Just a few more feet, and we can-

“Out of the way, voe!”

A husky, female voice echoed across the desert. Link squinted his eyes, peering in the direction of the rocks. He raised an eyebrow at the strange sight before him.

Three legless, flippered, furry creatures with enormous tusks were ‘swimming’ across the desert straight towards him. They were towing what appeared to be three dark-skinned Gerudo women on sand boards. Their vibrant red hair furrowed in the wind with the rapid pace in which they were riding.
They were led by a tall, muscular Gerudo with a poofy hairdo. She appeared to be the source of the voice.

“Take cover!” she yelled. “Now!!”

Link did as he was told, pulled Epona off to the side and laid flat on the desert surface. As soon as they were out of the way the three riders each drew a set of bows and arrows from their backs.

A relentless volley of arrows filled the air just above Link and Epona, quickly peppering the faces of the moldugas like a violent hailstorm.

But these were no ordinary arrows.

They were bomb arrows.

FOOM-FOOM-FOOM-FOOM-FOOM-

Rapid explosions rocked the air behind Link. A mix of blood and gore and sand and bone were launched in every direction. It was absolute chaos. The air was filled with dust and sand, and the ruined bodies of the pair of moldugas rumbled loudly as they came to a stop just in front of Link and Epona.

They were now, mercifully, nothing more than great messy blobs of flesh and bone.

Link briefly marvelled at the scene, picked himself up, dusted himself off. Epona attempted to rise to her hooves but struggled mightily.

The three riders finally arrived, coming to a stop in front of the moldugas. Link thanked them profusely for their assistance.

“Ah, it is no problem, naked voe,” said the lead rider. She dismounted her sand board and began to walk towards him. The others did the same.

“We were just in the middle of a midday ride, and saw that you needed help. We aren’t ones to ignore someone in need…” She gestured to her fellow riders. “These are my friends, Frelly and her mother Kohm. They run the sandseal rental shops up in Gerudo Town!”

She pulled off her strange tinted glasses and winked at Link.

“As for me, my name... is Tali.” She struck a confident pose, flexed her rippling abdominal muscles. “And I’m the best sandseal rider in all of Gerudo! You’d best remember that, voe.”

Link nodded his head.

“Well I… am Link. And I have no idea what a ‘voe’ is!”

Frelly laughed. “It seems you really are new around here. ‘Voe’ is the term we Gerudo use for ‘man’ or ‘boy.’”

“...And for women?”

“Vai!”

“Right. Thanks for the primer…” his eyes wandered back towards the ruined bodies of the two dead moldugas. “…And I also have to thank you, once again, for your assistance back there…” He walked a bit closer to the second molduga, sighing loudly as he did.
“Inferno… I’m so sorry,” he muttered.

As he said this, a muffled whinny emanated from the interior of the beast.

*WHAT?!*

Link sprinted straight for the molduga and begins to dig through its remains. He located its stomach, tore through the flesh and viscera, searched desperately for the source of the desperate cry. And as he pulled and ripped and tugged through the creature’s guts, a horse’s head suddenly emerged from the interior.

*Inferno’s* head. She neighed happily as she caught sight of her master.

“Inferno! Thank the goddesses!” Link quickly embraced his horse, gently pulling her out and away from the molduga’s entrails. He looked over her briefly and laughed to himself. She was a bit shaken up, but otherwise okay. In fact, she was in far *better* shape than Epona was. He’d have to seek medical attention in the next town, if that were at all possible.

The three Gerudo simply stared at this strange scene for a while, then shook their heads. Frelly pointed up towards a small black dot in the distance.

“There’s an oasis just down the way from here, young voe. We can show you the way. I’m sure you can find some medical assistance there—"

She pointed towards Link, who was now soaked to the bone in molduga blood. She plugged her nose in playful disgust.

“-and perhaps more importantly… you’ll find a place to bathe!”

Link emerged from the bathhouse feeling quite refreshed. And though the sun above was quite hot, he chose to don the Zora armor anyway. Despite its heat Link found the desert climate to be quite a welcome relief from the weeks of constant rainfall in the forests back east. It helped that a cool breeze seemed to blow perpetually through this cool oasis in the middle of the Gerudo Desert.

*It wasn’t quite the way we expected,* Link thought to himself, as he glanced down at Mipha’s white scale on his Zora armor. *...But it looks like we finally made it to Gerudo Desert together…*

He looked over the oasis around him, reminiscing about the event that transpired here over one hundred long years ago… a dramatic rescue of Zelda from the Yiga clan. The very event that sparked his friendship with the young princess of Hyrule. He wondered how Zelda was faring, if she was holding up against Calamity Ganon…

“I think I prefer you *without* clothes, voe,” said Frelly, winking as he began to approach her. The trio of sandseal riders had gathered just outside the bathhouse, watching over Epona and Inferno as Link cleaned himself up. He walked up to his horses and offered each one an apple, which they consumed with gusto.

“Ordinarily I prefer myself without clothes as well, *vai.*” he said. “But this is a special case…” The Gerudo decided not to press him about his strange armor.

“Well, if it’s all settled, we’ll be making our way back to Gerudo Town,” said Kohm. “We have our businesses to attend to, after all.”

Link held his hand up to stop them as they turned to leave. “Actually… *I* have some personal
business to attend to in Gerudo Town myself. Perhaps I can accompany you?”

The three Gerudo women looked at each other, then began to laugh in unison.

“My apologies, young voe,” Tali said. “But it seems you are unaware. You see, men are not allowed in Gerudo town at all.”

“What business could you possibly have there anyway?” asked Frelly.

“I need to see Riju.”

At this, the Gerudo trio laughed even harder.

“That… isn’t going to happen I’m afraid. We Gerudo are rarely granted an audience with Chief Riju ourselves. And as a voe, you wouldn’t even make it past the front gate. It’s impossible…”

Link’s brow furrowed at the sound of all this. “Are you serious? That seems a rather silly rule to me…”

“It might seem silly to you, naked chef,” chimed in a voice from behind him. He spun around, and his eyes lit up with recognition. “…But someone as attractive as you are would be instantly smothered by women the moment he entered!”

“Asha!” Link immediately ran up and embraced his old friend. “It’s been quite some time. How are you?”

Asha smiled back as they pulled away. “Greetings! Or should I say, ‘vasaaq’! …I think…” she rubbed her chin, unsure of her use of Gerudo terminology. "Whatever. Anyway, I’ve never been better!” She glanced around, shrugged. “It’s a little bit too warm for my liking here… but the hot sun is doing wonders for my tan!”

The three Gerudo bid Link goodbye - with a hearty ‘sav’orq!’ - as they left the oasis and headed back for Gerudo Town. Link took some time to catch up with Asha as they attended to Epona’s wounds. She gently soothed Epona with her hand as she spoke with Link.

“She’s a beautiful horse…” Asha said. “In fact… she reminds me of the old legends of the ancient hero! “ she winked. “It seems you’ve paid a visit to ‘ol Malanya, eh?”

Link finished bandaging the brace to Epona’s leg, wiped the sweat from his brow. “It’s a long story…. But more or less, that’s the case.”

He looked around the desert oasis, stared at the pool of water at its center, and sighed.

“So much has happened since we last met… I don’t even know where to begin-”

Asha waved him off. “We can catch up later. Seems you have more pressing concerns to deal with at the moment!”

Link nodded, pulled out his slate, tapped around a bit. Asha smiled at him.

“I can see that you two are finally getting along!” she said, gesturing towards Link’s slate. He looked up briefly.

“Ah right, well, we’ve reached a bit of an understanding for the time being,” he replied. He continued to poke through his slate, and finally found what he was looking for. He turned the screen to face Asha. Some of Purah’s research notes appeared on the screen, along with a very clear picture
of a great mechanical beast.

It was quite large, even in the schematics he showed her. Like Vah Ruta it was brown and black in color and adorned with ancient Sheikah patterns all across its stonelike surface. It stood on four telescoping legs, its long neck bore a wide, flat head with six glowing eyes. The elaborate towers that decorated its body gave it the resemblance of walking desert palace.

“This... is my target.” Link explained.

“Vah Naboris!” Asha shouted. “I’ve heard all about the legends, from a traveling Rito bard. Perhaps you’ve met him...?”

Link nodded as Asha continued.

“Anyway... from what I heard, the divine beasts were used to attack Calamity Ganon all those thousands of years ago. But he’s taken control of them all...” she turned to face the open desert, pointed towards the great dust storm swirling in the distance. It towered menacingly over the distant landscape.

“Naboris is responsible for all that. It’s been stomping around uncontrollably. This storm has persisted for a number of years now, according to the locals I’ve spoken with. They live in fear that Naboris will eventually make its way here. And any who try to approach it are threatened with its lightning strikes...”

Link merely shrugged. “It’s just like with Vah Ruta, back in Zora’s Domain. The machines are being possessed by Ganon’s influence. He’s holding the spirits of the old champions hostage...” he smiled, clasping the shoulder of his Zora armor.

“But! I was able to bring Ruta back to our side. I’m quite confident I can do the same here-”

As if in response, a deep noise rumbled across the desert from the direction of the dust cloud. A deep purple glow began to shine out from its center, and Link switched to the scope function of his slate to take a closer look. As he and Asha peered closer, the great mechanical beast finally emerged. It marched across the desert on its four towering legs, striding in matched step. Each heavy stomp kicked up more and more dust. Lightning strikes arced all around it, threatening any would-be attackers.

Link turned back to Asha, his confidence unwavering. “I need to get into Gerudo Town and see Riju. According to my friend’s research notes, the Gerudo Chief possesses an item that may allow me to approach Naboris safely...” He frowned. “But with men... er, with voe being banned from entering... I can’t imagine how I’m going to pull this off without having to sneak my way in...”

As he said this, a sinister grin suddenly appeared across Asha’s face...

It was a full day’s trip across the desert just to get to Gerudo Town. For Link it felt more like three. Each and every step in the soft, hot sand required twice as much energy as normal. But with sheer determination and force of will, Link managed the trip with plenty of daylight to spare.

He’d spent the previous day in the desert oasis resting at an inn and stocking up on supplies. Beedle, the friendly, big-nosed traveling merchant, resupplied Link with a fresh stock of arrows and food. Leaving Epona and Inferno with Asha to look after, he headed out the next morning with a pair of fresh legs, a nice full belly, and a rather heavy spirit.

A shrine had risen up along the wall just outside of Gerudo Town, and Link took the opportunity to
activate it and complete its trials. He was a little more comfortable with the knowledge that he could teleport back here at any time - but he was far less comfortable with the ‘solution’ to his silly predicament...

*This better work, Asha...* he thought to himself, as he finished changing into his new outfit. Despite her stocky, short build, Asha’s clothes fit Link rather well... though not without a few adjustments to the shirt. Among other things.

“You’ll want to expose your midriff…” she had explained. “As for your trousers... the tighter the better! And seeing as you haven’t shaved in a few days... I recommend you cover your face as well.”

Link examined his reflection against one of the metallic boxes he’d found in the shrine. His hair had grown quite long in the last few months, so he kept it down and flowing out behind him. He wrapped a small handkerchief around his freshly-shaved face, tied his flowery shirt behind him, adjusted his tights to be as form-fitting as possible.

And he sighed.

In his younger days, Link had always lamented his rather feminine-looking physique. And he had received quite a bit of grief for it during his days at the Knight Academy.

But it was certainly coming in handy now.

“Here goes nothing…” he said aloud, trying to sound as ladylike as possible. He hopped on the elevator platform and made his way back to the surface, ready to enter Gerudo Town.

After stepping onto the blazing desert sands, he began to walk towards the town entrance. As he traveled along the town walls, he glanced up at the imposing city before him.

It was really quite breathtaking. Palm trees were scattered amongst the primitive stone buildings. A large three-columned rock formation stood in the back of the city, pouring precious water down to the citizens below. He imagined that the palace which housed Riju would be located somewhere beneath it.

Soon, he arrived at the front gate where two large Gerudo guards stood watch. Link took a deep breath, prepared to approach them. He opened his mouth to speak, but a hand suddenly grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“Wow! What have we here!”

Link spun around, stared dully at the source of the voice. It was an overweight young man, dressed in a purple shirt and tan pants. His puffy cheeks were flush with red, likely caused by the sun’s bright rays.

*Or at least, I hope that’s what it is...* Link thought.

“*Ahem. The name’s Benja,”* the man said. “And I gotta wonder... what’s a pretty thing like you doing all the way out here?” His blush continued to deepen as he spoke.

*Nope, it’s not.* Link sighed.

“None of your business,” he muttered. He found it better to speak curtly, if only to mask the distinct lack of femininity in his voice. Benja didn’t seem to notice.
“A woman of few words. Excellent. As for me, I’m… well, researching. And stuff. Want to hear more? Perhaps you’d like to go find a… quiet place and—”

“What I’d like, is for you to take your hand off my shoulder,” Link said, grasping Benja’s hand and crushing it with a firm grip.

Benja yelped loudly, flapping his hand in pain. Link was pretty sure he’d dislocated a few of his fingers with that squeeze, but Benja gave his best miserable effort to to hide his intense pain.

“That’s….mmmmmm…. quite a grip you’ve got there, vai—”

But Link had already turned and walked away, heading straight for the front gates once more. Despite his disgust, Link was at least pleased to know that his disguise was working-

“Sa-sa-sa… sav’saaba!” yelled another voice. Link turned to his left and saw yet another man, long-haired and scrawny, running straight for him. He rolled his eyes as the stranger approached.

“S-so yeah, hey, I’m Bozai,” he adjusted his black spectacles dramatically. “I’m thirty-five, single, and I LOVE jogging. Especially on sand…”

Link shrugged. “And I’m in a hurry. Goodbye.” He gave a quick glance behind him, saw that Benja was slowly approaching as well.

I’ve had just about enough of this. He began to walk straight for the Gerudo guards at the front gate, as Bozai continued to speak from behind him.

“S-so… you out here on your own? Pretty rough and tumble place… wanna hang out with me a while?”

Link wasn’t one to lose his temper particularly easy. But something about these guys, and their ridiculously pathetic persistence, filled him with incredible irritation. He spun on his heels, rolled up his sleeves, and started after Bozai to finally shut him up…

But a dark-skinned figure sped past him in a flash, beating him to the punch.

“That’s enough of this, voe!”

Bozai’s eyes widened behind his spectacles as he found himself with a Gerudo Spear’s sharp tip pointed right in the center of his face. One of the guards had apparently left her post, eager to defend a fellow vai.

“And that goes for you as well,” she said, gesturing towards Benja. “I have had my fill of your prowling these last few weeks. You’re lucky I don’t crush you where you stand.”

Beneath his mask, Link couldn’t help but smirk at the ridiculous scene.

“B-b-but, I was just trying to… be friends—” Bozai began. But the Gerudo guard held out a hand to shush him.

“Begone with you! And if I see you again… you will not be so lucky. Mark my words—”

Both men left the entrance in a huff, stopping one last time to get a glance at Link before departing across the desert sands in the direction of the oasis.

Satisfied, the Gerudo guard returned to her post.
“These voe have been an absolute *pestilence* here for some time now,” she explained. “And one as beautiful as you is, unfortunately, an easy target out here in the desert.” She placed her hand across her chest as she spoke. “But I promise, you will be safe here within these walls. What is your name, young vai? I have not seen you before...”

Link scoured his brain for names, panicking for a second. He decided on the very first female name that came to his mind.

“MIPHA! *Ahem,* my... name is Mipha.” He found his voice adjusting to its new higher pitch, though it still felt quite a bit unnatural.

“I see. Vasaaq, *Mipha*.” The guard pulled her spear towards her body, stepping out of the way of the entrance to Gerudo Town. Her partner did the same.

“Please enjoy your stay!”

Link held his hand up in respect as he passed them, wiping the sweat from his brow as he finally made his way into the marketplace of Gerudo Town. He couldn’t help but feel a distinct sense of guilty pleasure with his successful entrance. It was a feeling of profound anonymity, the chance to be someone entirely new. If only for a time-

“Oh hey, it’s Link! You made it in!”

*So much for that.*

“Hello there, Frelly.” Link said. "Guess my cover’s already blown.” He looked around, saw that nobody was in earshot. “I don’t suppose you’re here to turn me in?”

Frelly laughed. “Oh not at all, not at all. Your secret is safe with me!” She winked. “Although I have to say, you make a pretty convincing little Hylian vai!”

Link wasn’t sure how to feel about this, so he remained silent.

“Actually,” Frelly continued, “I’ve grown a bit fond of you. So I’m here to help! But only on one condition...”

Link shrugged. “And that is...?”

“You'll have to rent a sandseal from me before you leave! Twenty rupees!”

Link laughed. “At risk of having to cross that barren desert on foot again, I’ll gladly take you up on that offer.”

“Wonderful!” She put her arm around Link’s neck and pointed straight through the marketplace. “Just follow the main road through town. You should eventually end up at the base of that tri-columned rock there. Riju should be in there... though as I said before, I can’t guarantee you’ll be granted an audience.”

“I’ll figure something out. Thanks.”

And with that, the pair split up. Link made his way through the bustling marketplace. He was surprised to see how busy it was, noting the countless number of female Hylians and female Rito wandering about. He even spotted a pair of Gorons, who were clearly male. Link decided not to let his mind wander *too* much speculating on how they were allowed in.
A multitude of conversations flooded Link’s ears from all around the town as he walked...

“Do you sell any poultry here?” a female Rito asked a nearby meat vendor.

“Oh, these clothes are adorable! Do these come in black?” asked a female Hylian at a clothing stall.

“I got dumped again.” said a gruff-sounding Gerudo. “Let’s hit up the Canteen. I’m feeling like downing a few Noble Pursuits, drown out my sorrows. Y’know.”

“It’s… only five o’clock…” replied her friend.

“Good. That means more drinking time…”

Link shook his head. A hard drink sure does sound great right about now… he thought, as he finally exited the marketplace and entered a much quieter street. Gerudo Town was quite a bit larger than he had expected, but he still felt a familiar sense of encouragement that some places in Hyrule were still yet thriving, even after the Calamity.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, he arrived at the front entrance of the palace. A pair of tall guards flanked the main doorway, just as he expected. Link decided not to waste any time and strolled right up the stairs towards them.

Both guards dropped their spears to their sides, blocking Link’s way.

“What business do you have with Riju, outsider?” said the first guard.

Link cleared his throat, adjusted his speaking voice in his head.

“My name… is Mipha. And I have important news for the Chieftain.” Link felt a twinge of guilt at using Mipha's name as his own, but he shrugged it off.

The second guard shook her head. “Lady Riju is far too busy with internal matters to be dealing with anything from outside these town walls. However, we would be more than happy to deliver your message for you. In due time, that is.”

Link frowned. “You don’t understand. I have to see her in-person…”

“That’s enough.” Said the first guard. “This conversation is over…” She paused. “Wait a second, what’s that?”

The second guard glanced up and noticed a strange, tanned figure running across the courtyard of the palace. The figure was a man, at least according to how he dressed. And he appeared to be chasing someone else. Someone familiar…

... Frelly?!

“Help, help!” yelled Frelly. “It’s a voe inside the walls!”

The two guards sprung into action, vaulting from the top of the stairs and chasing after Frelly and her ‘voe’ attacker - who Link could now clearly identify as Frelly’s mother Kohm, dressed in men’s clothes. He stifled a laugh, turned around, and strolled unhindered into the entrance of the palace.

"Hmmm... yet another traveler... how did you get in here?"

Link walked carefully across the ornate rug in the throne room of the Gerudo palace. A large stone
chair, comically oversized compared to the individual sitting on it, sat under enormous tapestries in the back of the room.

The individual was wearing an elaborate gold headpiece atop her fiery red hair. She appeared to be the one he was searching for; Lady Riju, the Chief of the Gerudo.

*She’s… way younger than I expected.*

In spite of her fancy golden jewelry, Riju was otherwise quite similar to her fellow Gerudo in appearance - the only exception being that she was far shorter than her peers.

The chief’s eyes looked over Link, settling on the Sheikah Slate he bore on his hip.

"Oh. It looks like you have something rather interesting there…” she said. "Seems you are more than just some common traveler."

Link dared to approach closer, seeing that there were no guards currently in the room.

“What’s your name?” Riju asked Link.

For a split-second Link debated which of his ‘names’ he should give to Riju. But in the end, he decided not to hide anymore. Not with so much at stake.

“Link,” he said. “My name is Link.”

"I see. And what is it you've come all the way here to tell me, Link?" She held her hands up in a welcoming gesture. "My guard, Buliara, is off using the restroom I presume. So you have a few moments to speak your piece."

Link nodded. “Frankly… I can calm Naboris. That is my objective. But I need your help.”

“Eh? And what makes you so sure,” Riju replied, “that you are capable of accomplishing such a thing? If I recall, the only people who could ever control them were the Champions from long ago. And they all died in the Calamity…”

“I’ve already appeased Vah Ruta with my own power. Because… well, you see, I’m-”

“Hah. You’re the Hylian Champion.” Riju interrupted. "I have heard the legends. After the Calamity, the princess of Hyrule placed a fallen swordsman into a deep sleep. I can only assume... somehow... that you are that same swordsman?" She giggled lightly. “And I also assume… that you haven’t truly swapped genders in your slumber either?”

Link looked down at his outfit and shrugged. He didn’t offer a reply.

"As you clearly know…” Riju continued, “A voe within our walls is a great crime. But a voe who is a Champion...” She grinned. “Well, that Sheikah Slate on your hip proves everything I need to know. And I could never mistreat a friend of Lady Urbosa. If you're here to help with Naboris, then we are allies.” Her calm, stoic demeanor returned to her instantly. “You must have seen it on the way here. Divine Beast Vah Naboris, cloaked in a massive sandstorm, hurling lightning at any who dare approach. We have to do something to stop it, but we have yet to find any way to appease it on our own. If you are truly a Champion, perhaps you will be able to enter Naboris and calm its anger, and-"

She paused, as she noticed Link staring to his left absentmindedly. He wasn't listening to her at all, so she followed his gaze. Along the wall of the throne room hung a set of beautiful golden weapon
which seemed to have captured his interest. Riju gestured at them, but Link seemed to totally ignore her.

“Those… belonged to our Lady Urbosa,” Riju explained. “The Scimitar of the Seven, and the Daybreaker Shield. Perhaps you recognize them…?”

But Link couldn’t hear her. His eyes were glazed over, his breath briefly froze, and he quickly passed into a waking dream.

“...All right, boy. Come at me. Let’s see what you’re made of…”

Urbosa had longed for this moment for many months now - the opportunity to have a sparring session with the young Hylian Champion. As expected, he truly held his own against the seasoned Gerudo warrior. She couldn’t help but marvel at his technique, his efficiency, his natural ability with the blade. But Urbosa was no pushover herself. Armed with her scimitar and shield, she was quite capable of parrying many of Link’s strikes with the Master Sword.

Both fighters easily simulated killing blows against each other at times, and both found creative ways to get the better of the other. They continued this dance of blades for several hours, never stopping to rest.

Drenched in sweat and growing weary under the intense midday Gerudo sun, Urbosa knew that Link wasn’t about to slow down anytime soon. And if they kept this pace, one of them would surely collapse.

So she folded.

“That’s enough, boy. Let’s have a break…”

Link nodded in agreement, resheathing the Master Sword on his bare back and taking a seat right there on the desert sand. A pair of Gerudo children ran up to offer water to the pair. The two drank heartily as Urbosa took a spot next to Link and sighed.

“I am not one who is easily impressed, Link. So take it as a compliment when I say… that your swordsmanship is pretty adequate.”

Link smiled at her, said nothing. Urbosa looked over to a nearby tree where Zelda lay sound asleep. She grinned widely.

“Seems your relationship with the princess is vastly improved! Glad to see it.”

Link just shrugged in response.

“Remember the last time you were here?” Urbosa continued. “That must have been, oh, two, three months ago? Zelda was so incredibly angry with you… she rode all the way south from Hebra on her own. I still can’t believe how quickly you caught up to her…”

To this, Link finally responded - much to Urbosa’s surprise.

“Well, I am getting paid for this after all,” he said. “The last thing I want is to lose my bonus if something happens to her.”

Urbosa reared back and laughed raucously. “Oh yes, yes. I’m quite certain your only concern is with money…” Link actually gave a half-smile back, and Urbosa’s attention turned back to the
sleeping Zelda.

“I guess we’d better get a move on. Vah Naboris isn’t going to fix herself after all…” Urbosa paused for a moment, then smiled again.

“This never gets old.” She raised her right hand in the air, letting loose a loud snap with her fingers. Instantly, her powers activated; a crackle of lightning struck the ground near them, shaking the earth with a tremendous rumble.

Zelda shot to her feet. “Gaaah!! What was that!? What’s happening!? What are-” She paused for a moment in realization, turning radish-red in the face in sheer embarrassment.

Urbosa laughed once more. And this time, Link himself had to resist the urge to join in.

“Urbosa’s fury strikes again!” Urbosa said. She winked at Zelda. The princess’s pouty face was really quite adorable, Link had to admit. And as she stamped her feet in playful disgust, Link turned to face the deactivated divine beast behind them.

He sighed internally. Once Vah Naboris was fully operational, all four of the beasts would be ready to defend against Calamity Ganon. But with the days growing darker... with the sudden increase of monster activity... and with the recent re-emergence of the Yiga Clan... Link was beginning to wonder if all their insane preparation would truly be enough in the end.

“And that should do it!” Zelda said, clapping her hands together. She reached up to wipe the sweat from her brow, leaving a dark smear of oil and grease across her forehead. Urbosa didn’t bother pointing it out.

“Urbosa, we are now clear to activate Vah Naboris once again. I’d quite like to test the walking mechanisms one last time, to at least ensure that they are now properly synced with the controls.”

“As you wish, princess.” The pair began to make their way to the control room, but Urbosa paused as she caught a glimpse of Link, far, far down in the oasis below Vah Naboris. He was playing with a group of small Gerudo children, all girls. They hopped and skipped around him, peppered him with questions, climbed all over him.

Yet Link did not appear at all bothered by their incessant teasing. In fact, he seemed to be having... fun. It seemed he was a complete natural when dealing with kids.

“That boy... really is something else,” Urbosa said, as Link began to sprint away from the group of laughing, stick-wielding girls.

Zelda nodded in agreement, but gave no reply. She simply looked down after the scene below them, smiling lightly. Urbosa noticed just how intently she stared at Link, how carefully she would study him any time he was near.

“He does care about you, you know.” Urbosa said. “Link, that is. It’s good to see you two getting along so well!”

Zelda blushed slightly at this. “Well, when you spend several months at a time traveling with someone, you really can’t help but become friends with that person. I suppose.”

Urbosa nodded. “True enough.” A mischievous smile suddenly crossed her face. “And sometimes, you really can’t help but do... certain other things with each other as well. Right?” Zelda’s slight blush evolved into total embarrassment as her prude nature kicked in.
“Lady Urbosa!” Zelda shouted. “That is quite a rude assumption to make!”

Urbosa laughed loudly. “What’s the problem? Cute boy, cute girl, loads of time alone together. Nobody could blame you at all if you decided to have a little… fun, right?”

“He is absolutely not that type of person!” Zelda huffed. “I—I’m not that type of person either! The thought never even crossed my mind…” she crossed her arms and continued to walk towards the control room, fuming all the more as she did.

Urbosa shrugged. She probably went a little overboard with the teasing this time, sure.

But a part of her intent… was really quite serious.

Zelda’s emotional restraint was incredibly evident, and it was becoming all the more obvious amidst the tension of recent days. With the princess’s inability to unlock her sealing powers being the focal point in their plan to defeat Calamity Ganon, Urbosa couldn’t help but speculate if there was some sort of connection there. And with so much at stake, she was ready to do everything she possibly could to draw Zelda’s repressed emotions out.

It was her duty, after all - both as the Gerudo Champion, as well as the princess’s dearest friend.

“Oh this?” Urbosa asked, holding up the strange object. “This… is what we call the Thunder Helm. It’s a prized relic of my people. I’ll show you how it works.”

The golden helmet carried a vague resemblance to Vah Naboris’s head, with six sapphire eyes adorning the front. Urbosa put the helmet on, turned to face Link and Zelda.

“You might want to stand back a bit…”

The two quickly backpedaled away from Urbosa as she struck her usual pose. Once the princess and her appointed knight were out of the way, Urbosa snapped her fingers. A bolt of lightning struck her directly this time, but then arced onto the surrounding ground around her in a massive, bright explosion. Link didn’t flinch, but Zelda was knocked backwards onto her rear in shock.

Urbosa laughed wildly as she removed the helmet. She was completely unharmed.

“And that’s your demonstration for today!” she said proudly. A group of nearby Gerudo children clapped at the entertaining scene. Urbosa took a playful bow, then turned to face Link and Zelda as they began to approach her.

“You two better get going,” she said. “I’m quite certain that your king will be expecting an update rather soon…”

Zelda frowned at this. “Lady Urbosa… the next meeting of the Champions is only a few weeks from today! I was hoping you might be able to travel with us…”

Urbosa shrugged. “Oh, don’t mind me. I’ll get there in time. Unfortunately, I have some matters to attend to before I depart.” She grinned slyly.

“And besides… I’d hate to get in the way of your… bonding sessions with your appointed knight.” She winked.

Link looked on in the distance, totally oblivious to Urbosa’s joke. Zelda turned bright red once
again, and quickly snatched up the Thunder Helm to distract herself with. Totally flustered, she
looked it over and immediately tried it on. It was just a little bit too big for her, and it sagged to the
side a bit as she wore it.

*Only then did Link look up at Zelda, noticing her silly appearance.*

*And only then did Link offer up a laugh of his own.*

“The Thunder Helm!” Link suddenly shouted.

Riju tilted her head in curiosity. “Ah, it seems you’ve remembered something-”

“The Thunder Helm is exactly what we need to assault Vah Naboris!” Link said. “Please tell me you
still have it!”

As he said this, a burly Gerudo guard darted across the room, tackling Link to the ground. He rolled
to the side, took a battle-ready pose, attempted to catch his breath. She’d taken all the wind out of him
with just her mild collision...

“Who are you?!” shouted the guard. "How did you get in here? What have you done to Lady Riju?!
I demand answers, vai."

Link was staring down the blade of a large Gerudo sword pointed directly at his forehead. It seemed
Riju’s guard, Buliara, had finally finished her business.

“That’s enough, Buliara. She’s a friend.”

Buliara scoffed animatedly at Link, retracting her sword a little as she did.

“This is why I hate allowing outsiders into your chambers, Lady Riju.” Buliara said, still fuming. “I
cannot trust this puny little vai.”

Link examined Riju's guard up and down as she spoke. She somehow looked even stronger than the
average Gerudo. And based on the pain he’d felt from her tackle... she most certainly was.

“I appreciate your efforts Lady Riju,” Link said. “But I think it’s safe to come clean. Buliara, I’m not
actually a-”

“This woman here,” Riju said, "Is going to retrieve the Thunder Helm for us.” She turned to face
Link. “Aren’t you now?”

Link raised an eyebrow. “You’re... going to have to elaborate on that one.”

At this, Buliara fully retracted her sword. “A-ha! So you’re going to undertake this suicide mission,
is that right?”

“I am?”

“You are.” Riju said. “Perhaps you are familiar with the Yiga Clan? Those dark Sheikah who insist
on fighting for Ganon? Well... it appears they’ve stolen our precious Gerudo heirloom. If you want
to attack Vah Naboris, then we’ll have to start there.”

Buliara laughed out loud at this. “This scrawny little vai... is going to infiltrate the Yiga Clan’s
hideout. Hilarious.” She patted Link on the back, a little bit too forcefully. “But I applaud your
bravery, young one.”
“I appreciate that…” Link coughed. "But listen, I’m not actually a va-

“In addition… to retrieving the Thunder Helm,” Riju interjected, “there’s also a few hostages that need rescuing. I was planning to send a few of our soldiers to take care of the job, but perhaps a one-woman show is all that we will need. Prove your worth. And maybe then we can start talking about calming Divine Beasts and all that…”

Link sighed. He’d do whatever he had to do to accomplish this mission of course. But…

“Well, one of our soldiers was kidnapped a while back.” Buliara explained. “They took her back to their hideout, in a canyon north of the desert. And… I believe there were two others…?”

“Two Sheikah children.” Riju said.

Now this caught Link’s attention. His eyes widened.

“Are you sure they were Sheikah?!” Link shouted, mouth agape.

“Mind your manners when addressing the Chief, vai!” Buliara snapped. But Riju waved her off, nodding at Link in acknowledgement.

“Our scouts reported that they were indeed. Two small children... white-haired… wearing traditional tan clothing. Unmistakeable.”

It can’t be! Dorian…

“Sorry… I… I have to go.” Link turned around suddenly, whipped out his Sheikah Slate. In seconds he had sprinted out of the throne room, immediately disappearing into thin air.

Riju and her guard sat there in silence for some time. And then Buliara finally spoke.

“That… was one strange and rude vai…” she said.

Riju smiled as she palmed her face incredulously.

Chapter End Notes

I never imagined I’d get this kind of following, but I’m glad to see it. Please continue to enjoy. Loads of insanity in store for this fic.

Entering a literal and figurative dry spell for Link and Mipha scenes. HOWEVER. Memories of Mipha Part Seven is coming sooner than you think. And it’s already shaping up to be quite fun.

In the meantime, I’ll see you in Chapter 25: Ghost
It was just before sundown on a stormy day in Kakariko Village. Despite the cold and rainy weather, Cado remained on guard at the foot of the steps leading to Impa’s home. It was the very least he could do... given his recent profound failure.

A bluish glow emanated from the nearby hilltop which was home to the ancient Sheikah Shrine.

*It seems Impa was right,* Cado thought to himself. A figure ran from the shrine and leapt off the hill, gliding swiftly with his paraglider straight towards him.

*Link has returned to us after all-*

He paused.

The young Hylian hero landed on the ground near Cado, sprinting right up to him. Link’s bright flowery shirt contrasted sharply with the gray backdrop of rain. His tights were… exceptionally form-fitting.

The bewildered sheikah guard looked him up and down, started to ask, thought better of it. He buried his face in his hands.

“Just...just go,” he said.

Link gave a nod in response and ran straight up the stairs to Impa’s home, his gorgeous long hair flowing majestically in the stormy wind...

“Impa!” Link shouted, as he burst through the double-doors that served as the entrance to her home. “Where’s Dorian?!”

“I’m... right here,” said a voice from upstairs. The elderly Sheikah guard made his way down the steps from the second floor. He looked like he’d seen better days. Large, dark bags were present below his eyes. He looked malnourished, as if he hadn’t eaten anything in some time.

Impa spoke to Link as Dorian approached.

“I can see from your getup...” she said, “That you have finally made it to Gerudo Town...”

Impa’s usual calm, cheery attitude was tarnished by an undercurrent of subtle lamentation. Link decided it would be best to simply cut to the chase.

“Is it true?” Link asked. “About... Dorian’s children-”

“Yes.” Dorian interjected. “Koko and Cottla… I... I failed them. They’ve been taken.”
Link heard a quiet sob nearby. He glanced over, saw Paya sitting by a Sheikah orb - the ancient heirloom she’d been sworn to protect all her life. To his surprise, she didn’t hesitate to speak.

“It...it’s all our fault!” She suddenly burst into uncontrollable tears, as Impa hopped off from her stack of pillows and placed a hand on Paya’s shoulder. Dorian attempted to compose himself, knowing he needed to explain things clearly to Link.

“It happened while we were out searching for you. They… appeared to have been watching us for some time. The Yiga Clan, that is. They struck when Cado was alone, and at his most vulnerable—”

“They were seeking the heirloom!” Paya cried out, pointing towards the orb. “B-but… we hid it carefully before we left. And when Cado wouldn’t reveal its location to them… they… well, they took Dorian’s children instead!”

“I’m so sorry...” Link said. “If I hadn’t disappeared like I did... then maybe...”

But Dorian shook his head. “We made our choice, Link. None of us could have foreseen their plans. It is not your fault... it’s mine.” He pulled a note out from his back pocket and sighed as he showed it to Link. “They’ve left us an ultimatum. Either we deliver the Sheikah heirloom... and you ...” he paused. “...Or they kill Koko and Cottla.”

At this, Paya lost her composure entirely. She stood up and quickly made her way upstairs, sobbing as she did. Link wanted nothing more than to follow her up to her room, to embrace her and comfort her. But he knew it wouldn’t be much help.

“We were waiting for your return.” Impa said, as she walked up to Link and grasped his hand. “We need your help.”

“Absolutely.” Link said without hesitating. “Though... if you’re expecting me to turn myself and the heirloom in as exchange, I don’t think that’s going to work out in our favor. Not with the Yiga Clan.”

“You’re absolutely right.” said Dorian, dully. “The moment we arrive for the deal, they will capture the both of us, torture us... and then kill my children while we watch. That’s how they operate. I know this, because I—” he frowned.

“Well, I’m ...nevermind.”

From the moment he’d met Dorian, Link had his suspicions about the man. He’d known all along he was hiding something.

But now he needed to hear the truth from Dorian’s own mouth.

“Spit it out.” Link suddenly said. His voice was cold, stoic. He hated the sound of it. But he carried on.

“There’s something you’re not telling us. We need to know precisely what we’re getting into. For my safety, and especially for your own. So just say it.”

Dorian glanced at Link, then at Impa, then he sighed loudly. “...Very well. I shall tell you.”

He began to remove his jacket, pulled off his undershirt to reveal his chest. Tattooed straight across it... was an upside-down Sheikah symbol.

The emblem of the Yiga Clan.
“As you’ve probably gathered by now… I was not always allied with the Sheikah tribe,” Dorian explained. “I… am part of the Yiga. Or at least, I used to be.”

Impa appeared nonplussed by this revelation, while Dorian continued.

“One day, I met the most incredible woman who blessed me with my two children. And so I tried to change my ways. Tried to leave the clan. But the Yiga... they took my wife's life as punishment!”

Link cringed at the thought of this, knowing full well the pain of losing someone he loved. He nodded mournfully.

“I couldn't let them hurt my children, so I used my position as gatekeeper to gather information for the Yiga. In exchange for safety... I told them about you and the village. But my grief over losing my wife consumed me, and I finally decided to cut ties with the Yiga completely! And though I forfeited my life the moment I left their organization, I decided I could protect my children from the Yiga. I wasn't afraid of them.” He began to tear up again.

“But I should have been! I should not have underestimated their cruelty. I'm… so sorry Lady Impa. I’ve let you down…”

Link shook his head as he placed a hand on Dorian’s shoulder. “We all make mistakes Dorian. We all do things we later regret, in order to protect those we care about the most. We... all have ghosts that come back to haunt us…”

Impa also approached Dorian, nodding in his direction. “I had my suspicions myself when you first came to us. But I trusted you. And I still do!” She suddenly smiled. “So what matters now… is what you intend to do about it.”

Link nodded. “We have no choice but to attack,” he said. “If what you say is true then we need to strike immediately, before they know what hit them.”

Dorian wiped the tears from his eyes, smiled at Link. “I... was hoping you’d say that. We prayed for your return. I had intended to make my way to Gerudo Desert on my own tomorrow… but with you here, we can teleport there instantly.”

Link raised an eyebrow. “But I thought it was dangerous to use the slate’s warp functionality with multiple people…” he said.

“I understand the risks… but we do not have any time to lose…” said Dorian. “The alternative would have far worse consequences.” He walked over to a nearby cabinet, retrieved a set of weapons from its interior. “We depart immediately-”

“Not without me!” Paya yelled from upstairs. Link’s eyes widened as the young Sheikah girl descended the staircase... armed to the teeth with weapons and armor.

Link held his hand up in disapproval. “No way. I can’t allow it. It’s dangerous enough to have Dorian accompanying me. And besides,” he gestured at the Sheikah heirloom nearby, “aren’t you responsible for guarding this?”

Paya shrugged. “A s-silly heirloom is nothing when weighed against the value of a life. I cannot forgive the Yiga for what they’ve done. S-such a crime is… well, it’s unforgivable!” Her arms fell to her sides as she yelled, and a set of throwing knives were scattered across Impa’s floor from her open hands. She bent over and scrambled to pick them up.
Link had never seen Paya in such a determined, angry state. He had no idea she was even capable of any semblance of pent-up rage. But having experienced her strength firsthand... he wasn’t about to argue with her. He closed his eyes, stood in silence for a time. And after dwelling on his thoughts for a moment, he hesitantly gave her his answer.

“...Very well then. Let’s move.”

Link changed out of his female attire, once again donning his old Sheikah armored top. He kept his tights on however, feeling that they offered him the best flexibility for the mission they were about the undertake. Dorian and Paya lent him a Sheikah stealth mask to complete the ensemble as well. This mission was, after all, quite personal for the Sheikah Clan - and Link fully intended to honor that.

The trio stood in a circle in Impa’s room, ready to warp back to Gerudo Desert.

“May the goddess protect you,” Impa said, as Link tapped around on his Sheikah Slate.

Link looked up, smiled.

“Likewise.”

In a burst of blue light, the trio disappeared from Impa’s eyes.

Night had firmly settled in Gerudo Desert as the group arrived at the shrine just outside of Gerudo Town. After examining themselves to ensure they’d arrived in one piece, they began to make their way north to the hideout of the Yiga clan.

“I’ve memorized this entire area,” Dorian explained. “It should take us several hours to reach the canyon on foot, so I suggest we bundle up now.” He produced a set of coats from his bag, offered one to Paya and Link.

The night air was already growing frigid, but Link wasn’t particularly bothered by it. So he declined the offer. As he glanced over, he noticed Paya shivering violently. He grabbed one of the coats from Dorian and draped it over her shoulders.

“Are you… sure that you’re up for this?” Link asked, as Paya thanked him for his gesture. “I understand if you want to turn back...”

“Y-y-you mustn’t worry about me...Link....” Paya said. “I have nothing to fear if... well, if you’re around anyway.” She trembled violently, as if she were trying to shake all of her emotions out of her system. Her voice suddenly turned cold and stoic as she continued to speak. “Besides. I... have been trained since birth for this, for the very moment my skills would be needed for the benefit of the Sheikah clan. For the very day I would become a tool to destroy evil.” She paused, her eyes narrowed. “Th-they murdered… my parents long ago. They killed Dorian’s wife. They’ve tortured and killed countless innocents. Now, they’ve kidnapped children! Hylia knows what they might have done to them by now....” She shook her head again. “But they must pay for what they have done! Their crimes cannot go unpunished. And so... I promise you this...”

Link was mildly startled as Paya flashed him a serene, confident grin.

“...we will destroy them all before the sun rises.”

The freezing, dark desert night wore on, illuminated only by the eerie yellow glow of the half-moon
in the sky. In the deep canyon which lead to the entrance of the mighty Yiga Clan, foot soldiers made their usual patrols along the cliffs, careful to watch out for any intruders.

It had been some time since the Gerudo army had made any significant efforts to penetrate their fortress to retrieve their stolen item, so the Yiga Clan remained quite lax. Aside from a few random travelers that had strayed into the canyon in the previous week - who were promptly slaughtered upon arrival - the recent days had been rather uneventful.

One particular Yiga footsoldier, dressed in his red and brown jumpsuit and single-eyed mask, strolled carefully down the canyon wall. His ears perked up as he heard a painful shriek echo across the canyon.

But it was promptly silenced.

The soldier figured it was simply yet another unfortunate traveler who had met his quick demise. No cause for alarm. Still, he found it necessary to check out the scene - if only to revel in the sight of the bloody, brutal kill. As he approached the source of the scream, he heard a quiet noise from behind. He spun around, drew his sword, saw nothing.

“Who goes there?” he said.

No response.

He shrugged and turned once more, continuing on to the site of the expected kill. In the dull moonlight he was able to just make out what appeared to be a corpse lying atop the desert sands. The body’s blood pooled around it, reflecting the moon’s glow on its surface. The soldier gave a sinister smile as he approached; but the smile quickly faded as he arrived ever closer to the site.

It wasn’t a random intruder.

It was one of his fellow guards.

He reached behind himself, prepared to sound the horn to alert his clan members of the incident—SHUNK.

A long curved Sheikah blade erupted through his chest from behind him. He felt his heart shudder. He struggled to breath as the blade was pulled straight back out from where it came.

The soldier immediately collapsed on the ground in agony, but managed to roll onto his back to catch a glimpse of his killer.

...But there was no one there.

Choking on his own blood and with his life slowly leaving him, he stared at the moon above and laughed silently to himself.

Further down the canyon, another pair of Yiga footsoldiers stood watch. They were waiting for their lead patrolman to return. But he was ten minutes late now.

Confused and angry, one of them began to leave her post to investigate. But before she could take even a single step, a shock arrow whistled through the cool night air and struck her straight in her left eye. She died before she even hit the ground.

Alarmed, her partner drew his own bow and took cover, scanning the horizon for the source of the
He dared not shout or scream, hoping to stay hidden - at least until he could figure out just who or what was attacking him. His eyes were well-trained for night patrols, so he figured he could easily make out any strange visitors in the distance.

Yet he felt something, deep down in his heart. Something he hadn’t felt in some time; the slightest twinge of fear.

He did his best to shake it off.

As he continued to peer down the canyon, he finally spotted movement - a small silhouette leaping from the wall in front of him. With his duplex bow in-hand, he let a pair of arrows fly, striking the distant figure square in the chest. He heard a grunt and a small thud. Grinning to himself, he drew his knife and sprinted down the canyon wall to finish the job.

But as he leapt from the wall and descended upon the figure below, he realized his grave mistake.

He’d struck a coat.

He landed on the ground, spun around, prepared to retreat from the exposed desert surface. But he was too late. He let out a fearful yelp as he came face-to-face with the cold, dead eyes of the mysterious intruder.

The encounter was brief. A flash of a sword, a sickening sound of blade meeting flesh, and the Yiga soldier collapsed on the ground. His severed head landed nearby, still bearing a twisted evil smile.

Throughout the canyon, Yiga clan members were steadily dropping like flies. And though the lack of communication from their fellow guards was worrying, the rate at which they were slain offered no time to sound an alarm.

Before long, Link, Paya, and Dorian had quickly and efficiently finished off the last of the canyon’s patrols. They reached the end of the canyon and began to carefully make their way through a narrow pathway, eventually arriving at a tall cavern. In its center stood a strange shrine, surrounded by torches. The trio made quick work of a lone Yiga archer and began to examine their surroundings.

“This is the entrance to the clan hideout,” Dorian said. He pointed at the large tapestries draped along the walls, each bearing the mark of the Yiga Clan. A set of stairs led to each one.

“The doorway should be hidden behind one of these tapestries, although I cannot recall which one. We’ll want to be very cautious here. There are sure to be traps hidden behind each of these-”

Link retrieved an arrow from his quiver and set it on fire, shooting one of the tapestries in one smooth motion. It immediately burst into flames.

“What in Hylia’s name are you thinking?!” Dorian shouted.

“Not wasting any time…” Link said. The tapestry disintegrated, revealing a hidden passageway behind it. He shrugged, and began to make his way there. Paya quickly sprinted after him without a second thought.

Dorian shook his head. “How this boy has survived all this time, is beyond me.” he muttered, as he followed them up the stairway leading to the hideout of the Yiga Clan.

They made their way down a torchlit hall, and Link took the opportunity to take stock of his weaponry. His trusty Ceremonial trident remained fastened to his back. His quiver was full of an
assortment of arrows - along with a new set of bomb arrows courtesy of Paya. He also had an Eightfold Sheikah blade on his waist. Dorian had insisted he take it with him, just in case.

He wasn’t near as over-prepared for this mission as Paya was. But it would suffice.

Up ahead they spotted a set of small cells along the walls. They were surprised to find them unguarded, but they proceeded cautiously nonetheless. And as they peered through the bars of each of the dimly-lit holding cells, they finally spotted one of the captives.

A Gerudo soldier sat in the center of one of the cells, lying on her side. She was in rough shape, malnourished and bruised. She was bleeding from her head, and from the looks of her hands it appeared that each of her fingernails had been ripped out one after another. She stared weakly through the bars of the cell, then laughed.

“Back for more, eh?” she rasped. “Well bring it on. I can take it. I-”

She paused when she caught sight of the trio’s uniforms.

"Wait a minute... are you... Sheikah? What are you doing here? This is the hideout of those Yiga scum who stole our Thunder Helm. If they spot you… there’s no telling what they’ll do."

Link pulled his mask down to speak, but Dorian cut him off.

“My name is Dorian. I am part of the Sheikah Clan. Please, tell me… my- my children have been captured by the Yiga. Have you perhaps… seen them?”

The Gerudo prisoner laughed once more, though a bit stronger this time. Link noticed that she was clutching a bundle of blankets between her arms.

“Ha! Children you say? Yes. They’re right here.” She began to unwrap the bundle in her arms. “Or at least… what’s left of them anyway.”

Dorian cried out mournfully as a bundle of white hair emerged from the blankets. A pair of bruised and black-eyed faces popped out from inside, and they lit up as they recognized their father’s concerned expression.

Dorian curled his fists, drew his own large Sheikah blade, and sliced open the wooden bars of the cell. He dropped his weapon and entered the cell, snatching up his kids as he did.

Paya let out a small gasp when Dorian emerged into the torchlight, finally offering a clear glimpse of the Sheikah children. They were sickly, pale, bruised. Their ribs were visible on the surface of their scarred and starving bodies. They winced painfully in their father’s welcomed embrace. Link and Paya both began to visibly shake with pure rage at the sight of this, while Dorian maintained his composure. But just barely.

“As you can see…” said the Gerudo prisoner, “our stay has been… less than pleasant.” She limped from her cell and pointed down the dark hallway leading further into the hideout. “We’ve managed to survive on rats and insects that find their way in here on occasion. Every day… they pulled us from our cell and beat us mercilessly. Your children were no exception. I did my best to protect them, I really did... but… well…”

Dorian turned back to face her, placing his hand on her shoulder. He smiled grimly.

“You have my thanks. Truly. And fear not, we’ll be out of here in no time. Link, Paya, I suggest we proceed quietly.” He spun around to face them. “Be careful not to be seen, or else-”
He froze.

They were already gone.

Dorian sighed loudly, somberly whispering to himself.

“Oh, Hylia…

...please forgive them…”

A large, muscular Yiga guard patrolled the first room next to the jail cells of the clan hideout. Before he could react, a wave of throwing knives punctured him all across his body. An ornate trident sailed through the air and pierced him straight through the chest. Link sprinted across the room and kicked the clan member in the face as he ripped his trident back out. He hit the ground running and continued on to the next guard.

With rapid speed, Paya made it there first. The second guard swung blindly with his windcleaver sword in her direction, sending a piercing gust of wind in her direction. She rolled under the strike, leapt to her feet, then quietly slit the guard’s throat as Link spun past her and drew his bow. The final guard had her own bow and arrow trained on Paya, but Link was simply too fast for her. He’d fired off three arrows in rapid succession before she had time to even think about firing her own. All three arrows made contact with her head, piercing her brain and killing her instantly.

The first room was already clear. But there was no time to waste.

Twenty Yiga footsoldiers patrolled the main room of the hideout, guarding a bounty of bananas and stolen treasure. Despite hearing a commotion in the next room they remained at their posts. It was unlikely that anyone could have penetrated this far into their sacred fortress; surely the noise was the other soldiers having another ‘session’ with their captives.

One lone Yiga archer stood in front of the doorway leading into the main room. He trained his head to the door, eager to overhear the pained and tortured screams of their Gerudo captive. Music to his ears.

A massive blue explosion suddenly rocked the entrance, launching the archer across the room. Link and Paya burst through the doorway and charged the room without a second thought. A nearby guard drew his sword, just in time for Link to stab through him with his trident. Several panicked archers stood atop the high scaffolding of the main room, preparing to shoot arrows down on these surprising intruders.

Link thought quickly. Using the Yiga patrolman’s body as a shield, he ducked down and continued on towards the center of the room as a volley of arrows rained down on the body of the archers’ fellow clan member. Paya leapt up the scaffolding, drawing her own sword as she did. In seconds the bodies of each archer were sliced into ribbons.

Another distant archer across the room fired off a single arrow, which buried itself into Paya’s shoulder. She took no notice. As Link tossed the arrow-riddled Yiga body to the ground, his eyes focused on another large Yiga warrior - a blademaster - in front of him. He drew a bomb arrow from his quiver and let it fly. Paya vaulted from the scaffolding and prepared to embed her sword into the head of the blademaster below, but her target suddenly exploded violently just before she landed. She stared wild-eyed at Link in mild irritation, but shook the emotions off. There were still many more clan members for them to dispatch after all.

By this time a loud alarm had been sounded throughout the fortress. Link could only hope that
Dorian had retreated by now, as a dozen more Yiga clan members appeared on the platforms above the main room of the hideout. Paya produced a smoke bomb from her pouch, tossed it on the ground in front of herself and Link, and waited.

“Bahahahahahaha! It does not matter how many of us you kill!” one of the clan members taunted. His laugh echoed across the walls of the large room.

“So long as we remain in our great lord Ganon’s favor, you will never-”

A shock arrow flew out from the center of the smoke, just missing the taunting Yiga warrior. He laughed maniacally once more at the missed shot. That is, until the shock arrow exploded behind him and fried his nervous system.

Link and Paya exited the smoke cloud in separate directions, each scaling the distant walls to reach the platforms above. Now on opposite sides of the room, Yiga clan members charged them one after another. And though these fighters were more skilled than the previous footsoldiers, the end result was still the same - they were cut down with little trouble. Blood began to stain the walls and floors of the upper platforms like a smattering of finger paint. Angry screams and shouts of pain reverberated throughout the hidden fortress. And as bodies plummeted to the ground below, slaughtered easily by this pair of presumed Sheikah intruders, a large figure suddenly entered the main room from the back. It was yet another blademaster - but this one was even more muscular than the previous ones. He wielded a pair of swords in each hand.

“You’ve been sent by that coward, Dorian, haven’t you?” the blademaster called out. Link spared a glance at the figure and sighed.

He was starting to get sick of these dramatic monologues.

After dispatching the final Yiga warrior in front of him, Link dropped down to the floor below to confront this new enemy. Across the room, Paya did the same. And as Link drew closer, it became obvious to him that this particular blademaster was one of the clan leaders.

“I am Baron, Master Kohga’s second-in-command,” the swordsman said. “Try as you might, you two will never be able to-”

“Let’s not drag this out.” Link coldly interrupted. He trained his bow at the Yiga’s head and fired immediately.

“...As you wish.”

Baron ducked. The explosive arrow sailed just past his head, blowing up a statue behind him. He rolled to his left and began to engage Paya in a swordfight.

Based on the ease and efficiency of his attacks, the man was clearly a disciplined swordsman. But so was Paya.

Link drew his trident and chased after Baron, marveling at Paya’s impressive speed as she dodged each of Baron’s lightning-fast sword swipes. Though considerably weaker than her opponent, Paya parried and dodged his strikes effortlessly.

Link sprinted forward and lashed out with his trident with one hand - one of Mipha’s classic techniques - but he only struck the air. Baron had disappeared in a puff of red smoke.

The pair stood back-to-back and scanned the room carefully. Despite the ease with which they had slaughtered his comrades, they weren’t taking any chances with this wily Yiga leader.
As Link expected, another puff of smoke erupted in the air above them. He and Paya both rolled out of the way as Baron materialized above them and swiped in their direction with his swords, both of which now glowed with power. Piercing gusts of air bounced off the ground where the pair had once stood, ricocheting towards them. The gusts sliced their torsos, drawing blood and briefly bringing them to their knees in pain.

Baron landed on the ground and bounded towards Link in a split second. Link barely had time to draw his Sheikah sword to parry Baron’s strike, but he managed to hold his footing. As their blades clashed, another gust of wind exploded out of the sword and gashed Link’s face. He shrugged it off. Using his opponent’s own weight against him, Link pulled his sword back, spun on his heels, and sliced Baron’s stomach with his sword. Baron gasped loudly and took another blind swipe at Link - but this time he was ready. He rolled to his left just as Paya leapt into the air behind Baron, extended her sword, and stabbed him straight through the chest.

She just barely missed his heart.

Grinning widely, Baron clutched the protruding Sheikah blade and spun quickly, launching Paya to the ground beside him. He was on her in a flash, swiping madly with his windcleaver blades at the now-unarmed Sheikah girl. Her clothes were being torn to shreds, exposing the deep gashes in her flesh that only seemed to grow in number with each of Baron’s strikes. She was losing a lot of blood, growing dizzier by the second. But she did her best to dodge his swipes as she finally drew a pair of knives from her waist to counter him.

Link drew his bow once more, trained an arrow on Baron’s head, and let it fly. The arrow struck Baron in the nape of his neck, but he was unaffected. Link fired off four more arrows, each one making contact with Baron; yet he still continued his relentless attack on Paya unabated. Link gritted his teeth in frustration, drew his trident and chased after this seemingly unkillable enemy in an effort to ward him off.

Fortunately, Link’s assistance was unneeded. Paya had seen enough.

She crossed her knives together, catching the blademaster’s downward sword strikes. One last gust of cutting wind gashed her face severely, but she held on. With a quiet grunt she ripped her knives apart, completely shattering both windcleaver blades in Baron’s hands.

Seeing an opening, she pulled her knives together again and stabbed upward towards the blademaster’s chest. This time her aim was true. Both knives pierced Baron’s heart simultaneously.

They stood there quietly for some time, neither one moving from their position. Link kept his trident aimed at Baron’s head, ready to strike him if he made any more moves.

But the Yiga leader began to laugh maniacally. He coughed up blood on Paya’s face as she finally withdrew her knives. He collapsed on the ground, rolled on his back, and closed his eyes.

“Two-on-one…” he gasped. “…is a bit dishonorable for the Sheikah Clan, is it not?”

But neither Link nor Paya responded. Link shrugged, lifted his trident high into the air, and delivered the final blow.

It was finished.

For a brief moment, Link’s eyes met Paya’s. Her left eye was swollen completely shut, gashed deeply by one of Baron’s wind strikes. It was very likely that she would never see out of that eye again.
Link began to approach her, but she held up her hand to stop him.

The job was still yet unfinished.

The Yiga hideout was like a maze, with traps and tricks greeting the pair with every turn. They managed to retrieve a map from one of the fallen clan members, but it was of little help to them. The map only marked the main rooms of the facility, and displayed none of the hideout’s hidden passageways and catacombs. Even a secret treasure room, where Link had expected the Thunder Helm to be housed, held nothing but chests full of bananas and exploding spikes. As they proceeded cautiously from room to room, bandaging their wounds as they did, they found themselves eerily alone in the dead silence. Still, neither one dared to speak. They were dead-focused, still pumping with adrenaline, still intensely angry.

So they carried on exploring, loosely using their map as a guide. And before long, they realized there was only one room left to survey: the training grounds of the Yiga Master Kohga.

It was the only remaining room marked on the map which they had not yet explored. The entrance, however, seemed impossible to find. Frustrated, Link turned to using the magnesis rune of his Sheikah slate to scan for any metallic objects or doors they may have missed. Sure enough, a hidden rotating wall was revealed in the treasure room of the Yiga hideout.

Link took a deep breath, nodded at Paya, and pushed the doorway open with magnesis.

A gust of cold mountain air greeted them as they entered, stinging their exposed skin and throbbing wounds. They found themselves walking into yet another massive canyon, dimly lit by red and yellow lanterns. Ropes and streamers were tied across across the canyon in decorative fashion, and an enormous ceremonial pit stood directly in the center.

A small chest sat directly in front of them, just waiting to be opened. Link had a hunch that the Thunder Helm was housed inside of it. And he was correct - from inside, he produced a golden helmet with six glowing eyes in the front. Just like in his vision.

His objective in-hand, Link knew it was just a matter of time before Master Kohga himself -

“Wahahahahahahahahaha!”

-finally arrived.

A puff of smoke and red papers appeared next to them. And when the dust settled, an overweight Yiga clan member stood before them. He grasped at his shoulder, rolled it around with a large creak, and groaned loudly. "So... who the heck are you guys? And what are you doing in my napping spot?!

He suddenly paused, shaking his head in disbelief.

"...Wait a minute.” He rubbed his mask vigorously and peered closer at Link’s hip. "That thing on your hip... is that... could it be a Sheikah Slate? If it’s a Sheikah Slate, then that means..."

“...It means I’m Link. The guy you’ve been searching for.” Link drew his trident and held it loosely at his side. “And based on your tone... you must be Kohga.”

“The one and only!” Kohga posed dramatically. “I am the leader of the Yiga clan!” He began to dance and point in every direction. "The strong! The burly! Master Kohga!"
He took a battle stance and pointed his finger at Link. “I can’t believe my luck!” he said. “I’ve sent scouts all over Hyrule searching for you. And you wander straight into my hideout! Speaking of which… how did you even make it this far?”

Link glanced down at his bloodstained clothes. He shrugged.

“No matter! I will destroy you myself. Personally…”

A throwing knife soared through the air next to Link and pierced Kohga straight in the forehead.

Link glanced over at Paya, who was already reaching for a second knife as Kohga suddenly disappeared from before them, reappearing at a distance. He held his hands out in the air, summoning a large stone decorated with Yiga Clan symbols. Link wasted no time. He pulled out his bow and struck Kohga in the face with an arrow.

He and Paya both charged in his direction as the stone he’d summoned suddenly plummeted to the ground and squished him beneath it. When the stone rolled away, Paya pounced on top of Kohga with both daggers in hand. She stabbed at his stomach rapidly as he screamed and yelped in pain. He disappeared once again, this time materializing in the air just above the large pit at the center of the canyon. Paya raised an eyebrow at Link, shook her head, and charged in Kohga’s direction once more.

Kohga began reciting strange incantations, and this time two spiked boulders appeared in the air next to him, each spinning rapidly in a circle. Link decided to simply ignore the boulders, instead aiming a bomb arrow at Kohga’s center. It exploded right in his face and launched him towards the back rim of the pit. Paya leapt over the hole in a single bound and once again rapidly struck the Yiga master with her daggers.

Kohga teleported away from Paya, appearing on the ground just in front of the pit. He turned to face Link, clutching his chest in pain. Link almost scoffed loudly at the pitiful sight.

"Who would've thought... I'd be done in like this..." Kohga gasped. "You... you think I'm just going to let this stand?!" He began to stomp his foot on the ground in frustration. "Do you?!"

Link nodded.

"Ahem! Sorry, I almost lost my temper there…” Kohga said. "Argh, what a pain... I can't go out this way. What to do, what to do..."

Paya hobbled over to where Link stood. She seemed to be just as a confused as Link was with the sheer ridiculousness of Master Kohga’s behavior.

"Ha! I got it! Mehehehehehe..." Kohga grabbed at his mask as he laughed manically. "Ahahahahahahaha!" He crossed his arms and took a step forward. "I need to bust out my serious moves... a secret technique taught by my father's mother's father! It will... destroy you! This is the end!"

He clasped his hands together, reciting yet another incantation. And as he did, a gigantic spiked ball appeared in the air in front of him and collapsed on the ground, blocking his view of Link and Paya.

"Ahahahaha-uh... Huh. Maybe it's... just a tad too big. Are you still over there?"

Link didn’t bother to respond.

"Well, no matter. Pretty soon you'll be gone! And not just from my line of sight!" Kohga shut his eyes and chuckled to himself.
"Only the leader of the Yiga Clan... can use this secret technique..." The gigantic spiked ball began to roll in Kohga's direction as he continued his dramatic monologue. "It is... the ultimate... oof!"

The ball collided with him, knocking him backwards and straight into the large pit behind him. His high-pitched screams echoed across the canyon as he fell.

"Coward!" he yelled. "I shall be remembered! I swear to you, I will-"

THUD.

With a pathetic thump, Master Kohga’s body smashed into the bottom of the large pit. The spiked ball followed swiftly behind, completely crushing his ruined body.

A moment of confused silence slowly passed. And after some time, the pair of exhausted warriors finally exhaled in relief.

In the most ludicrous of fashions, their battle was finally over.

Link glanced over at Paya. She was completely covered head-to-toe in blood. She wiped the tears from her good eye, turned, and smiled grimly at Link. He smiled back as he quickly pulled her into his comforting embrace. Unlike before, she confidently returned the favor.

The sun finally began to peek its way over the horizon, its warm light slowly revealing the bloody carnage that now decorated the canyon walls.

Burned and torn tapestries, ruined bodies, and scattered weapons were all that remained - a ghost of the mighty Yiga Clan.

Chapter End Notes

Next is Chapter 26: Grains.
Just a note: I really took liberties with Paya's character here, and I suppose I should expect some mixed reactions. Nevertheless, she's a girl raised by a clan of assassins and warriors so I don’t find it too off-base to assume that she’s been trained in the ways of the Sheikah by Impa and others. And so I found it necessary to expand on this tragically underutilized character, who just happens to be a personal favorite of mine. Hope you enjoyed.

_________________________________

Bonus note:
In my very first playthrough I attempted to complete this segment using only stealth. After finally making it into the main room and accidentally falling right in front of a Yiga blademaster, I gave up and proceeded to slaughter the entire clan. Definitely made it a lot easier to search for the Thunder Helm. Haha.
It's a true story, I swear. Arrows are your friend...
Grains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It is with the utmost pleasure that I present to you, the savior of Barta as well as our precious Thunder Helm, the brave and beautiful vai...

Mipha!”

Link stood by awkwardly just outside the palace with Riju. The Gerudo Chief’s announcement had produced raucous cheers and adulations from the adoring crowd. And though he knew that Paya would not have been particularly comfortable in this spotlight, he still felt a bit guilty that she wasn’t also present to receive the gratitude of the Gerudo people. Instead, she had insisted the previous day on accompanying Dorian back to Kara Kara Bazaar, the oasis town he’d previously visited.

“I’ll have to make it up to her later, Link thought. If that’s even remotely possible…

His mind turned to Paya’s injured left eye, and he sighed. The guilt he felt over her injury weighed heavily in his heart, but he pushed the thought from his mind for now. He glanced over at Chief Riju. A tiny half smirk appeared on her face as she continued announcing the news to her people. Link noticed her sly expression and rolled his eyes. She clearly was feeling great satisfaction in messing with him.

He slowly leaned in to speak to her. “Pardon me, Riju,” Link whispered, “but... do I really have to keep dressing up like this?” He had changed back into Asha’s top and his Sheikah tights before entering the city, just as a precaution. But with his mission accomplished, he’d hoped that she would excuse him from having to wear his vai disguise in public. Riju laughed loudly at his question and whispered right back to him. “Sorry, but rules are rules, voe…” The loud cheering of adoring female fans continued around them, filling their ears. Riju smiled up at Link and winked. “Besides… for your own safety, you’re probably better off!”

As he peered across the encroaching crowd before him, Link found himself hesitantly agreeing with the sentiment.

“Mipha!”

A gruff voice addressed Link from behind. A tall, pale-skinned Gerudo woman approached him.

“I am Captain Teake of the Gerudo army,” she said. She gave a respectful nod in Link’s direction. “I want to thank you sincerely for what you’ve done!”

Link cleared his throat, mustered up the most feminine voice he could. “Ah well, it was… not a problem. Anything I can do to help...” His voice cracked as he spoke, but Teake didn’t seem to notice. She shook her head.

“It is no small feat! And we are eternally grateful. You’ve put our entire army to shame…” she turned and glared at her soldiers, who were still cheering and celebrating with the crowd. They immediately shut up after noticing their leader’s piercing glare. “Our guards could learn a thing or two from you…” Teake continued. “Perhaps you’d like to come over and assist in our training for a time?”

Link began to respond, but Riju interjected. “Sorry Captain,” she said, “But I have other plans for
our friend Mipha here. I’m afraid we cannot afford to spare the time.”

“Ah, of course my lady!” Teake said. She bowed in Riju’s direction. “Pardon me for the intrusion.”

Riju held up her hand. “Not at all, Captain.” She pointed towards the silent Gerudo soldiers who now stood awkwardly idle in the crowd. “Although, I do expect… enhanced training for our guards here. We cannot afford any more incidents like Barta’s in the near-future.”

“Understood!” Teake said. “I shall take my leave.” She turned to face the guards. “Soldiers! Assemble in the training hall. One hundred laps around Gerudo Desert, for all of you!” The soldiers all groaned loudly in exasperation as Teake smiled cruelly. “And that includes you as well, Barta!”

“Are you kidding me?!” Barta shouted from the crowd. “I’m injured!”

“I don’t care!” Teake countered, as she made her way down the stairs to her soldiers. “It’s your fault we got into this mess anyway!”

Riju laughed loudly at the sight, finally grabbing Link’s hand and leading him back into the throne room and out of sight of the adoring crowds. Once they were back in her throne room, she exhaled loudly. “I’m glad that’s over,” she said. She took her place in her chair and grinned. “Now, back to business. She looked Link up and down and crossed her arms. “I really must thank you for what you’ve done… retrieving our heirloom, as well as our missing soldier. That should prove to do quite a bit of good for our morale…”

Buliara stood idly by, nodding thanks in Link’s direction. Link was surprised that she was no longer treating him with suspicion or disdain, though his success in his ‘impossible’ mission surely had something to do with it.

“I take it…” Link said, “That times have been rather tough around here lately?”

Riju’s face grew sullen, and she sighed. For a brief moment, it seemed like the entire world was closing in on her. She looked around the room carefully, rubbed her chin. “I’m growing tired of sitting in this chair all day. Let’s go get some fresh air…” She suddenly hopped out of her chair and walked right past Link, gesturing for him to follow her. They made their way up to the second floor of the building, onto a balcony overlooking the city. Buliara followed close behind, still silent.

“I am, as you have no doubt noticed, still but a child,” Riju said. She glanced at the dispersing crowds below, a pained expression growing on her face. “The people look on me with nothing but warmth in their eyes, but even this brings me some pain, I must admit…”

Link wasn’t entirely sure why she was suddenly opening up to him, but he decided it would be best to listen rather than to interject for now.

“I’ve tried so hard to be worthy of their love, to be a worthy chief…” she continued, “and to prove to myself that I was worthy too. When my family heirloom was stolen, I felt as though a shadow had fallen over me…” Her frown suddenly gave way to a bright smile as she turned to face Link once more. The sun glowed intensely in the sky behind her, casting a vibrant light across the shimmering buildings of Gerudo Town. Link couldn’t help but marvel at the gorgeous scene before him; though a part of his heart ached slightly at the thought that he wasn’t able to share this experience with the one he cared about the most…

“Yes!” Riju said. “Your arrival in the midst of all this must be the work of Lady Urbosa…” She pointed her finger loosely at the Thunder Helm, which Link quickly handed to her.

“Tell me, Link…” she said, as she put helmet on over her head. “How in Hylia’s name did you pull
this off? Our best soldiers struggled getting anywhere near their hideout, let alone infiltrate it. I imagine the Yiga will be none too happy that you snatched this thing up from under their noses! Perhaps we should be wary of their possible retaliation…”

Link shook his head. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that for a while… at least until the next Blood Moon anyway.”

“And why is that?” Riju asked.

“We… well, we annihilated the entire clan.”

“…You what?”

“We killed all of them.”

“…Eh?”

The Thunder Helm sagged to the side of Riju’s head, much in the same way as it had on Zelda’s all those years ago. Link held back a laugh at the somewhat comical sight.

Riju crossed her arms across her chest. “…Really!?” She giggled silently to herself. “Well well. It appears I’ve grossly underestimated you. Seems you have a bit of a dark side… my kind of voe!”

Link shrugged. Since Riju had opened up to him, he figured he might as well return the favor.

“Well the thing is… I was once a soldier. A captain in the Hylian Royal Guard. I was trained for war since I was a child. So… I suppose it’s only natural that I would simply do what needed to be done, when the time came.”

Riju closed her eyes to this in deep reflection. “You and I are quite alike. It would seem that we both simply… grew up too fast.”

To this, Link had no real response. A brief, uncomfortable silence flooded the air between them.

But it didn’t last long.

“Well!” Riju said as she pulled off the helmet, “a promise is a promise.” She turned to face the looming dust cloud, far off in the desert horizon. “The threat Divine Beast Vah Naboris poses has only grown all the more since we began searching for the heirloom. I believe that Gerudo Town itself may be in danger before too long… we must act immediately.” She grinned widely as she turned to face Link.

“We ride at dawn!”

A mildly shocked expression found itself on Link’s face as she said this.

“Hmmm… What’s the matter?” she asked. “Are you getting cold feet?”

Link shook his head vigorously. “It’s not that. Not at all. I’m ready to go. I just didn’t expect you to be quite so… aggressive about it.”

Riju grinned slyly. She crossed her arms together and leaned her face into Link’s. “Little voe… I am the Chief of the Gerudo tribe. Would you have expected anything less?”

The irony of a young girl referring to him as ‘little’ was not lost on Link, but he smiled back anyway. “Point taken,” he replied. “We ride at dawn, indeed.”
“Excellent. There’s a lookout post south of town. I suggest you take a sand seal to get there, get a little bit of extra practice. I’ll be waiting for you there with my favorite seal, Patricia.” She nodded cordially in his direction. “We’ll see you then.”

Link nodded politely in kind as he descended the stairs in front of him. He needed to return to the desert oasis immediately, in order to brief Dorian and Paya on the situation.

*But first, he thought to himself, I need to see a certain friend about a sand seal rental...*

From behind, Riju and Buliara stared after Link as he made his way through the crowds of Gerudo still milling about in the streets. And suddenly, Buliara’s eyes widened in realization.

“Wait a minute…” she said, “just now… did you call her… ‘voe’? Then... that means, this whole time…she was actually a-”

Riju palmed her face in disbelief.

Link instantly regretted his decision to wander through Gerudo Town in broad daylight. The crowds were intoxicating, and his newfound celebrity status made it nearly impossible for him to travel the roads without being smothered by fans. But after a considerable amount of time he finally arrived at Frelly’s sand seal booth. The wily sand seal trainer was quite excited to see Link again, thanking him profusely for his successful work in retrieving the Thunder Helm. However, and much to Link’s chagrin, this did not mean he would be getting a discount for her services. She had, after all, given him the opportunity to gain an audience with Riju in the first place.

“An eye for an eye!” she’d said. “Whatever that means!” Link cringed a bit at the ill-timed metaphor. But twenty rupees later, he soon found himself gliding across the surface of Gerudo Desert, towed by a rather hyperactive sand seal. It didn’t take him very too long to master the technique, due largely in part to Frelly’s careful instruction. A warm breeze blew across his face as he rode, and he quickly entered into a focused trance as he made his way across the desert in the direction of Kara Kara Bazaar. It took him an hour’s ride to get there, and before he knew it he had already arrived. To his surprise, Paya was immediately there to meet him.

“Master Link,” she said, “good to… see you again.”

She had apparently been looking out for his return, having hopped down from the roof of a market building to greet him. Link leashed his sand seal to a nearby tree and smiled at her.

“Same to you.” he said. “How’s the eye?”

Paya held her hand up to her bandaged face and shrugged. “It’s... better. Your friend Asha has taken good care of me. B-But more importantly…” she pointed across the town to the inn. “She’s taken good care of Dorian’s children as well. They are a bit shaken up, to say the least. But they are doing well...”

Link breathed a sigh of relief at this news. He was happy to know that there were no lingering effects on Koko and Cottla from their ordeal.

“And what about you?” he asked. “How are you holding up overall?” Link had reason to be concerned. He knew that this had been Paya’s first real combat experience. And to have experienced so much violence, so much bloodshed in her first battle, he couldn’t help but wonder how it was affecting her psychologically.
Paya shook her head, scratching absentmindedly at her bandaged shoulder. “I-I, well, don’t mind me. I’m okay. Like I said before, I was trained all my life for this. Please don’t worry...” A brief lull in the conversation set in. Link could tell that Paya was a bit uncomfortable with talking about herself, so he decided to change the subject.

“I spoke with Riju” he said. “We are going after Vah Naboris first thing tomorrow morning.” He turned to face the looming dust cloud to the south, and Paya followed suit. “I was hoping to send you all off by today. There’s no telling how dangerous it might get tomorrow. I don’t want you all anywhere near this place when the fighting starts.”

But Paya shook her head again. “I…. I’m not leaving,” she deadpanned.

Link frowned. “This isn’t up for debate. Your eye is injured, your shoulder is injured, you’re exhausted, and I don’t want to risk-”

“I’m not leaving,” Paya repeated. “I want to help.”

Link could feel his frustration growing inside of him, fought it back. The sun was bearing down on him, his head hurt, his legs were badly chaffed, and he wanted to change out of his sweaty Gerudo disguise as soon as possible.

“I’m not going to argue with you right now,” he finally said. “Let’s discuss this with Dorian and come to a decision then.”

Paya nodded, spun on her heels, and began to lead Link towards the oasis inn where Dorian and his family were staying. And after a brief moment of silence and contemplation, Link suddenly began to laugh.

“I never imagined,” he said, “that you could be so straight-forward like this! It’s a bit of a shock...”

“H-how so?”

“You just seem to be speaking more freely now. More openly. Quite a bit different than the incredibly shy girl I knew before.”

Paya bowed her head down as she fought off a smile.

“Well Link, after everything we just went through… I suppose I cannot help but feel a bit more… confident in speaking to you.”

She paused, and began to blush shyly.

“...I um...w-well...is that okay with you?”

Link groaned.

“I’m fine with it.” Dorian said.

“No, you’re not.” Link replied, dully.

They were sitting in the main lobby of the Kara Kara inn. Asha sat nearby, playing with Koko and Cottla. They’d warmed up to her easily, and Link was at least happy to see that they were all in good spirits, despite the circumstances.
“Paya has more than proven her capabilities, I believe,” Dorian countered. “You can count on her.”

“Her competence isn’t in question,” Link said. He glanced over at Paya’s face and she turned away suddenly, hiding her bandaged bad eye from his gaze. “The last thing I want is for her to get injured again. Or worse…”

“I completely understand that, Link,” said Dorian. “I am concerned for her well-being, just as you are. But she’s made her decision. And I think we should honor that.”

Asha nodded in agreement. “It’s none of my business, I know,” she said, winking. “But! You should never doubt a woman’s resolve!”

It was three against one. And Link realized that this was simply an argument he wasn’t going to win. After a moment’s pause, he shook his head. “Fine, fine. You win. I’ll allow it. But only on one condition…” He looked at Dorian and crossed his arms. “You and your family should return to Kakariko Village as soon as possible.”

Dorian laughed. “Excellent! We planned on leaving here shortly anyway. No use sticking around, you have a job to do after all.”

Link relaxed a bit at this. “Good to know. You’ll need transport though… and I don’t want to risk teleporting a large group again…”

“Agreed,” Dorian said. “We were lucky last time. Very lucky. And I’d prefer the more scenic route anyway!”

Link paused briefly, considering their options. And he smiled widely as he turned turned to Asha. “How’s Inferno doing? Is she ready to ride?”

“Absolutely!” She smiled. “She’s outside in a nearby stable, and ready to go!”

Link smiled back. “Then it’s settled. I’m sure she’ll be quite happy to see some real action, instead of serving as a pack horse for me... again.” He walked over to Dorian and firmly shook his hand. “Be careful crossing the desert… and take care of Inferno for me. She’s a bit of a wild one…”

Dorian squeezed Link’s hand and suddenly pulled him into a tight embrace. “Thank you so much… for all that you’ve done,” he said. “I mean that sincerely.” He pulled away and turned to Paya. “Take care of each other. I have no doubt that you will find success in your mission…” He gestured towards Koko and Cottla, who ran up and leapt into his arms. “We’ll see each other again quite soon!”

After saying their goodbyes, Link and Paya took the time to relax and explore the oasis with Asha. They partook in some fruit from a nearby melon vendor, replenished their supply of bomb arrows, and Link even got a chance to reconnect with his old pal Beedle, the traveling vendor. The comic relief he provided was quite welcome; Link still couldn’t quite get over Beedle’s comical appearance, with his enormous nose and ironically muscular physique.

When am I going to stop analyzing people like this? He chuckled to himself.

The afternoon soon gave way to nightfall. After briefing Paya on their plans for the assault on Vah Naboris, the group entered the inn to sleep for the night. And though it was quite late, Link found himself wide-awake with anxiety for the pending mission. After tossing and turning for a while, he
hopped up from his bed and made his way into the lobby, sitting down at a small table. The innkeeper handed him a book to read, *Rumor Mill: Volume 7*, written by a strange girl named Traysi.

He rolled his eyes as he perused its contents. He’d never been one to partake in gossip, and it was clear to him that this Traysi character seemed to revel in it…

*This is Traysi! The book said. I have a taste for the rumors of worlds long gone and worlds yet to come! Everyone gossiping in the present world? Here’s my favorite bit of the latest news…The Secret of the Royal Family of Hyrule. I heard a rumor that there’s something to be found inside Hyrule Castle… And that something is a secret room of Rhoam Bosphoramus Hyrule, the last king of Hyrule! There’s also supposedly a laboratory that belonged to his daughter, Princess Zelda. A double discovery! I bet there are all kinds of amazing royal-family secrets hidden in those rooms just waiting to be revealed! "Secrets of the Royal Family Uncovered!" That headline alone would keep food on the table for months! But there’s no way I’m going anywhere near a place as dangerous as Hyrule Castle. No way! Don’t let that scare you, though… Traysi's Recommendation: five stars!!!*

This was actually quite interesting, Link had to admit. Though he wondered if it was even worth his time to risk an early entrance to Hyrule Castle, just to invade Zelda’s privacy…

“L-Link!”

Paya’s voice. Link looked up from his book and smiled as she approached.


“Yes. I am… a bit nervous about tomorrow I have to admit. Would you… I mean, if it’s okay w-with you, I…”

“You want to go for a walk?” Link asked.

Paya blushed mildly. “Yes! If that’s… o-”

“It’s okay.” Link interrupted. “Let’s go.”

They wandered out of the inn, silently walking around its exterior. They discovered a ladder on the side of the inn wall, made their way up. The inn was attached to an enormous boulder - a fairly tall structure - and its peak offered them a rather nice view of the moonlit desert around them. The cold night air was quite chilly against their exposed faces, but neither seemed to mind. They took their seats there in silence. Paya attempted to speak up now and then, but seemed to talk herself out of it each time. So Link decided to take the initiative.

“I told Riju that we shouldn’t worry about it, but I… don’t think this is the last we’ve seen of the Yiga,” he said.

Paya’s ears perked up at this. “The… blood moon?” she asked.

“Yes. So long as Ganon still exists… I have a feeling that they will return in due time. With a vengeance. We’ll have to be prepared for the consequences of what we’ve done.”

Paya nodded, but said nothing. So Link changed the subject. There was something he’d been meaning to ask her for a while.

“So… what’s on your face?”
Paya held her hands up in surprise. "Wh-wh-what?! There's something on my face? What are you speaking of... Oh!" Her hand gently touched the Sheikah Crest on her forehead. "It is customary for those with a long Sheikah lineage to have this crest inked onto their skin to honor their past."

Link raised an eyebrow at this. "Wait a minute... that's... a tattoo?!"

Paya nodded.

Link shook his head in disbelief. "You Sheikah... are even tougher than I imagined!"

Paya nodded again, but said nothing. The uncomfortable silence settled in once more, and Link began to wonder if Paya didn't want to chat with him after all. But suddenly, she spoke up.

"Link... can I... ask you something?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. I... well. Ahem! A-a while back, when Impa was, well, when she was scolding you for being too emotional... you told her that restraining yourself is what got us into this mess in the first place." She looked away. "Or something to that effect I guess. What exactly did you mean by that?"

Link nodded. "Well, the truth is, I... spent so much of my life bottling everything in. Holding my emotions back, to appear as the cold and stoic hero everyone expected me to be." He frowned at the thought, reflecting on his change from happy young child to stone cold soldier. Lamenting his loss of innocence. "Before I knew it, I stopped opening up to people. Even to those I loved the most. I feel that if we had all just been honest with what we were all feeling, about our doubts and our fears... perhaps we would have been better prepared for what was to come." He shook off his frown, smiled back at Paya. "If I can help it, that will never happen again."

Paya smiled back. "Then... what about now?"

Link shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... what's stopping you... from opening up right now?"

Link grinned widely. And after a pause, he began to tell Paya of his memories. He told her of his upbringing at Zora's Domain, of the great pressure he endured as the presumed savior of Hyrule. He told her of his countless adventures, of his worries and doubts, and of the guilt he felt at failing Hyrule long ago.

And finally... he told her of his great love for Mipha.

"It's... rare that I get to talk to anyone these days. Let alone open up to anyone," he said. "But the thing is..." He paused for a moment, thought carefully about his next words. He could feel his emotions welling up again, those same familiar tears bubbling to the surface.

"I keep fighting back the hurt. I keep bouncing back and forth between acceptance and peace, and deep heartache." He bowed his head solemnly. "I miss her. I miss her so much. I've finally come to terms with the reality... that she isn't coming back. But at times... the hurt is overwhelming." He placed his hand on the shoulder of his Zora armor, thumbed Mipha's white scale embedded there. "She's with me now, in spirit. I can feel her presence, even now. And I'm strengthened by that. But that doesn't change the fact that she's no longer alive, to experience the world with me, and to live out our lives together. That doesn't change the fact that I still love her."

Paya's eyes welled with tears at Link's sorrow. But her kind smile cut right through the sadness like
a sharp blade. A part of her wanted to reach out and embrace Link, to comfort him. But she knew it wasn’t her place.

Yet to her surprise, Link suddenly drew closer. Paya gasped slightly, as his face was now only inches away from hers.

“I want to try something.” Link said. “Is that okay?”

Paya nodded shyly as Link carefully unwrapped the bandage around her left eye. She fought off the urge to recoil, to hide her blushing face from him. Link cringed as he uncovered her injury. A deep gash was evident, penetrating her eye deeply. He took a deep breath, placed his hand on her face, and exhaled.

They sat there that way, for what seemed like hours. Paya hadn’t a clue what Link was doing, but she waited patiently. When it was clear that nothing was going to happen, Link pulled his hand back and shook his head in frustration.

“It’s no use,” he said. “I thought… perhaps… Mipha’s healing blessing would work on other people. Seems I was wrong…”

“I-It’s okay!” Paya said, shaking off her deep blush. She began to wrap the bandage around her head once more. “It doesn’t hurt too bad.” She shrugged. “And besides… scars make you look… c-cool…”

To Paya's amusement, Link reared back abruptly as he began to chuckle loudly. It seemed that he’d had her pegged from the get-go after all. She was going to be a very good friend indeed...

With the tension diffused, Paya leaned back and stared up at the sky with her good eye.

“W-Well Link, I just want you to know…” she smiled warmly as she spoke, a look of serenity growing all the more evident across her moonlit face.

“If we make it through this… when we make it through this… please know that you can always come to me for anything.” She turned to look at him, confidently and assuredly. “If you ever need help, or if you just need someone to talk to. I’ll always be there for you.

And that’s a promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Not a lot of action, but we'll make up for that soon in Chapter 27: Signal Static (finally!). See you next time, and I thank you once again for your patience and for your continued readership!
"GASP!"

Link abruptly shot awake and sat straight up in his bed. His heart pounding, he examined the inn’s candlelit interior around him and then quickly relaxed. There was no imminent danger as far as he could see.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. It wasn’t unusual for him to be roused awake like this by a false sense of danger. Probably just a bad dream, no cause for alarm. Laying back in bed, he crossed his arms and frowned. The wind howled wildly outside the inn window, and it still seemed quite dark out.

*Looks like I’ve only been out for a couple of hours at the most*, he lamented. *Going to be a long, long day...*

With the sudden adrenaline rush, he knew there was no way he’d be getting back to sleep any time soon. So he grabbed his Sheikah Slate and powered it on, hoping to pass the time. And perhaps to find a distraction from the strange sense of danger still lingering at the edge of his psyche.

The slate’s familiar ring chimed in his ear when it started up. And as the faint bluish glow of its map feature filled Link’s eyes, he sighed. The map was, of course, totally blank.

With all the chaos surrounding his arrival in Gerudo Desert, he’d had no real opportunity to seek out a Sheikah Tower to fill in his map data. Thus, there was no way to track the movements of Vah Naboris. He reached to turn his slate back off when something suddenly caught his eye: the clock at the bottom corner of the screen.

He cried out in shock. It was six o’clock in the morning, well-past dawn.

He was late for his rendezvous with Riju.

In a panic, he leapt out of bed and quickly got dressed. Zora armor, Sheikah Tights, Hylian hood, weapons and gear.

*How in the world is it six o’clock?* He wondered, glancing at the window once more as he changed. *It’s still dark outside—*

THOOOOM!

The earth shook violently around Link, knocking him flat on his rear. A large gust of air burst open the inn windows, letting in a swirl of sand and dust. The Sheikah Slate fell from the bed and onto the floor, right into Link’s line of sight. Fuzzy dots of static flickered and danced around the screen, growing more and more intense with the passing seconds.

*This can only mean one thing...* he thought, as the earth shook violently around him once more.

...*Vah Naboris is here.*

“Paya!” he yelled, sprinting through the inn, “We have to move!” Shrieks of surprise and terror
began to fill the air around him. By now, all of the inn’s residents were awake, frantically making their way to the entrance in a state of confusion. As the doors flew open, another massive gust of dirt and debris flooded the interior of the building.

“Paya!” Link repeated. “Where are y-”

ROOOOOOOOAAARRRR!

Naboris let out a deep bellowing cry as its enormous, glowing hoof smashed through the inn’s roof, collapsing half of the building. At the same moment, Link felt a figure collide with his body, knocking him off to the side. A large chunk of debris landed in the spot he had just been standing in. When the dust cleared, the figure looked up at him and smiled grimly. It was Paya.

“Link! Are you hurt?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Link muttered, as she grabbed his hand and pulled him around the divine beast’s hoof and out of the entrance of the inn.

“It’s Vah Naboris,” Paya explained. “It’s attacking the-”

“I know!” The pair turned to face the ruined inn. Vah Naboris let out another tremendous roar as it lifted its hoof from the ruins and began to slowly make its way to the next building. Link took a deep breath, his survival instincts giving way to a familiar sense of calm responsibility. He spared a quick glance around the oasis. Even in the middle of the dark dust storm, he could still make out the ruined buildings and broken bodies around him. Link cringed at the sight of it all, but brushed the feeling off. He had a job to do.

“We need to evacuate, get everyone as far away from here as possible!” He pointed towards the entrance of the oasis and down the desert path leading back to the distant canyons. “That way is our best bet! I’ll hold Naboris off for now.”

Paya nodded, departing from Link’s side as he drew his bow. Link knew it would be dangerous to approach Vah Naboris closely without the Thunder Helm. But in this situation, he had no choice but to take the chance.

As the beast's hoof slammed into the next building, Link sprung into action, firing a bomb arrow straight at its back leg as he charged after it. His arrow made contact, and it even seemed to briefly rattle the divine beast as the tip of the arrow exploded violently against the leg’s stonelike surface. Naboris shuddered for a second, letting out a furious roar as if it were in pain.

As Link drew closer to it, he immediately regretted his hasty attack. Through the dust storm, he could just make out the faint purple glow of electricity arcing across the back of Vah Naboris. A purple glowing circle appeared on the ground beneath him as it targeted him with an electrical strike. Link quickly changed directions, hoping to at least draw the fire towards himself and away from the panicking crowds.

“This… is going to hurt…"

“Get behind me!!” someone shouted from nearby. Link spun around to view the source of the voice. It was Riju, clad in ornate Gerudo armor - and her comically oversized Thunder Helm. She was gliding across the desert on her dark-blue sand seal Patricia.

The divine beast roared again, and large purple lightning bolts shot immediately in their direction. Riju leapt from her sandboard and extended her arms around her, and a bright green force field appeared around them just in the nick of time. With a thundrous crackle, the force field deflected the
lethal lightning bolts in a semi circle around them. Riju pumped her fist, then turned to face Link.

“Sav'otta! Lucky break, voe. I was on my way here to wake you up! But it appears Naboris has beaten me to the punch…”

A stunned Link began to thank Riju for her assistance, but she held up a hand to interrupt him.

“Don’t thank me,” she replied. “It’s not over yet!”

Riju’s guard, Buliara, arrived next on her own sand seal. And the trio set their sights on Vah Naboris, continuing to draw its attention away from the frenzied populace.

“Aim for its feet!” Riju said. Link did as he was told, and began peppering the beast’s hooves with bomb arrows as they circled from a safe distance. It seemed to be working, each strike producing a roar of anger and a flare of lightning in the trio’s direction. But each lethal bolt was deflected with ease by Riju’s Thunder Helm. After a series of attacks, the divine beast seemed to give up its rampage. It turned away from the oasis, knocking over yet another building in the process, and began to gallop steadily away. Straight in the direction of Gerudo Town.

The trio regrouped on the village outskirts, with Riju and Buliara towing their sand seals behind them. The divine beast’s dust storm finally settled, revealing the full extent of its destruction. Kara Kara Bazaar was now nothing more than a pile of rubble and debris.

“We were too late…” Link said, shaking his head. “It’s my fault, I should've-

“Oh, enough with the frivolous self-reproach…” Riju said. “It was only a matter of time before Naboris struck. What’s done is done - we must focus on moving forward…”

From the corner of his eye, Link saw his friend Asha, darting back and forth amongst the injured, offering medical assistance to those who needed it. Paya was right there with her and helping out however she could, while Epona galloped dutifully alongside them both to assist in carrying the wounded. A look of profound fear was present in the eyes of all the Gerudo there, and Link still felt a tremendous sense of guilt welling up inside of him. But Riju spoke up once more.

“People of Kara Kara Bazaar,” she yelled, removing the Thunder Helm and climbing up on Buliara’s shoulders. The crowd turned to face them, then let out a thunderous cry of cheers and adulation at the presence of their esteemed leader.

“Our greatest fear has come to pass. Vah Naboris has struck. But fear not!” Riju pointed in Link’s direction and smiled. “The Hylian champion of legend has returned to us! And together, we shall appease the divine beast!” The crowd cheered again, and Link found himself marveling at Riju’s leadership ability. It seemed he truly had underestimated her after all…

“We are a resilient people,” she continued. “Strong, determined, tough. We will rise from the ashes, just as we always have. This... I swear to you.” She leapt down from Buliara’s shoulders and smiled at Link. “And now, we have a divine beast to catch.” She glanced at the ruins of the oasis and crossed her arms. “Where… may I ask, is your sand seal?”

Link pointed his finger at a nearby tree. It was totally flattened by the divine beast’s hoof - along with the remains of what used to be Link’s sand seal.

“That… is a rather unpleasant sight…” Riju murmured.

“Take mine, voe.” Buliara said. “I will stay behind and help with the wounded…” she turned to face the crowd of worried faces behind them. Asha was still scrambling about, dealing with the injured
people in their midst. Meanwhile, Paya had broken away from her side, running up to the trio after hearing Riju’s inspiring speech. Link nodded at Paya in acknowledgement as she approached.

“How is everyone doing?” Link asked her.

“We were… fortunate,” Paya replied, catching her breath. “A lot of terrible injuries, but no deaths as far as we could see.”

Link felt quite relieved at the revelation, though her words did little to restrain his guilt. “We’d better get a move on,” Link said, as Buliara handed him the reins to her sand seal. He stepped on her sand board and fastened the reins around his waist. Paya took her place behind Link on the board, hesitantly grasping his waist as they prepared to set off. Buliara glanced at the pair, prepared to say something to them, thought better of it. Instead, she turned to face her Chief. “Take care, my liege,” she said, bowing in respect before turning and running into the crowd.

A bemused look appears on Riju’s face as she stared after Link and Paya. “I see we have an uninvited guest…” she said, pointing in Paya’s direction. “Is she... your girlfriend or something?”

Paya blushed slightly at this, but Link remained stoic. “If you mean that she’s a girl who happens to be my friend, then you’re entirely correct.”

“H-He has a fiance!” Paya suddenly blurted out. Riju raised an eyebrow, then offered the pair a teasing smile as she fastened herself to her own sand seal.

“So he does...” She looked out in the distance, peering at the looming dust cloud making its way in the direction of Gerudo Town.

“Let’s ride.”

A thunderous, mechanical howl echoed across the desert sands as Naboris continued to gallop in the direction of Gerudo Town. Just behind it, Riju’s sand seal skimmed the sand’s surface with grace and ease, though Buliara’s seal seemed to labor a bit with both Link and Paya in tow. Nevertheless, the two seals continued their pursuit of the divine beast, drawing from their considerable amount of stamina and strength.

“At this pace,” Riju shouted at Link from behind her mask, “I would say we have roughly an hour before it reaches Gerudo Town. We must do everything we can to stop it - or at least slow it down enough to get inside and regain control...”

Link attempted to respond but was met with a mouthful of dust and sand kicked up from his seal. So he simply nodded in agreement. “Stay close, and follow my lead,” Riju continued. “Yah!” She whipped the reigns of her sand seal, and Link followed suit. Their seals picked up their pace, and before long they were right on the tail of Naboris. Sensing their approach, the divine beast’s steady gallop accelerated. Link quickly drew his bow and took aim at the beast’s rear-left hoof, striking it with a bomb arrow. The divine beast shuddered and slowed down briefly. Several cracks appeared on the hoof’s outer shell.

“Just like that!” Riju said. Predictably, Vah Naboris attempted a lightning strike against its pursuers as a deterrent - but to no avail. Riju activated the Thunder Helm’s force field and deflected the bolts with ease yet again. Angered and damaged, Naboris tried to pick up its pace. But the undaunted sand seals maintained their speed, eventually drawing the trio alongside their target. A few more explosive arrows, a handful of failed lightning strikes, and it seemed the Divine Beast was already on its last legs.
“Too easy!” Riju shouted. “I think one more strike on its foot ought to do it—"

THOOOOM!

Sensing its defeat, Naboris had leapt in place, stomping the ground with tremendous force. Despite the damage it had taken, the beast’s limping trot suddenly changed into a thundering gallop. It seemed to be pouring every ounce of its energy into escaping now. Meanwhile, the vibrations from the stomp reverberated across the landscape - though it appeared to Link that their only purpose was to kick up an even larger sandstorm than before in order to hinder their vision...

BOOOM!

...Or not.

An explosive rumble suddenly sounded up from behind the trio. They spared a glance through the sandstorm around them, and Link groaned. A mound of sand was rapidly moving through the desert surface in their direction. Link had seen this before, when he’d first arrived in Gerudo Desert. Summoned by Naboris... an absolutely gargantuan molduga was now joining in on the pursuit - this one far larger than any of the ones Link had previously encountered.

I just can't catch a break... can I?! Link thought to himself.

“We just can’t catch a break, can we?” Riju said out loud. She turned towards Link and scowled lightly. “That...” she explained, “...is the Molduking.”

The creature’s mouth poked up from under the sand, revealing a snout that was peppered with spears and arrows from its countless battles with would-be monster slayers. The creature roared menacingly at its targets before burying itself deep in the sand as it accelerated its chase.

“Lady Urbosa fought one of these during her Divine Beast trials,” Riju said. “Seems that history is repeating itself…”

“All right!” Paya suddenly shouted. She let go of Link’s waist, rolled along the sand nearby, then hopped to her feet. She drew her own bow and bomb arrows and prepared herself for the monster’s approach. Link had told her of his previous encounters with these creatures, so he knew she was well aware of their weaknesses. Nevertheless, he began to peel off from the pursuit to assist Paya. But she waved him off. After hesitating a brief moment, Link shook his head and circled back around to continue the chase with Riju. A series of explosions and monstrous shrieks echoed behind them, but Link dared not look back.

“That’s quite the vai you’ve got there…” Riju yelled to Link as he drew alongside her again. She turned her attention back to Naboris. “Let’s finish this now. On my mark...”

The dark dust storm was growing so intense that Link could barely make out the silhouette of the galloping divine beast ahead of them. What he could see, however, was a cluster of smaller shadows lurking in the sandy clouds ahead of them. Drawn to the commotion, a group of lizalfos were apparently joining in on the battle, armed with bows and spears. Almost immediately Riju and Link were met with an intense volley of shock arrows from these new attackers. The pair began to swerve around them, Link drawing his sheikah sword from his back in order to conserve his arrows for Naboris.

Link leaned over the side of his sand board and swiped widely at a nearby Lizalfos warrior, decapitating it instantly. As he did so, another electrical charge began to glow in the distance as Vah Naboris shot yet another burst of lightning at the pair. Like a routine, Riju activated her Thunder
Helm and deflected the charge at a nearby cluster of attacking Lizalfos. The monsters were instantly killed by the electric shock.

Riju turned to Link as they rode, flashing him a thumbs-up. But he shook his head back and began to signal wildly at her in panic. She tilted her head in confusion then turned her attention ahead once more. But she was too late. A lone lizal warrior stood directly in her path, ready to take down Riju's charging sand seal. They collided with tremendous force, knocking Patricia onto her side and flinging Riju directly off her sandboard. Both she and her sand seal bounced and rolled along the desert sands. Link pulled back on his reins to circle back to assist, but as he did another Lizalfos leapt through the air, stabbing Buliara's sand seal with its spear on its way down. Now Link too was rolling painfully along the desert sands, finally coming to a stop alongside Riju and the shellshocked Patricia.

"Ugh... are you all right?" Link asked, as he disconnected Riju's harness and pulled her to her feet. "I've been through worse," she replied, clutching her arm with a grimace. Link scowled at her injury, but maintained his cool. He drew his trident from his back and held his Sheikah sword out to Riju. "Can you fight?"

The group of pursuing Lizalfos quickly converged on the pair. Riju scanned the area around them, then shrugged. "I don't think I've ever been asked a sillier question," she said, grabbing the sword from Link's hand.

Link rolled to his left as the first lizal creature swiped the air next to him with its razor-sharp boomerang. Riju quickly leaped towards it, striking it down from behind with a series of rapid slashes from her Sheikah blade. Two more spear-wielding monsters struck next, but Link was too fast for them. He parried their stabs then countered with a wide-sweeping spin attack, breaking their legs with his trident. They collapsed on the ground in a heap, lashing their tongues out in fury. Riju finished them off with a pair of quick jabs then turned her attention to the next set of attackers.

Behind the pair, Patricia was surprisingly holding her own. Despite their docile appearance, it seemed sand seals could be quite brutal in a fight. She was swinging her head side to side, gouging countless lizalfos with her enormous tusks before crushing their heads swiftly with her powerful tail.

I'd... better stay out of her way for now... Link thought to himself, as he caught a leaping monster with the tip of his trident. He slammed it into the ground and finished it off before moving onto the next one. Nearby, Riju seemed to be holding up just fine in spite of her injured arm. And after a few moments, the three made quick work of these attacking monsters. Riju returned Link's sword to him, then ran over to check up on Patricia after she finally calmed down.

"A few deep scratches, but I think she will be just fine," Riju said, as she patted her sand seal on the head to soothe it. "Good girl..." She glanced up in the distance, saw the dust cloud of Vah Naboris getting farther away with each passing second. She then noticed Buliara's lifeless sand seal nearby - still drenching the sands below with an outpouring of blood.

"That makes two of them today," Riju said, pointing at it with her good arm. "Your reputation with sand seals is certainly taking a hit..."

And my reputation with horses is already bad enough as it is... Link thought bitterly.

"No time to lose!" Riju exclaimed, mounting her sand board and fastening her harness once more. "Hop on."

Link stepped on her sand board and grabbed her waist, and Patricia was once again off in pursuit of Naboris. With the divine beast now far off in the distance, the dust storm had cleared in their
immediate area. Link glanced behind them, hoping to catch a glimpse of how Paya was faring against the Molduking. Riju sensed Link's concern and shrugged her shoulders at him.

"I'm sure she's fine," Riju said. "She seems like a tough vai. I'd imagine she's-

"She... she failed," Link said.

"What?!"

Riju glanced behind them as well, then uttered a strange obscenity in her native tongue. Far back in the distance, the smaller dust cloud of the Molduking was once again rapidly gaining on them.

Link fought off a pang of tremendous guilt. He feared the worst for Paya... but they had to press on. Riju snapped at Patricia’s reins with her good arm, and the sand seal picked up speed. They soon re-entered Naboris's dust cloud as Link drew his bow and prepared for what he hoped would be their final strike. But with the Molduking already right on their tail, Riju was forced to swerve to and fro, dodging lightning strikes as well as the gaping mouth of the giant molduga.

"Link!"

A loud, female voice rose up from the roar of sand and heavy stomps around them.

Paya's voice! Link recognized. But where is she-

"Up here!" Link looked back at the pursuing creature, now skimming the sands just a few feet behind them, and found himself suppressing a relieved laugh.

Paya was riding right on top of the Molduking.

You've got to be kidding me...

"I couldn't stop it!" Paya shouted, as Riju swerved to her left to dodge a surge from the molduga's open mouth. "I'm sorry Link!"

"It's fine!" Link shouted back. "Can you hold on?"

"For now, yes!" Paya said. "But I think-" she gripped the Molduking's fin tightly as it leaped in the air and dove in Link and Riju's direction. It hit the ground with incredible force, just missing them, then continued its rapid pursuit. "-I think it's attracted to Riju's Thunder Helm!"

"Well, either we get zapped by Naboris, or we get torn to shreds by a gigantic molduga," Riju said. "Let's try a third option. Yah!" She whipped at Patricia's reins, and the sand seal mustered up every bit of energy it could as it finally closed in on Vah Naboris again. Link set his sights on the back hoof of the divine beast, but each time he prepared to let an arrow fly Riju was forced to swerve awkwardly to dodge the pursuing Molduga. Several missed attacks later, and their supply of bomb arrows was nearly depleted.

“Can’t you keep her steady for just a second?!” Link shouted, in a rare burst of rage and frustration.

“I’m trying!” Riju yelled back. “Or perhaps you’d prefer to be eaten by the Molduking after all?!”

Link opened his mouth to unleash a bit of his own sass in return, but he suddenly paused at her words. The creative gears were swiftly turning in his head.

“Perhaps... I would...” he finally said.
A faint purple glow illuminated the air around them, Naboris preparing itself for another lightning strike. A wide grin spread across Link’s face as he turned to shout at Paya, who was still clinging for her life on the Molduking’s dorsal fin.

“Get ready to jump off!” Link shouted at her.

“When?!” she asked.

“You’ll know when!” Link placed his bow on his back and began to unclip the reigns from Riju’s waist as a glowing purple circle appeared below the pair, signaling the imminent electrical strike from Naboris.

“Wait, Link,” Riju said. “What in Hylia’s name are you-”

Link suddenly grabbed Riju’s waist and leapt backwards from the sandboard, straight into the open mouth of the Molduking. At the same time, Paya dove off from the monster’s back, just as Vah Naboris unleashed another incredible lightning blast from its back in their direction. Paya rolled painfultly across the desert sands at rapid speed, climbing to her feet in time to see a large explosion of energy burst directly against the hide of the giant molduga. The creature writhed and thrashed in terrible agony. Purple streams of electricity arced across its broken body, which skidded and rolled across the desert sands before finally coming to a stop.

The Molduking’s mouth gurgled and sputtered as Paya ran over and attempted to pry it open. When she’d finally opened up a sufficient gap, she reached her hand inside and felt around the now-steaming insides of the dead creature’s mouth. After a moment she finally grasped something. A hand.

*Link's hand!*

She pulled as hard as she could, and Link slowly began to emerge. *His arm... his head... his torso...* and finally his other arm, which still clung tightly to Riju's waist. The pair exploded out of the molduga's mouth in a spew of blood and saliva. Link scrambled to his feet and drew his bow again. He reached for his bomb arrows - only to realize they were now completely useless, soaked with the guts of the large molduga’s insides.

Paya helped Riju to her feet. “We were so close...” the Gerudo chief said, clutching her right arm in pain. “Now what do we do?”

Link started to wrack his brain in an effort to come up with a solution. But Paya interrupted his thoughts.

“Here!” she said, holding out a single bomb arrow. “It’s... all I have left, I’m sorry-”

“It’ll have to do!” Link said, snatching it from her hand. He nocked the arrow in place then leaped atop the head of the Molduking’s corpse. He trained his bow in the direction of Vah Naboris, closed an eye, and sighed. The beast’s dust storm continued to rage before him, still filling the air around it. There was no way he’d have a clear shot - not with his visuals impaired by the dust cloud surrounding his target.

But as he considered this, Link suddenly smiled. His mind flashed back to his little archery competition with Revali, all those many years before.

*That blind shot. Maybe I could...?*

Link peered carefully through the dust cloud, his mind recalling the shape and size of Vah Naboris.
Purple arcs of lightning still arced across its back, lighting the cloud around it with its menacing glow. Link closed his eyes, imagined the beast’s steady gallop, its legs stepping forward in a predictable pattern. His ears trained themselves on the sound of each stomp, his senses finally entered a state of hyperactivity as he pulled back on his final explosive arrow and let it fly in the direction of his target: the rear left hoof.

A final, pained cry rumbled across the desert as Link’s arrow detonated in the distance, letting him know he’d struck his target. The dust storm settled, the divine beast’s legs collapsed underneath it, the air was filled with the sounds of grinding gears and heavy stone crashing down to the earth.

The trio jumped in the air and shouted in triumph at the sight of the fallen Sheikah relic before them.

It was only a small victory. But their first battle with Vah Naboris was finally won.

Riju gritted her teeth as Link put the finishing touches on a tourniquet for her broken arm.

“T’ll ride ahead to… warn Gerudo Town… of Naboris’ approach,” she said through grunts of pain. She glanced up at the stalled divine beast above them as she spoke. “We have a brief head start… so I intend to take advantage of this.”

Link simply stepped back and nodded, and Riju mounted up on her sand board and prepared to ride away with Patricia. She spared another glance at the divine beast and shook her head.

"Back there... with the Molduking...." she paused. "What made you think that would work?"

Link shrugged. "Just call it... a voe's intuition."

Riju looked on, stifling a laugh as Link and Paya quickly scaled up the large ramp on the front chest of Naboris. The beast shuddered and clanged as it struggled to bring itself to its feet once more.

“I leave the rest to you,” Riju called out. “Don’t let us down.” She waved at Link and Paya with her good arm, whipped at Patricia’s reins, and before long was far off in the horizon in the direction of the Gerudo capital. Link scanned his Sheikah Slate on the pedestal at the entrance of the divine beast, and immediately an ethereal voice echoed from the beast’s interior.

"Well, well, well..." The voice was confident, sassy, respectful; and very much Urbosa’s. "You sure do know how to keep a woman waiting." Link could only grin to himself at the familiar sound of his old friend, and said nothing. Based on his experience with Mipha in Vah Ruta, he knew there was no use in responding anyway.

"Seems you had a bit of a rough time slowing this tough old thing down!” Urbosa said. Link could already imagine the sly grin spreading across the Gerudo Champion’s face. “I can’t wait to see you take Naboris back from Ganon,” she continued. “But, one thing at a time…”

The objective was clear once again. To retake Vah Naboris, Link would need to recapture its control panels with his Sheikah Slate. He turned to Paya, who glanced around in bewilderment after hearing the disembodied voice.

“That, was Urbosa.” Link explained. "The Gerudo champion…” But Paya just nodded, deciding it better not to press any questions. By now, Vah Naboris had already resumed its steady trot once more - this time, with two intruders inside. Link grabbed Paya’s hand and they quickly ascended the walkway leading up to the entrance of the main chamber of the divine beast, the door firmly slamming shut behind them. Paya’s eyes were wide open with curiosity as soon as they entered. Her arms crossed her chest sheepishly in a loose self-embrace. “I-I’ve… heard the legends of the ancient
beasts…” she murmured. “But I never imagined how enormous… and tough they were.” She seemed to glow with admiration as she spoke. “The technology of my ancestors is truly something to behold…”

“We sadly do not have the luxury of taking the time to appreciate it,” Link replied flatly. “There’s five control panels we need to recapture. Let’s not get distracted.”

At this, Paya immediately broke from her stupor and the pair got to work. They quickly reached one of the main control panels, which upon being scanned by Link’s slate provided the duo with a map of the divine beast. And only then did Link allow himself a brief chance to examine the interior around him. Aesthetically it was rather similar to that of Vah Ruta, with brown and tan colored stone surfaces decorating the walls and floor. Ancient Sheikah markings decorated the walls and corridors, and even the sounds of ancient gears turning and grinding were not quite unlike those found in Mipha’s divine beast.

But this was where the similarities ended. The main area was dominated by an enormous cylinder which, according to the three-dimensional map Link acquired, could be rotated in order to access every control panel inside. And as he painstakingly maneuvered sections the giant cylinder with his Sheikah Slate, the convoluted interior of Naboris began to frustrate Link. He openly wondered why the Sheikah would go through such great lengths to make accessing each room as difficult as possible. Traps and puzzles were everywhere, usually involving the bridging of electrical connections or dodging dangerous rotating spikes. Like everything else in this world, it felt to Link that this place was designed almost entirely for the purpose of killing him outright. That they were in the middle of a race against time did little to ease his frustration and impatience.

Fortunately for Link, Paya’s natural curiosity proved to be quite useful as they proceeded through each room. She had an inquisitive, analytical nature - surely a result of her introverted tendencies - which made puzzle-solving a relative breeze. These traits served as a great counter to Link’s own general aversion to technology. And despite his initial fear at putting her life in danger at every turn, he was quite glad that she’d insisted on joining him after all.

As they made their way through to recapture each terminal, Urbosa confidently addressed the pair with each successful activation, offering her support. Unlike Mipha in Vah Ruta, Urbosa’s instructions carried no sense of incredible longing or wistfulness - only her sheer determination and desire for vengeance. It was incredibly typical of Urbosa, and Link’s heart was filled both with pride and sadness at the Gerudo champion’s confident guidance.

Meanwhile, he also found the sheer lack of resistance to be quite unnerving.

Surely whatever blight Ganon had unleashed upon this divine beast was already aware of their presence. Yet the only enemies Link and Paya encountered were the familiar purplish-red glowing blobs of malice and the strange floating skull creatures they produced. A handful of miniature guardian robots also offered them little trouble at all. So as they hurriedly approached the main control panel in the center of the main cylindrical chamber, Link just knew that they had to be walking right into a trap.

But with the seconds ticking by, and with Vah Naboris drawing ever-closer to Gerudo town, they had no real choice but to fight their way through whatever was coming.

Link turned to Paya, nodded quietly, and held his slate out to the final control panel. A gush of smokey malice immediately erupted from the pedestal. Vah Naboris shuddered, and every window and door inside the divine beast began to seal them away inside the main chamber. Streams of bright-blue light swirled in a whirlwind around Link and Paya, before condensing into solid form directly behind them.
And in that spot, a creature emerged from thin air. Another blight.

This one was not unlike the waterblight that Link had fought inside of Vah Ruta before. But rather than a massive trident, this one wielded a holographic sword and shield set - both of which glowed ominously in contrast with the sparks of purple and red malice making up the creature's flesh. On its head, the red mane once belonging to the ancient demon king Ganondorf whipped and thrashed around the blight as it unleashed an otherworldly shriek of anger. The awful sound reverberated throughout the interior of Naboris, and Link and Paya fought off the urge to cover their ears in response.

"Stay on your edge, Link!" Urbosa's ethereal voice said. The dot in the center of the blight's mechanical mask flashed to life, staring at Link and Paya like a single, eerie glowing eye. "This formidable adversary was made by Ganon, and brought me to a warrior's demise one hundred years ago..."

Paya spared a glance at Link. He drew his trident from his back and took up a tense battle pose, pointing his weapon directly at the phantom's face. Paya drew her own sheikah sword in return, awaiting their enemy's first move.

"Do not allow this to be your end," Urbosa continued. "Fight for your life...

...and its death!"

As she said this, thunderblight instantly attacked. It crossed the short gap between itself and its opponents at lightning speed, zig-zagging across the platform so fast that neither Link nor Paya had any time to react. It closed on them immediately, swinging widely across the pair with its glowing blue blade. Paya's natural defensive pose deflected the blow, but Link was struck across the shoulder and face which caused him to roll to his side and topple off the center platform to the floor below.

Paya immediately leaped off from the platform to Link's side below. But as she fell, a glowing blur flew through the air behind her. She gasped in pain as the blight split open her back with a quick swing of its sword. It re-materialized in the air above them while Paya fell straight to the ground, just managing to land on her feet.

Despite the intense pain from her wound, she quickly made her way over to Link. She offered a hand to help him up, but he pulled her aside and drew his bow, releasing a volley of regular arrows in the blight's direction. As expected, the floating creature's lightning-fast reflexes allowed it to dodge each projectile with little effort. Link began to grit his teeth in frustration as he climbed to his feet and picked up his trident.

The blight already knew it was infinitely faster than its two opponents. It was simply toying with them right now.

Link wiped the blood from the open wound on his scalp, staring furiously at the blight. The pulsating, writhing creature cackled loudly but remained floating in the air above them. It lifted its sword, formed a glowing green ball of lightning, which it sent flying directly towards them.

Link rolled to his left to escape the blast while Paya began to sprint the opposite way in hopes of drawing the phantom's attention away from Link. When she was safely out of range of the blast, Paya spun on her feet to scan the area, only for the blight to surge directly at her with a rapid series of sword slashes. She parried a handful of these strikes, but was swiftly cut down. Its speed was simply too overwhelming.

Satisfied, the creature turned and disappeared from before her, just in time to dodge another volley of
arrows from Link. It descended upon him next in a split-second, easily outpacing Link's counterattacks with his trident.

Link and Paya were already both bloody, angry, and exhausted. And we haven't even landed a single blow yet, Link bemoaned, as the blight continued to unleash its series of attacks on him. But while he thought this, a small blur moved in from behind the creature. Paya had already recovered from the attack, setting her sights on the monster as it focused all of its attention on Link for the time being. Link caught sight of her, gave a nod, then suddenly moved into the creature's attacks. He absorbed a couple of blows and fell to his knees. But it was enough.

Paya leaped through the air, embedding a pair of Sheikah throwing knives into the blight's spine. It shrieked loudly in pain before teleporting away to regroup once more.

"This is our chance," Link said through gritted teeth. Paya nodded, and together they bounded after the reeling creature as soon as it re-appeared across the room. Link arrived first, dashing and stabbing out with his trident then spinning back on his feet to unleash a vicious flurry of stabs at the phantom. It parried every single strike. Meanwhile, Paya arrived next, flipping over Link and behind the monster in hopes of catching it off-guard. Her own strikes on the creature also failed; it was now parrying strikes from both of them simultaneously with an incredible, impossible blur of rapid movements.

Just how fast is this stupid thing?! Link thought angrily as he picked up the pace of his attacks. In his furious impatience, Link's movements were growing more predictable, more forced. Even Paya became more and more agitated, as each of her attacks with her Sheikah blade were bounced back with incredible ease. After several moments of this seemingly endless defensive stand by Ganon's blight, it finally spotted an opening. Link winded up a powerful strike with his trident, hesitating just enough for the blight to prepare for a powerful attack of its own. Link attempted to strike first but the blight was ready. Link's hasty attack bounced off the monster's glowing shield, cracking the trident. In the same move the creature spun around and brought its sword straight down across Link's chest.

It just barely missed the fatal blow. The chest of Mipha's zora armor split open down the middle, a spatter of blood sprayed across the floor. Link recoiled, dropped his cracked trident, and collapsed backwards onto the ground. The blight spared no hesitation, appearing in front of him in another quick blur of speed. Link drew his sword to counter it; but before it could do anything else, Paya leaped up and tackled the beast from behind, dropping her own sword next to Link as she did. She drew her knives and began to stab rapidly at the creature's head, pocking its rotting flesh with gaping wounds. In anger, it reached behind itself and threw Paya to the ground in front of it. It snarled furiously at her before lunging quickly in her direction with its outstretched sword to finish her.

Sensing the attack, Paya spun on her heels, lifted her knives, and stabbed downward straight into the single, glowing, robotic eye of thunderblight's mask. In the same moment, Link had snatched up Paya's dropped weapon and dashed at the distracted creature, gashing it across its back with both swords. The creature teleported across the interior of Naboris, clutching its face and body and screeching with incredible pain.

Link stumbled over to Paya, screaming in anguish and fury as she collapsed face-first to the floor. They'd finally hit their target, sure. They'd done their damage.

But so had the blight.

A pool of blood began to form under Paya's lifeless body. A jagged hole was visible in the center of her back. She'd been stabbed straight through the chest by the blight's lunging attack.

She was slowly dying.
"Are the preparations ready?" Riju asked.

"Yes my lady." Captain Teake replied. "Our army is stationed all along the outer walls, awaiting the arrival of Naboris."

"What about the recovery team?"

Teake nodded. "Geared up and on their way to Kara Kara Bazaar as we speak."

"Excellent. And the evacuations?"

"..."

"Captain Teake?"

"...I'm sorry my lady, but the evacuations are... well, they're..." She paused. "...They're not happening."

"What?!" Riju peered out from her watchtower on the southeast side of Gerudo Town. She scanned the center of the city, but saw nobody milling about as they would usually be. She raised an eyebrow at Teake. "Looks to me that there's no one here, Captain."

"Look down, Chief."

Riju poked her head out of the window, staring straight down to the roads directly beneath the tower. And she gasped. Nearly every woman and child was gathering together, flocking towards the entrance of Gerudo Town. And nearly each one was armed to the teeth with bows, bomb arrows, and other weaponry.

"I don't think we can ever question their loyalty, or their devotion to you," Teake said. "I couldn't convince them otherwise. They have promised to defend this city at any cost. And it's all due to your leadership--"

"No, it's not." Riju said, grinning. "It's all due to the strength of the Gerudo spirit!" She marched over to the doorway leading to the staircase descending down the watchtower. "If our own citizens intend to stand in defense of this city, then I must be right there on the ground alongside them!"

"Wait!" Teake cried, running alongside her as she descended the stairs. "It's not safe!"

But Riju waved off her concern. Her broken arm bounced and throbbed with pain with each step, but she did her best to conceal it. "Safe or not, it is my duty as a leader. I've made my decision, and I stand by it." She opened the bottom door of the tower, spilling out into the crowds of people milling about in the street. They immediately nodded and cheered with respect for their youthful leader.

"And besides," Riju said, as she and Teake began to make their way to the city entrance. "I believe that we truly have nothing to fear. Our army is strong and well-trained. For the most part." She nodded at the entrance guards, then made her way to their army's position just outside the fortress walls. Hundreds of soldiers gathered in neat rows, standing at the ready. Captain Teake beamed at their devotion, but still felt a sense of incredible unease at Riju's nonchalant attitude to the situation.

"This is all more of a precaution than anything else, anyway." Riju explained. "I have faith in our hero. He will stop Vah Naboris in time."

A look of confusion spread on Teake's face. "...Hero...? Wait, you mean that Hylian... the one from
earlier?"
Riju nodded.

"...The one that was obviously a voe, but everyone was too ignorant to notice?"
Riju nodded.

"I see, I see..." she peered out across the hazy desert sands towards the looming dust cloud in the distance. It drew ever-closer with each passing moment, yet the Gerudo people stood defiant and strong despite its ominous approach. As a leader, Riju could not have been more proud.

Teake crossed her arms and shrugged as she gazed out in the distant horizon. "And how, praytell, can you be so sure that the voe will be successful?" she asked.

Riju winked. "Easy. Just call it... a vai’s intuition!"

Another slash, another gush of blood, another gasp of pain.

Link staggered backwards, angry, feral, frustrated. Ganon’s blight arced across the interior of Vah Naboris, flickering menacingly before Link’s eyes.

*It's not working*... He spared a glance at Paya’s unmoving body near him and cringed solemnly.

*I've failed you, Paya. I'm sorry...*

With a bright flash of light the blight materialized before Link again. He swiped at the creature with anger and haste, cleanly missing his mark as it teleported away again. It appeared behind him, slashing him across the back before disappearing yet again. Link stumbled forward, fell to his knees. His armor was soaked with his blood, which trickled and flowed to the ground beneath him. A familiar darkness tunneled his vision as he started to lose consciousness.

He attempted to regain his footing once more, when a shrill cackle suddenly rang out through Vah Naboris, piercing Link’s ears.

The blight was taunting him again.

Link coughed up blood, shook his sweaty and bloody head. He tried to let out a scream of pure rage, failed, coughed once more. His vision fogged. His eyes were clouded with red.

*“Too tense...”*

He held both Sheikah blades loosely at his sides as the blight descended upon him again. Link’s movements grew incredibly sluggish as he fruitlessly attempted to parry the blight’s attacks with both weapons. His arms felt like dead weights, his energy seemed to be draining completely from his body...

*“You are too tense...”*

Time seemed to slow down around Link. The blight hovered high in the air in front of him, holding its sword in the air and charging up one final electrical blast to finish the job. Link once again fell to his knees in pain, glanced at his cracked trident still gleaming on the ground near him. Despite himself, a feeling of warmth entered his spirit as his thoughts turned to Mipha...

*“You are still too tense...”*
He could feel her loose embrace from behind him, could feel the warmth of her silky hands on his own. Could still feel the touch of her gentle voice behind him...

“You must roll with the tide…”

In a bright flash of blue light, Link’s mind was right back in Zora’s Domain. He was but a child, so young, so inexperienced, so bright-eyed and happy. In his hands was a Zora spear, silver and gleaming in the sunlight. Mipha’s hands clutched him from behind as she guided his movement yet again.

“It appears,” she said, “That old habits are hard to break! You know you cannot always force these things…” Mipha’s melodic voice filled Link’s heart with comfort as she guided his spear thrusts back and forth in front of him. Link spun around, blue eyes shining as he glanced up at his instructor.

“I know!” he said. “You already told me that, but-” He spun around and stabbed forcefully at the air in front of him, “-I have to be powerful if I want to defeat my enemies right?” His innocent smile pulled at Mipha’s heartstrings, but she remained defiant.

“Even the largest boat is still subject to the will of the waves,” she explained. “Even the toughest rock in a river can be weathered to dust over time.” She grabbed his arms from behind again, a little bit tighter now.

“So! You have a choice... Will you resist the waves?  
...Or will you be like water...?”

She released her grasp, and Link’s movements began to smooth out once more. His movements were fluid, his tension was gone. It seemed he had made his choice for now...

Link snapped back from his vision, staring at his own reflection in the pool of blood below him. He tried to cough again, expecting another spatter. But nothing came out.

A blue-green glow emanated from the scale on the shoulder of his Zora armor, and he felt the last drop of pain and tension leaving his body. His wounds were completely gone. His energy was restored. His heart was happy, proud. The vision had only lasted a split second. But it was more than enough.

“Thanks, Mipha,” he said aloud, as the thunderous blight unleashed its lightning attack in his direction. “Old habits indeed…” A serene grin spread across Link’s face, and he easily rolled backwards and out of the way of the blast. The blight disappeared, arcing rapidly in a zigzag pattern in his direction.

Link held both swords out at the ready, preparing to parry the attack. The blight appeared in front of him, swiping hastily at lightning speed. But before it struck, Link rolled to his side. The attack whiffed above him, its momentum causing the blight to spin in a complete circle as Link continued to roll. He spun around in a single motion, stabbing backwards behind himself with both blades. A loud piercing shriek let Link know that he’d struck it cleanly.

And now, it was his turn to go on the offensive.

The sword fight continued, and Link began to use thunderblight’s moves against it. His attacks flowed smoothly, with him carefully predicting and dodging the phantom’s moves one moment then swiftly striking back the next as it recoiled away from his advancing attack. This push-and-pull battle was wearing down the terrible creature, which was now having trouble seeing out of its damaged
An eye for an eye...

With the tables now turned, the blight attempted one last-gasp attack at the rejuvenated Link. It altered its attack pattern, teleporting rapidly in a circle around Link as it looked for an opening. Its sword and shield sparked with green electrical energy as a deterrent.

But Link was ready. He didn't bother following it with his eyes, instead keeping his ears tuned into the sounds of the monster's movements around him. He knew if he attempted to parry this next strike that he would surely be electrocuted in the process. He needed to be patient, needed to wait for the exact moment when he could-

There.

Thunderblight lunged in from Link's left side in an instant, ready to cut him down. Link spun to his left, dropping the sword in his left hand and catching the blight's own sword-wielding hand with a firm grasp. In the same motion, he stabbed upward at its throat with his other sword, piercing it straight through its head.

Got him.

They stood there, frozen, for what seemed like hours. And for a moment Link wondered if he'd finally slain this awful beast.

Finally, the blight dropped its weapons. A horrible squeal erupted from its mouth and it floated high above the the main chamber of Naboris, its body dripping and pouring malice to the floor like great drops of blood. This time, a new weapon appeared in the creature's hands - a lightning rod, which it pointed up towards the sky.

And yet, there's more...

Bright-green streams of energy streamed upwards all around thunderblight, and then a bolt of lightning struck the rod from the ceiling of Naboris. Electrically-charged pillars began raining down around the it, arcing electricity around them in an effort to kill Link from a distance. Link dropped his swords and drew his Sheikah Slate from his hip.

These things better be made of metal, he thought to himself as he activated magnesis.

It was just as he hoped. A glowing blue hook-shaped magnet materialized out of his slate, releasing a stream of yellow energy which latched directly onto one of the phantom's pillars. Link lifted his slate, maneuvering the stream of energy to lift the pillar straight out of the ground and straight in the direction of thunderblight. An enormous bolt of lightning struck from the heavens, bouncing off of the electrified pillar and zapping the phantom with all of its lethal energy. Now stunned, the blight fell straight to the floor of Van Naboris with a loud thud.

With a primal scream, Link suddenly swung his slate down in front of him with all his might. The stream of yellow energy emanating from magnesis followed suit, pulling the levitating pillar straight down after the monster with tremendous speed and force. The sharp tip of the metal pillar slammed straight into the chest of thunderblight. This time, there was no scream of pain, no reaction.

The creature died instantly. The battle was over.

"I'm dead. I must be dead."
Oh, Link... I'm so sorry...

Paya's life began to flash before her eyes. She remembered her birth in Kakariko Village. She remembered the death of her parents, whom she barely knew.

She remembered the sadness in Impa's eyes as she dutifully raised the young orphan, trained her, and loved her. She remembered the oath she took to protect her guardian's homestead at any cost.

And she remembered Link. The man who gave her hope once more. She longed to be by his side again... but she knew it could no longer be so. And she knew that she had to accept that.

Strangely, there were other memories there too - memories which did not belong to her. She saw Link's tragic upbringing in the watery utopia of Zora's Domain. She saw the love he held for its people, his respect for their king, and his brotherly relationship with the infant Prince Sidon.

Even back then, Link was courageous and selfless, confident and handsome...

And finally, she saw her. Lady Mipha.

Her face was obscured by the brilliant sunshine overhead, but it was clear to Paya that she had been quite beautiful indeed. She saw the way she adored Link, and how Link adored her in kind, their bond strengthening with each moment spent together. She saw Link himself grow with the passage of time, his outgoing demeanor devolving into the attitude of a silent warrior - unfeeling, unemotional. She saw the pain on Mipha's face as she witnessed the boy she loved become so overburdened by the task set forth before him-

"You love him, don't you?"

The stream of memories shattered abruptly around Paya. She could feel herself floating, surrounded by endless walls of the purest white, brilliant and blinding. And before her stood the source of the voice: one beautiful, elegant, red-finned Zora princess.

A sensation of warmth entered Paya's spirit as she addressed Mipha.

"I do."

Mipha smiled back happily. "As do I," she said, laughing to herself. "A difficult thing to avoid, it would seem..."

Paya gave no response. She opened her mouth to ask Mipha where they were, but the words just wouldn't come.

"I have a request for you, if you would." Mipha said.

Paya nodded, and room began to dissolve around her, first to gray, then blue, then black. She could feel her energy, her life, returning to her, could feel her wounds beginning to heal...

"Please... watch over Link for me..."

Paya gasped awake, her eyes filled with tears as she clasped her fists tightly in her lap. Her heart was filled with incredible sorrow, sincere regret for the loss of the one Link had loved so much...

She looked up, and nearly recoiled in shock. Link was crouched over her, hand on her chest, a faint blue afterglow slowly fading from his outstretched palm. He pulled it back to himself, collapsed to his rear in relief, and smiled. "Thanks again, Mipha" he said, closing his eyes. "It worked..."
Paya felt around her chest for the open wound, but it was completely gone. All that remained of her injury was a jagged hole through both ends of her Sheikah top, and the drying pool of blood on the ground around her. She grasped at her once-ruined eye and smiled. It was in great shape - only a faded scar remained. She made an effort to stand, but Link grasped her shoulder and forced her back down.

"No sudden movements!" Link said. "I want to be sure you're fully healed before we move on..."

Paya blushed slightly as Link moved behind her, investigating the exit wound on her back. She nearly leaped to her feet from his gentle touch. "I-I... saw her," she said. "I saw Mipha."

Link's hand froze against her back, but he said nothing. Paya turned to face him, climbing to her feet despite his protests.

"She was... beautiful. And incredibly kind." She smiled warmly. "I can see why you loved her... why you still love her."

Link stood up himself, staring down solemnly at his broken, bloodied Zora armor - the proof of his devotion to the late Lady Mipha.

Paya coughed. "Ahem... Isn't there something you need to do?" she said, giggling.

Link's eyes widened. "The control panel! I totally forgot..." He sprinted up the nearby walkway to the main pedestal at the center of Vah Naboris, grabbing the cracked ceremonial trident on the way. He whipped out his Sheikah Slate and scanned it on the pedestal's surface. Its orange-color glow immediately gleamed to blue, and the strange Sheikah monument it was attached to did the same. Vah Naboris shuddered, then unleashed a triumphant roar as it slowed to a halt with a tremendous crash of stone and sand. Its legs slowly collapsed underneath it, its stomach slamming against the ground below.

Paya joined Link on the main platform and wrapped him in a friendly hug. Link returned the embrace. "It's over," he said. "We did it. We finally finished it-"

"Still popular with the vai, even after all this time..." a voice interjected from nearby. Link and Paya turned to their side, and Link smiled.

"Though I suppose..." Urbosa continued, "That after a hundred years one could be forgiven for two-timing..." Her ghostly visage descended a nearby staircase in their direction. On Urbosa's face was her usual, confident stare. Each deliberate step exuded control and dominance as she descended. "I knew you wouldn't let us down, Link. Thanks to your valor and skill, my soul is free and Naboris is ours once again. Which means that finally... we can complete what we started years ago." Urbosa's hand found its place on her waist, and she tilted her head and smiled. "We Gerudo have no tolerance for unfinished business..."

Link wasn't much of a conversationalist when it came to Urbosa. So he found it appropriate to allow her to speak uninhibited for the time being.

"I've waited so long for the moment to see you finally rush Hyrule Castle..." she said. "As well as for the moment when I incinerate Ganon into a pile of ash. Which reminds me, I wanted to give you a little something... something that I believe will come in handy for you in the battles to come..." She reached out her left hand, and a glowing ball of energy emerged from it. "Please accept this, the embodiment of my vengeance, which has come to be known as Urbosa's Fury." With her right hand she released her trademark snap as the energy soared across the room and filled Link's body. Link held his own hand skyward, returning her snap in kind. A flash of lightning roared from the
heavens, exploding in an arc immediately around him and Paya.

Like Mipha before her, Urbosa had gifted Link with her most prized skill. "Thank you, Urbosa." He finally said. "I will be sure to channel your awful temper each time I use it..."

Urbosa roared with laughter at Link's response. "Ha ha! It's so good to see you again, my old friend." She held out her ghostly hand, and Link grasped it and shook it firmly. "Same to you, Lady Urbosa." He nodded respectfully. They released their grasp, and Urbosa turned towards Paya.

"And look at you! You've either aged as well as Link has... or..." she leaned in to examine Paya more closely. "Or, perhaps you're Impa's descendant?"

Paya still appeared to be quite shocked at the entire experience, reverting back to her usual, timid self. "I-I-I, I'm her granddaughter!" she stammered.

Link rolled his eyes. It seemed Urbosa was still the master at making people feel uncomfortable... Urbosa roared with laughter again, pulling her face away from Paya's. "Definitely not Impa. Far too timid." She winked. "But just as talented a warrior, evidently."

She spun on her heels and sighed to herself. "Link... both you and the princess... I know you have suffered much regarding what happened to us Champions. Especially with... well, you know. But I believe this is simply how things had to happen. No one need carry blame. So please, make it clear so Zelda understands that."

Urbosa paused, staring wistfully at a distant wall. "She's just like her mother, the princess. Always shouldering the blame on her own. Always looking to protect those she loved by shielding them from the hurt." She turned to face Link again. "But she need not carry that same burden. Tell her that."

"I will." Link said. "I promise."

Urbosa paused for a brief moment, crossed her arms, and finally grinned.

"Sorry Link," she said. "Sometimes I forget myself... and get lost in the past."

A glow of yellow surrounded both Link and Paya as Urbosa began to teleport them out of Vah Naboris. They disappeared in a flash of light - yet Urbosa's words still echoed inside Link's mind.

"Link... save the kingdom. Save Hyrule. ...and please, take care of my little bird..."

A flash of light gleamed at the ruined front entrance of Gerudo Town. From thin air, Link and Paya suddenly materialized beneath Vah Naboris to a raucous chorus of cheers and shouts from a relieved populace.

"Congratulations, Link," Riju said, grinning. "And sarqso! Thank you! Just in the nick of time as well!" Link raised an eyebrow, then glanced up at Vah Naboris. He palmed his forehead as he finally saw the aftermath of the beast's attempted strike on Gerudo Town. The entire front entrance of the city had been penetrated by its front carapace, and several tall buildings had been toppled. Naboris's legs were also riddled with soot from bomb arrows as well as a massive tangle of cables, all of which had been used by the Gerudo in an effort to slow it down.

"You had me worried there for a moment," Riju said. "Captain Teake thought maybe you'd both
died in there or something!"

Link and Paya looked at each other, rubbing the backs of their heads sheepishly.

"I'm... sorry for the mess." Link finally said. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Not to worry, my dear friend," Riju said, patting Link on the back with her good arm as she spoke. "Not a single injury here. Never underestimate the spirit of the Gerudo!"

The crowd roared with delight at Riju's words, moving in closer to Link and Paya as they did.

"We have quite a bit of rebuilding ahead of us, to be sure," Riju continued. "But we Gerudo are tough. We'll persevere, as we always do." She held her fist up in triumph. "Isn't that right?!" The crowd roared and cheered once again in response, grouping around Link and Paya and lifting them on their shoulders as they paraded the pair around the market square in celebration. Extra attention in particular was given to Link, and he could swear that some of these ladies were... copping a feel as they carried him around. He looked back at Riju with desperate eyes, practically begging her for assistance. But Riju simply crossed her arms and smiled as she spoke with Teake.

"...And the keese is out of the cave, so to speak," Riju said. "The savior of Gerudo Town... is a rather handsome young voe."

Teake scratched at her arm nervously as she observed the scene. "...I don't think he'll survive the night," she said, only half-joking. Riju burst into laughter, partly in response to Teake's comment, and partly in sincere relief at the conclusion of this intense battle. She glanced over at Paya. The young Sheikah warrior's arms were crossed as she was paraded around herself, and a minor scowl was quite evident on her face.

And Riju instantly knew why.

“Well, well!” Riju yelled towards Link from across the square. "I never thought you'd be such a glutton for female attention!"

Link heard her loud teasing, frowning slightly. He couldn’t quite put his finger on when... but he swore he had once heard those exact same words, long long ago...

Chapter End Notes

And we're finally, mercifully, finished with the Gerudo Arc! (And before you ask... no, this is not going to become a LinkXPay a fic!)

Coming soon will be the short but sweet Goron Arc - but with a nice little detour along the way...

In the meantime, next up is Memories of Mipha Part 7: Hylian Guard. See you then.
Zelda wasn’t quite sure at what point she began to harbor romantic feelings for her young guard.

Was it after his dramatic rescue of her in the desert? Or was it perhaps when he finally began to open up to her as they spent more and more time together? It could even have been well before his drawing of the Master Sword, and she simply had been repressing her feelings at the time. Whatever the case, Zelda found herself more than just a little bit smitten with this peculiar, silent, brave Hylian warrior...

“There’s one! Oh! And another!” Bearing the widest of grins, Zelda scanned the field around her with her Sheikah Slate’s camera. She seemed to be perfectly in her element out here in the open plains of Hyrule, with a plethora of flora and fauna to study and research.

“The flowers we have in Hyrule aren’t just beautiful…” she explained, snapping another shot of the flowerbed below her, “they’re also quite useful as ingredients for a variety of things…”

Link stood behind Zelda as she worked. He found her childlike curiosity to be fairly amusing, and certainly a contrast from her usual dour self. As a result, this relatively short break from their travels was quite welcome; though Link’s impatient sense of duty severely soured the positive mood. They’d have to get a move on sooner rather than later, after all.

But as he once again caught a glimpse of Zelda’s contagious, vibrant smile, Link just shrugged. He supposed that could spare at least another minute or two - for Zelda’s sake.

Standing near Link, the princess flicked through the slate and examined the pictures she’d taken. But she suddenly gasped as something caught her eye. She knelt down carefully, peering at one particular flower that stood out from the rest.

It was utterly beautiful. It bore brilliant white petals, which faded to blue towards the center. The flower seemed to sparkle and shimmer against the sunlight, magnifying its allure against the sweeping backdrop of pure green grass around them.

“This one here is called the silent princess,” Zelda explained to Link, as if anticipating his next question.

Great. But I think the real question here, Link thought to himself, is whether I can eat it or not.

“...It’s a rare, endangered species...”

Nope.

“Despite our efforts, we can’t get them to grow domestically yet,” Zelda said, bending over even further as she began to crawl towards the flower. “The princess can only thrive out here in the wild. All that we can hope...” Zelda sat up, clutching her hand at her chest, “is that the species will be strong enough to prosper on its own...”

As Zelda crawled about through the fields, Link found himself diverting his eyes away from her. It wasn’t that he was disinterested in her words - he was most certainly listening to her. The analogy between herself and the flower was rather blatant, and he could definitely empathize with her plight...
...But she really needs to break the habit of bending over like that when she's wearing tights, he thought. Any of the other shameless guards at the castle would just be ogling her backside incessantly-

“Oh! Is that what I think it is?!” Zelda cried out. “Look at this!” Still oblivious to her appearance, she bent over once more and crawled rapidly in front of Link, forcing him to divert his eyes again until she turned back around.

“I don’t believe it, but I actually caught one!” She walked upright on her knees back towards Link, clutching something small between her hands. “This delicacy is known to have very, very potent effects under the proper circumstances. Ta-da!” She carefully opened up her hands, revealing a small green frog with large yellow eyes. It stared up at him in wonder, while Zelda continued to speak rapidly with a guileless excitement that Link could barely keep up with.

“Research from the castle shows ingesting one of these can actually augment certain abilities,” she said. The frog hopped up and down in her hands as she bubbled with excitement at her find. “We wouldn’t be in a controlled environment out here, but with your level of physical fitness you’d be a perfect candidate for the study!”

Link recoiled a bit at the thought of eating a harmless, cute little creature like this, but Zelda was persistent. She held the frog right up to Link’s face. “Go on!” She said. “Taste it!”

No longer amused by Zelda’s behavior, Link calmly shrugged and snatched the frog from Zelda’s hand. Gripping it tightly, he ran his tongue all the way down its back, slipped it in his pocket, then hurriedly turned around to mount his horse again.

“Wait, you… that’s it?!” Zelda said. With a show of indignance she marched right after Link, demanding he finish the job. “I wanted you to eat it, not lick it—”

“You said to taste it,” Link deadpanned. “Should have been more specific.” He looked down at his pocket, then back at Zelda. Her innocent, pouty face nearly made him change his mind. But he stood his ground. “…Maybe later. We need to get going, unfortunately. We’re getting short on time…”

It was true. A letter that the pair received during their second trip to Vah Naboris had explicitly summoned them back to Hyrule Castle earlier than scheduled. The king had requested Zelda’s presence prior to the next Champion’s meeting, which was scheduled to take place soon. And despite nearly two weeks worth of near-constant riding, they were still in danger of running late.

Regardless, it seemed Zelda’s priorities were elsewhere.

“Hmmph, and here I had come to believe that you weren’t so picky about your food! Suit yourself then.” She turned her chin up and mounted her horse, spurred it with her heels, and began to ride away. Link rolled his eyes and did the same, while the poor little frog continued to croak loudly from the inside of his pocket in protest...

“Is that Link?” cried a female voice.

“It is! That’s him! Eeeeeeeeh!” yelled another.

A chorus of shrieks erupted at the entrance of Hyrule Castle Town, and a crowd of adoring fans began to surround Link and Zelda. The pair had only just arrived there, and already they were wishing to be somewhere else. Anywhere else but here.

“Link! Link! Is it true that you once slayed a Lynel all by yourself?!” someone yelled. Link scratched
at the back of his head, trying to decide if he should respond. After all, he couldn’t take all the credit for that particular-

“What’s it like being the Hylian Champion? Is it scary?” someone else asked. To this, Link simply shook his head no, much to their delight. But he instantly regretted responding to them. It seemed to only empower their relentless questioning rather than satisfy them.

“Link, hey, Revali says that he could beat you in a one-on-one fight! Is that true?”

“Oy, Link, are you single? Please tell me you’re single!”

Now incredibly annoyed, Zelda grasped Link’s hand and began to pull him through the hordes of people and straight in the direction of Hyrule Castle. Still, the curious crowds followed them quite closely, peppering Link with their increasingly juvenile questions.

“Link, what’s your favorite color?!”  
Green.

“Have you ever been on a date?” Yes.

“What kind of shampoo do you use?” None.

And finally: “Did you really rescue the princess from the Yiga Clan in Gerudo Desert?”

Zelda blushed at this. And for whatever reason, Link’s stoic expression finally broke slightly. “...Word... sure gets around fast...” he muttered quietly, as they continued to make their escape. Zelda noticed Link’s subtle expression change, and her neutral expression quickly gave way to a smirk. Was he… actually enjoying all this?

“Well, well…” she sneered, coming to a stop in front of a nearby bazaar. “I never imagined you’d be such a glutton for female attention!” She released her grip and elbowed Link lightly as she said this. But he ignored her, focusing instead on the growing crowd of fans surrounding them. It seemed that there was truly no escape from them, not with such high profiles. But the large concentration of people visiting from all over the country begged a rather important question...

“Why... are there so many people in Castle Town?” Link whispered. “I don’t think that I have never seen it quite this busy...”

Zelda placed her hands on her hips. “Well, father’s letter mentioned a special presentation was planned for some time after our arrival. It appears that it’s a public event as well, a celebration of the Champions. I suppose we will find out more about it at the meeting tonight…” She turned to Link and smiled. “‘Word sure gets around fast,’ right?”

“Princess! Princess!” A voice shouted from nearby. “Oh, thank goodness you’ve arrived…” Zelda’s attendants - along with several guards - came flooding into the square from the direction of the castle. The crowds finally parted around them, creating a path for the princess to depart. One of the female attendants turned to Link and nodded respectfully. “Thank you, Master Link, for taking good care of the princess.” She winked. “But we can take it from here...”

Zelda’s entourage surrounded her and swiftly whisked her away towards the castle as fast as they’d arrived. Zelda called out to Link one last time while she departed. “Meet me outside of the royal chambers at four o’clock!” she yelled. “There are several things I wish to discuss with you later… in private.” She was out of sight before Link could bother to respond.

As if on cue, Link’s loyal fans immediately swarmed around him for yet another interrogation session. Despite admittedly being flattered by all the attention, he hardly reveled in it at all. To make
matters worse, his stoic response seemed to enhance his already attractive mystique; but it also fortunately served to deflect the crowd’s relentless questions without any real harm, as he quietly made his own way in the direction of the towering Hyrule Castle.

“Link!” someone shouted over the sea of voices. “I just have one question! It’s about the princess!” Link nearly groaned aloud. He knew what was coming...

“...What exactly... is your relationship with Zelda?”

And there it was. Link grimaced internally. He had been anticipating the question from the moment Zelda made her ambiguous parting comment. Part of him sincerely believed that she’d made the comment entirely on purpose, knowing what would result. He’d be sure to pay his friend back for this.

Very soon.

A chorus of oos and ohs sounded from the crowd, but they began to quiet down as Link finally stopped walking and turned to address them. He paused for a brief moment, thoughtfully considered this intrusive question.

My relationship with Zelda... well... I suppose...

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the frog from earlier. Several of the young ladies closest to Link recoiled a bit, but they maintained a wide stare of curious, hesitant wonder. Grasping the amphibious creature tightly, Link peered deeply into its large eyes, looked up at the waiting faces of the crowd...

...then bit the frog’s head clean off.

The resulting screams were utterly deafening. Shouts of fear and surprise and laughter filled the air around Link as the crowds of shocked fans chaotically departed from around him. He looked down at the half eaten frog, threw the rest in his mouth, and finally smiled to himself.

This... actually doesn’t taste half-bad...

“Bahahahahaha! Now that, I gotta say, is classic Link…” A rumbling laugh reverberated throughout the square, causing Link to turn his head. It was the goron champion, Daruk. And he was laughing quite uncontrollably at the scene before him.

Link smiled in return, sincerely. Because if any one of the other Champions could appreciate his oddly subtle sense of humor - aside from Mipha of course - it would be Daruk.

Careful to watch for any brave fans that might suddenly ambush him, Link made his way over towards Daruk. It had been some time since he’d last seen his hefty goron friend, so he was quite pleased to have run into him in Castle Town square.

“Good to see ya, brother. How ya been?” Daruk said. Link flashed him a thumbs-up, then returned the question his way.

“Ah me, ya know…” Daruk answered. "Happy. Bored. Hungry! Ha ha!"

Link quite liked Daruk. He was brave, yet kind. Deceptively simple, yet really quite intelligent...

“So what brings ya to the castle?”
...most of the time anyway.

Link raised an eyebrow at Daruk, who slowly began to realize his mistake.

“Oh. Right. The Champion’s meeting…” he rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. “Stupid question. Sorry.” He glanced at his other hand, which clutched a massive half-eaten chunk of stone, and took a huge bite. “Can you believe there’s only one restaurant in this entire town that serves rock roast? It’s a tragedy, I tell ya…” Chunks of gravel spewed from Daruk’s mouth with every other word he spoke, but Link merely chuckled silently. The goron champion’s lack of manners never bothered him in the slightest. In fact, they reminded him of himself, really.

“Why are you loafing around here anyway?” Link asked, surprising Daruk.

Daruk finished his roast with a large chomp, clapped his hands clean, then placed them on his hips. “Well, I heard you’d be arrivin’ fairly soon. Wanted to be the very first person to greet you!” He gave Link’s back a hearty slap. “Been really missin’ you there, little guy.”

Link rubbed at his aching back, sparing a wincing grin in Daruk’s direction. He’d missed the old goron too - just not so much these backbreaking ‘love taps’ of his.

“By the way, I noticed Zelda’s not with you anymore…” Daruk elbowed Link forcefully, knocking him off balance. He’d actually witnessed Zelda’s departure just now, but couldn’t help teasing Link just a bit. “What’s the matter? Lover’s quarrel?”

Link shook his head. “No. Things are fine. She’s become a good friend. We get along well.”

Daruk grinned at the deadpan responses. He knew he shouldn’t be teasing Link this much, but-

“Gotta say Link, I’m pretty happy to know you two are getting along so well. Already seemed like a warmer relationship the last time you visited…” he rubbed his chin deviously. “Be careful though! A lot of guys ‘round here have their eyes on the princess. Better make your move before they do, amirite?” Now, Link’s perfectly stoic face was generally cold enough to prevent the average person from reading him...

...But not Daruk.

The boisterous goron could easily see right through his facial expressions - or lack thereof. And in this case… Daruk found himself needing to backpedal on his statement a bit.

“Aw, I’m really sorry about that Link, didn’t mean to tease you so bad there.” He turned his head in the direction of the castle, where Zelda was likely making her way up the winding tunnels and stairways towards her room. “I really am just glad your relationship isn’t stone cold anymore. It might not seem like it… but the princess needs our serious support right now.” He turned to face Link again. “Romantic, or otherwise.”

Link said nothing, but Daruk slapped him on the back once more. This time, a little less violently. “Anyway, I’ll quit with the jokes,” he said. “After all... the only person on your mind right now is probably-”

“REVALI!”

A chorus of shrieks echoed through the city streets as an avian silhouette blotted out the sun directly above the pair. Several people flooded into the streets and after the gliding rito, hoping desperately to meet him. Revali performed a few barrel rolls before dive-bombing the center of the square, landing gracefully on his feet in a theatrical bow.
“...Time to go,” Link said, flatly.

“Why?” Daruk asked.

Link shrugged. “Well, I am still a part of the Royal Guard after all. I need to report to my direct superiors and see to the soldiers under my command.”

“Aw, I understand Link. We’ll have to catch up later…” Daruk looked to his right. Revali was busy signing autographs and posing dramatically for his die-hard fans. He turned back to Link. “Besides, I wouldn’t wanna hang around that flyboy over there if I were you either!”

“And what about you?” Link asked. “All of the Champions have a pretty high profile now. It’s a bit of a nuisance really. Sure you want to stick around here yourself?”

Daruk grinned. “Ha ha! Oh, don’t worry about me, brother. I don’t really get any attention anyway.” Scratching his nose, he glanced around at the dozens of fellow gorons milling about in relative obscurity. “That’s the best part about being a goron in Castle Town. Hylians think we all look exactly the same!”

Finally alone in her room, Zelda quickly got undressed from her Champion uniform. She’d dismissed her attendants, insisting on changing on her own. She had, after all, been taking care of herself just fine for the last couple of months; she wasn’t about to settle back into old, lazy habits anytime soon.

She sighed to herself as she examined some of the scars laced across her body, the physical consequence of her travels around Hyrule. It wasn’t that she was upset about them, not at all. In fact, she actually thought they looked kind of… cool, as Link would say. No, what grieved her was that her first journey alone with Link had finally ended for now. What began as a dreadful mission with an infuriatingly silent knight had quickly morphed into a rather pleasant - and daresay fun - experience indeed. The last week after their departure from Gerudo had been particularly enjoyable; but this joy had been severely undermined with the dread of her inevitable return to the castle. Its suffocating walls and peering, judging eyes threatened to crush her soul into pure nothingness. From the very moment she’d arrived, the overwhelming weight of responsibility began to press down on her yet again. She’d only been back for an hour or so, and she already found herself wanting to leave her home once more.

Her hand traced one particular long gash on the side of her abdomen. She found it funny that she’d spent so much time pressing Link to request a healing session with Mipha, yet she hadn’t bothered to request one for herself. But on the flipside, the scars that remained simply reminded her of her precious time with Link. So she was, of course, in no real rush to heal them.

She sighed aloud again. Out in the wilds with her appointed knight, Zelda had been given a taste of true freedom, that which she had longed for every day, every second of her life.

If only...

She shook her head rapidly, snapping herself out of her stupor. Mustn’t dwell, she thought. Duty calls once more...

She walked to the front of her mirror with her royal dress in-hand...

...and she giggled quietly as she caught sight of her reflection. She was a complete mess. Her hair was in tangles, dark circles were evident just under her eyes, her eyebrows were... well, thicker than ever. And she was pretty sure there was still a light layer of dirt caked on the surface of her face. Surely her attendants would chide her for dirtying her formal attire with a week’s worth of filth, but
she hardly cared really. She hadn’t any time for a bath right now anyway. She quickly pulled the
dress down over her head and adjusted its ridiculous flowing sleeves. As she slipped on her long
white gloves, she grinned. She was only meeting with Link right now anyway; and he was the type
that hardly cared about appearances - or smells - at all.

Zelda did a quick brush-through of her hair, slipped on her tiara, then abruptly left the room. It was
well after four o’clock now. She’d already wasted too much time earlier attempting to track down her
father, who was apparently too busy to see her at the moment. She didn’t want to leave Link waiting
any longer than she needed to-

"Greetings, princess! It is such a pleasure to see your beautiful face gracing the halls of our castle
once more!"

Zelda looked to her side and smiled. It was the court poet, a young Sheikah man who had served the
royal family for several years now. She offered a courteous bow in return.

“And it is a pleasure to see you as well! How are you faring?” She asked.

“Quite well indeed. And I’m glad I caught you when I did! There is a poem I have been working on,
a song that pieces together some of the events surrounding the hero and princess ten thousand years
ago. Perhaps you’d like to hear it?” He drew his accordion from his bag, staring up at Princess Zelda
with a look of expectant longing. “It’s the least I could do to welcome you back home!”

Zelda winced slightly. She was already running late for her meeting with Link… but she did not
want to be rude to the court poet either. He was a nice enough person - though a bit overbearing at
times. She began to formulate an excuse in her mind, when she noticed a group of guards making
their way through the corridor up ahead. It seemed they were talking and laughing together with one
stoic, stone-faced…

Link…?!?

Zelda’s face lit up with joy as she called out to Link and waved. It appeared he’d gotten tired of
waiting and had come up to fetch the princess himself. The young captain dismissed his soldiers,
who turned around and left the area as Link began to walk in Zelda’s direction.

A firm scowl settled in across the court poet’s face. Zelda had once utterly detested this Hylian
“hero” before. He’d known as much, having overheard the princess’s complaints to her caretakers
prior to her departure. So what changed?

He feared the worst.

“I’m quite sorry for having to do this,” Zelda said, with a tone of sadness, “but I really must be off.
I’m late for a meeting.” She smiled warmly at the Sheikah poet. “Perhaps you’ll perform your song
for me later? I would be delighted to hear it.”

“Ah, well, as you wish my lady. Good day.” He nodded cordially, then watched as Zelda happily
ran up to Link’s side and began to walk down the corridor in the direction of her study. Feelings of
anger and heartache began to brew inside the poet’s heart, and he nearly slammed his accordion
down in sheer anger. But he composed himself, ran a hand through his silver hair, and sighed.

He’d have to watch these two a little bit more closely, it would seem. For… Zelda’s sake of course.

Meanwhile Link and Zelda had soon arrived at Zelda’s study, which was contained within a large
spire on the west side of the castle. A small walkway bridged the gap between the main structure of
the castle and the spire itself, which the pair had to cross in order to access the study. Both the
walkway and the tower offered breathtaking views of the countryside surrounding the castle. As he caught a glimpse of this, Link found himself longing to return to those wilds once more; longing to be free of his responsibilities and fears in exchange for freedom, peace, and independence.

*Maybe when this is all over... Mipha and I could actually-*

“I suppose you’re wondering why I wanted to meet you here…” Zelda asked, closing the door behind her. She bit her lip nervously, while Link glanced around the dim, candlelit room in curious wonder. It was actually quite messy, much to his surprise. Seemed that the princess lived a more cluttered life than he had imagined before.

Zelda turned away and crossed her arms, growing all the more nervous as she took in the intimate setting. Before their departure, Urbosa had encouraged her to be more open, and more loose with her emotions. Would this be... too much?

“...I feel like after all our time together…” Zelda continued, “Well, I just couldn’t help but feel a bit of familiarity and, um, closeness to you.” She uncrossed her arms and turned around, moving right in Link’s direction. “Because of this… I… find it quite appropriate to move toward to a higher level of intimacy.” She drew closer and closer to Link, who just stared back stoically in confusion as she moved within a foot of Link’s face and stopped. “It’s, um, a bit embarrassing I must admit. Only my… most trusted advisors have ever seen this side of me. So please, close your eyes…”

Link performed one final scan of the room, taking note of possible escape routes through the open windows above.

*Just in case.*

He closed his eyes. He could hear some intense shuffling around him, some footsteps here and there, and suddenly he found his hands clutching something. Something soft and smooth.

“Open your eyes…” Zelda said. Link did so, and nodded calmly. He now found himself staring right down at...

...a cloth-covered research book.

“Ta-da! These are my research notes! They have been painstakingly accumulated over several years of nonstop study of the ancient Sheikah technology. This… is my life’s work!” She closed her eyes and rubbed her chin in pride. “Aside from Impa and Purah, nobody has ever laid eyes on this side of me! But I feel that I can finally be completely transparent with you now. This… is me!” She opened her eyes, held her hands out towards her book. “What do you think?”

Link had barely kept up with Zelda’s rapid-fire speech, despite being somewhat used to it by now. This hyperactive de-evolution seemed to occur any time her research was involved. Still, he had to carefully review her words several times in his head before responding, being also quite wary of Zelda’s emotional volatility.

“It’s… quite interesting,” Link said, dully, as he flipped through the pages and skimmed their contents. The book was filled to the brim with technical schematics, which were impressive drawings indeed, he had to admit. And surrounding the schematics were endless paragraphs of notes and observations - technical jargon that Link already knew he couldn’t even begin to try deciphering.

Zelda’s face appeared crestfallen. “You’re… not impressed?” She said, staring down at the floor. “Or, perhaps…” she grinned, blushing slightly. “Perhaps you were expecting... something else?”

Link didn’t waver. “No, I meant what I said. It’s interesting. You should be proud of your talents.”
He finished skimming the book, slamming it shut and handing it back to her. “Unfortunately, I failed at science in the academy. So this all might as well be a foreign language to me.”

Zelda took the book back and set it on her desk. She paused for a second, then giggled softly. “Anyway, this isn’t actually the reason I called you here…” Her hands fell to her lap as she stared back at the shut door behind them. “I want to discuss something for more important. It’s about… our situation.”

Link nodded. “Calamity Ganon…” he said.

“That’s right. I’ve been... concerned about your morale lately.”

Link placed his hands on his hips. “You want to know if I think we’re actually ready for its return. If it happens…”

“Yes.”

“No.” Link said. “I don’t think we are.”

Zelda frowned. Her mind immediately leaped back to her own shortcomings, recalling her inability to awaken her sealing powers at the Spring of Courage a few weeks prior. “I… would be inclined to agree…” she said, bitterly. “However, I want to remain optimistic! And I wanted to express that to you. As difficult as you are to read, I have recently felt a sense of… doubt from you.” She turned away from Link. “And now I know it for sure…”

Link felt himself wanting to contradict Zelda. After all, he'd certainly do whatever it took to save his nation - and the people he loved - from Calamity Ganon. He actually had no doubt that they would be able to see this through to the end, no matter the cost. However, he found no words to explain his fears regarding their lack of preparedness. So he simply remained silent. It was so much easier.

“We are making loads of progress with our research,” Zelda continued. “Not just with the divine beasts… but with the Guardians as well. It would be a shame not to place some of our faith in the Sheikah relics we’ve been developing successfully. After all…” she turned back towards Link. “This is the same technology our ancestors used all those millenia ago. Surely, we can use it again to defeat-”

WHRRRRR-SHUNK!

A loud sound from outside caused Zelda to turn on her heels again. Her face lit up in pure delight as she recognized the clattering noise.

“Speaking of which,” she said, “that sounds like… a Guardian!” She motioned for Link to join her, and together they left through the doors of Zelda’s study and walked slowly along the bridge back to the castle. Peering to the grounds below, they spotted a massive Guardian stalker marching its way to and fro. Sheikah scientists paced around the squid-like robot, carefully studying its movements and guiding its systems. Robbie stood by proudly, glancing up at the princess above. He offered her a wink, but she ignored him.

“Incredible…” Zelda said. “We’re at a point now where we can actually control them. At the current rate, we’ll soon know all we need to know about the Guardians and the Divine Beasts!” She turned towards Link, peering at him with a confident gaze. “And should Ganon ever show itself again, we’ll be well positioned to defend ourselves.” She said this matter-of-factly, hoping to convince Link that they were indeed prepared - whether her sealing powers manifested themselves or not.

“What are you doing out here, Zelda?!”
The powerful, commanding voice of King Rhoam sounded out from behind her. She shuddered as she turned to face him, while Link immediately fell to his knee in respect. A pair of royal guards accompanied the king, and they nodded respectfully at Link before turning to stand guard near the castle door. Zelda’s face curled into a look of resigned guilt as her father approached her. This was the first she’d seen of him in several months. This was how he chose to greet her?

“I…” Zelda curled her fists. “I was assessing the results of the experiment with the Guardians. These pieces of ancient technology could be quite useful against the-”

“I know that,” Rhoam interrupted. His gentle voice betrayed his fatherly instinct lurking within, but he quickly buried it. This was no time to be anything more than a king to his daughter.

“They are essential to Hyrule’s future, and our research demands that we keep a close eye on them. However, as the princess, you currently have a crucial unfulfilled responsibility to your kingdom.” His words pierced straight through Zelda’s heart. The crushing weight of her failures finally pressed down on her all at once, and she immediately wanted to burst out in tears. But she stayed strong.

“Let me ask you once more…” Rhoam said. “When will you stop treating this as some sort of childish game?”

Zelda held her fists at her side, restraining her desire to be defiant. “I’m doing everything I can,” she said, with nearly a snarl. “I’ll have you know that I just recently returned from the Spring of Courage where I offered every ounce of my prayers to the Goddess.”

“And now, you are out here wasting your time,” Rhoam snapped. “This is the reason I summoned you back early: you need to be dedicating every moment you have to your training. You must be single-minded in unlocking the power that will seal Calamity Ganon away.”

“I already am…” Zelda said, nearly in tears now. She turned away. “Don’t you see - there’s nothing more I can do!” She snapped back. “My hope is… My hope is that you- that you’ll allow me to contribute here in whatever way I can.”

“No more excuses Zelda!” Rhoam shook his head with disapproval. “Stop running away from your duty. As the king, I forbid you to have anything to do with these machines from this moment on, and command you to focus on your training.”

Rhoam walked out towards the edge of the bridge and stared down at the working Guardian below. “Do you know how the gossip mongers refer to you? They are out there at this moment whispering amongst themselves… that you are the heir to a throne of nothing… nothing but failure.”

Somberly, Zelda stared at her feet, saying nothing.

“It is woven into your destiny that you prove them wrong.” Rhoam said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand.”

Rhoam spun on his heels and made his way back to the door leading into the castle. Once he was gone and out of sight, Link stood up and paused in thought for a time. After giving Zelda a chance to compose herself, he approached her. He half-expected her to dismiss him in anger, but she instead offered him a pained smile.

“Would you please… escort me back to my room?” She asked. “Lady Urbosa… is due to arrive shortly. She will be meeting me there.”

Link could feel something… intense boiling inside of Zelda’s heart. So he was quite surprised to hear
her calm request. He knew there was really no other way to comfort her anyway, so this would be the best he could do. He nodded his acceptance, and together they began to make their way back towards Zelda’s room.

The pair strolled down the corridors together, Zelda crossing her arms and staring in deep thought as they walked. Link found himself rather inspired by Zelda’s ability to keep her emotions stable and in-check; especially after this incredible scolding from her father. But as they quietly drew closer to her room, Zelda’s eyes suddenly widened.

“Oh, that’s right. I almost forgot.” She turned towards Link. “I had meant to tell you this back in my study, so I must apologize.”

She paused for a brief moment, then smiled. “I was told... that Lady Mipha herself is due to arrive any minute now.”

Link’s eye twitched slightly.

Chapter End Notes

RIP nameless frog #1.
Next is Memories of Mipha Part 8: Hylian Chaperone.
“You gotta be kidding me!”

Daruk rumbled through the back alleyways of Hyrule Castle Town, grunting and cursing in fear as the terrible creature pursued him with a vicious bloodlust he’d never before faced. He turned the corner, knocking over a small fruit stand and sending apples and bananas flying every which way. The toppled stand did little to slow the pursuing beast, which continued to dart after Daruk at incredible pace. Crowds of people scattered to get out of the way of this unstoppable, lumbering goron as he finally exploded out of the alleyways and back into the town square. He stumbled onto his stomach, shaking the earth as he hit the ground. He quickly spun around onto his back, holding his hands up in fear as the awful thing leaped through the air and straight towards his face-

SHOOM!

-But suddenly, an enormous red force-field erupted from Daruk’s inner being, creating a multi-faced wall of protection around him. The diving creature instantly bounced off of the shield and rocketed across the town square, limbs flailing about like a tossed ragdoll. It soared through the air for several moments before finally landing smoothly in the center fountain with a tiny splash. After a few seconds, Daruk deactivated his shield, slowly climbed to his feet, and shook his head.

“Stupid dog…” he said. “Makin’ me look bad…”

“Spike? Spike?” a young boy’s voice cried from nearby. “That’s weird… I coulda sworn I just heard him…” the boy caught sight of Daruk, then sprinted directly towards him. “Hey mister-” he arrived at Daruk’s feet, staring up at him with a clueless expression. “Have you seen my puppy? I’ve been lookin’ for him all day!”

“Oh uh…” Daruk coughed nervously. “I think I… just saw one in the fountain… over there…” he pointed out to the center of the square, and the boy’s face lit up with joy.

“Thanks so much!” He cried. He turned to leave, then backpedaled to stare up at Daruk again. “Hey wait a minute, you’re… the Goron Champion, aren’t you?”

Daruk nodded.

“Wow! You’re my favorite! You’re so cool!”

Daruk scratched his head nervously. “Um, yeah. Thanks.” He straightened up, placed his hands on his hips and puffed his large chest out. “Stay out of trouble, you hear? There’s…uh, dangerous creatures around. And stuff.” The boy giggled at him, then sprinted off to retrieve his dog. “Will do!” he shouted back.

Daruk sighed in relief as he glanced around the square in embarrassment. Fortunately, it seemed nobody had taken notice of the ludicrous scene. He continued to scan the town square in wonder, and after some time he finally realized why nobody was staring at him. It seemed they were all distracted by something… someone…

He froze. A massive crowd of people were gathering at the entrance of Castle Town. It was reminiscent of Link and Zelda’s earlier arrival - only this time, it was mostly older Hylian men and a
large number of Zora and Rito gathering there.

“That can only mean one thing…” Daruk said to himself. He immediately made his way towards the entrance of Castle Town, careful to look out for any unwanted canine guests lurking about.

“Oh... well, hello! It is a pleasure to meet you all!” Mipha smiled awkwardly at the large group gathering before her. In addition to the numerous Hylians and Rito present, there was quite a large number of Zora here that she didn’t recognize, all hailing from various domains far away from her own.

“Lady Mipha! You’ve finally arrived! How was the journey?” someone shouted.

“Mipha! You’re even more beautiful in-person!”

“We love you Mipha!!”

Mipha blushed lightly. She did her best to shyly acknowledge everyone there to greet her, but she found herself trapped at the entrance, unsure of how to proceed - and struggling mightily to maintain her composure. If Muzu had been here, it would have been yet another rare time where his overbearing nature would have come in handy. But he and the other elders were busy attending the annual Zora Summit out at sea, so King Dorephan had granted Mipha the opportunity to travel to Hyrule Castle unaccompanied. She was starting to regret it.

Mipha scanned the people around her, glanced at her left, and did a double-take in surprise.

In the midst of the chaos, one handsome young man stood there to greet her. A great big smile was present across his face. He was blonde, blue-eyed, lightly tanned, and...

...not Link. Mipha laughed internally at her mistake, then she sighed as she looked over this familiar stranger. In his hands was a large collection of loose papers and tattered books, giving him a bit of a scattered appearance. She found that his otherwise calm demeanor and his looks seemed to draw her in with comfortable ease. For whatever reason.

He seems approachable, she thought. Perhaps I might gain some information from him.

“Excuse me, sir…” she said. The young man’s eyes perked up as she addressed him. “...Not that I'm...displeased by the warm greetings. But if I may ask, how… does everyone recognize me?”

The young man smiled back. “Well, you’re the Zora Champion of course! How could we not?”

“Ah!” The young man laughed, reaching into his cluster of papers and pulling out a large poster. “Seems you haven’t seen the announcement!” He offered the poster to Mipha, who grabbed it and spun it around in her hands. As she examined it carefully, she found herself holding back a small giggle.

It was an advertisement for the upcoming Champion Celebration, which apparently sought the presence of all the citizens of Hyrule, far and wide. And below the announcement was an elaborate illustration of all of the Champions. It was quite well-done, she had to admit - aside from some rather glaring inaccuracies that stood out to her...

In the drawing, Urbosa appeared roughly eight feet tall. Revali was a bit too dashingly good-looking,
and missing his ridiculous blush-like red feathers on his face. Link was… actually, handsome and chiseled as ever.

...That one’s dead-on at least...

Daruk was nothing more than a blob of brown with a face drawn on it, which somehow didn't surprise her. And as for Mipha herself, well…

She couldn’t help but roll her eyes. This doesn’t resemble me in the slightest, she thought as she glanced over the image. I’m not nearly this tall...

...Or this bulgey! She nearly snorted out a laugh as she examined the exaggerated features - particularly those in the torso area - and she draped her arm across her chest absentmindedly. It seemed Link had been telling the truth before. Hylians did seem to put a premium on those who were more... 'well-endowed,' as he’d put it. Still, it seemed that her fans were not in the least bit bothered by her relatively mundane real-life features. Even if she didn't quite measure up to their expectations.

“Could you um… sign it for me? I’m a huge fan!” the blonde young man said, holding out a pre-filled quill pen.

“Oh, well, certainly!” She grabbed the pen and began to sign the poster, smiling politely as she did. “Although I must be honest. I feel that this is a rather... comically inaccurate representation of me to say the least...” She handed the pen and poster back, and the man instantly frowned at her words.

“I’m the one who drew it,” he said.

Mipha’s eye twitched slightly.

“All right all right, that’s enough,” a booming voice shouted. “Just roll on out of here, you lot!”

Furious stomps reverberated in the distance, and the crowd turned in time to see a huge, angry Daruk rumbling their way. They immediately scattered in fear as this intimidating goron finally came to the rescue. Mipha looked up at Daruk, smiling warmly.

Just in time, she thought. Thank Hylia...

“Boy, these creeps sure don’t know how to leave a little lady alone,” he said, as he scratched the back of his head. “You all right?”

Mipha giggled into the back of her wrist. “I’m doing just fine. And I certainly appreciate your help, Daruk.”

“Don’t mention it!” He replied. He looked around the square to make sure it was clear, then spun on his heels to lead Mipha back to Hyrule Castle. “We’d better head on up though, I’m sure the king will want to start the meeting as soon as possible, now that you’ve finally arrived…” Mipha ran up alongside him and nodded in agreement. She pulled a black hooded shawl from her bag and quickly donned it, in hopes of drawing less attention to herself. After a moment, Daruk glanced down at her.

“So how was the trip?” he asked. “Are you tired? Get into any good fights?!”

Mipha perked up. “Ah, I feel just fine actually, thank you for asking. As for getting into fights, well…” she briefly looked back at the Lightscale Trident strapped to her back, which gleamed brightly in the afternoon sun. Then she looked back at Daruk. “Just a handful of monster encounters, now and then, here and there.” She waved him off. “Nothing I couldn’t handle…”

Daruk pumped his fist. “I’ll bet!”
“And how are you faring yourself?” Mipha asked. “I noticed you were quite winded when you approached me earlier. You seemed a bit startled as well. Is everything alright…?”

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“Oh... okay.”

“Anyway…” he said, quickly changing the subject, “everyone else has already arrived. But I guess Link and the others are too busy attending to their own matters right now-”

Link...!

“...Which means you’ll just have to put up with me as your chaperone instead.” Daruk grinned apologetically. “Sorry about that!”

Mipha shook her head. “It’s no problem,” she said. “You will more than suffice, although I will say a chaperone seems hardly necessary-”

Daruk laughed. “I dunno, after seeing that scene with all your ‘fans’ earlier, I gotta disagree. Respectfully.”

“Point taken…”

“Plus, all that aside... I actually wanted to be the first one to greet you when you arrived! Glad it worked out that way.”

Mipha smiled happily at Daruk’s brotherly affection. She was really quite comfortable with his presence, and was simply more concerned with burdening him than anything else. But she certainly welcomed his insistent company, as she found him very easy to talk to. His kind nature, his selfless personality, and his honest desire to look after others had always endeared him to her - and those traits also reminded her of a certain Hylian boy to boot.

“Has the honor of your warm greeting been reserved for every champion in our order?” Mipha asked.

Daruk shrugged. “Well, only for the ones that I actually like!”

To this, Mipha found herself stifling a laugh. She knew precisely who Daruk was referring to, but-

“While there are surely some preferences that we may have developed for our fellow champions,” Mipha said, “I do find it rather... counterproductive to be vocalizing our grievances out in the open...”

Daruk laughed off her concern. “Ha ha! Oh, don’t mind me, I’m just joking around. Really! I like all of you guys just fine.” His gigantic hand patted Mipha’s covered head with a surprisingly gentle touch. “Some of you just... really grate my gravel, if you know what I mean...”

As they made their way through the square, Mipha noticed another crowd gathering in the distance. With Daruk fending off any of her would-be stalkers, the crowds flocked madly to the only remaining Champion who welcomed their attention:

Revali.

He’d been there all afternoon, relishing the attention and the opportunity to show off his abilities in the most flamboyant, confident manner possible. But now he was crouched on the ground, both
wings spread on either side in the midst of a crowd of adoring fans. It appeared he was gathering his energy, waiting for the right moment...

Suddenly, an enormous, swirling pillar of air shot up into the sky around him. Revali leapt from his feet and spun up through the whirlwind at incredible speed. The crowd cheered in excitement at his special maneuver, and at the peak of his launch he spread his wings and flew into a series of aerial stunts and flips. After a moment of this, he finally ended his show and began to glide away in the direction of Hyrule Castle, leaving behind a group of longing fans.

Daruk rolled his eyes at the scene before him. “Speaking of grating… does that guy ever get tired of cheesing up the place every time he arrives?”

Mipha suppressed yet another laugh, but she remained silent.

Daruk glanced at Mipha then rubbed his nose. “That poor guy just doesn’t get it. He’s so jealous of Link that he doesn’t know what to do with himself! Too bad my brother is at least ten times the hero Revali will ever be.” He turned to face Mipha and grinned. “Wouldn’t you agree, little lady?”

Mipha shrugged. “…As I implied before… I am loathe to openly criticize my fellow Champions…”

At this, Daruk suddenly exploded with raucous laughter.

“So it’s a yes then!”

Back in Zelda’s chambers, Urbosa sat on the bed with the princess’s head resting lightly on her lap. The princess fought back her tears, as the Gerudo chief gave her best efforts to soothe her.

“Now, now little bird,” Urbosa said, with a rare gentle tone, “you know the king means well. He just…”

“He just doesn’t understand!” Zelda snapped. “You don’t understand!” She sat straight up, brushed Urbosa’s hand away. “And stop speaking to me like you’re my mother! You’re not!”

Urbosa had no reaction to Zelda’s sudden outburst. She merely sat in silence and allowed the princess to cool off on her own for a moment. After a few seconds, the gravity of what Zelda had said finally pulled her right back to the earth. She looked in Urbosa’s eyes, dangerously close to tears now, then stared at the ground.

“I’m… sorry Urbosa. You’ve been so supportive of me for all these years. Truly, as good to me as my own mother would be. I don’t know what I was thinking, I didn’t mean to—”

“I miss her too, princess,” Urbosa interrupted, pulling Zelda into a loving embrace. “When the queen died, I lost a lot more than just a friend. I lost a sister.” Zelda returned Urbosa’s embrace and opened her mouth to respond. But she found no words.

“Your father…” Urbosa continued, “coped with her death in the best way he knew - by taking shelter in his responsibilities to the Kingdom of Hyrule.” She ran her fingers across Zelda’s head as she spoke. “And therein lies the problem. He needs to learn to be a father first… and a king second…” She shrugged. “Perhaps in time, he’ll grow to realize that family is far, far more important than politics.”

Just down the hall Link exploded out of the royal chambers, sprinting quietly down the corridor as fast as he could manage…
“...After all, there's no point in government,” Urbosa said, “if you aren’t surrounded by the people that you love, right?”

Link slid down the banister of the massive stairwell leading down past the dining hall. Mipha had surely arrived by now, likely being overwhelmed by unwanted attention due to those ridiculous posters advertising the Champion celebration.

*That drawing didn’t resemble her in the slightest…* he thought. *She’s way prettier than that.*

At any rate, he just hoped he could at least make it into the town square to greet her, before anyone did anything weird to her-

“Slow down!”

Link looked to his right and skidded to a halt. A tall, well-dressed Sheikah man was shouting at him. *The court poet…? What’s his deal?*

“I don’t care if you’re the Hylian Champion, or even the king himself,” the poet said. “We do have rules to abide by here in the castle…” He appeared to take great pleasure in lecturing him, but Link hardly noticed it; he just wanted to get a move on already. He nodded apologetically, saying nothing at first. Despite the severe irritation bubbling inside, Link knew he had to at least try to mind his manners. While this was only the court poet, the man did have some clout and authority within the Royal Court of nobles. The very last thing Link wanted was to get in trouble with them. Again.

“Understood,” Link finally said, breaking the awkward silence. "May I go?"

The poet smiled. “Perhaps…” he pulled out his accordion. “But only after hearing my song. You will, won’t you? After all… you did interrupt my performance with the princess earlier. It will take just a minute…”

*You have got to be kidding me.*

Link crossed his arms, staring blankly at the poet as he closed his eyes, cleared his throat slowly, and began to play…

"*The princess, beautiful and fair,*

*Assigned a guard who does not care,*

*This appointed knight, so calm, so cold,*

*Could never match up with the hero of old.*

*Calamity threatens to rouse itself awake,*

*But is our chosen hero real, or is he a fake?*

*Four worthy Champions boldly guard his back,*
To cover what our precious knight so lacks.

But fierce and deadly trials await,
And the boy might yet meet with a terrible fate...

The poet stopped, laughed proudly to himself, then smiled. “A bit somber, to be sure. But I imagine that you—” He opened his eyes and frowned.

Nobody was there.

Link turned the corner quietly, saw that no one was watching, then sprinted down the corridor at mach speed. He slowed down enough to creep past the generals’ chambers without a sound, and then ran through an open hallway towards a staircase which lead to the roads below.

At this rate, there probably won’t be any time to see her before the meeting, he lamented. But he shook off his fears, glancing briefly at the sun outside. He still had an hour to go before the meeting started, so perhaps there was still a chance - if he took a few shortcuts. He turned his head back to the direction he was running-

BLAM!

-Just in time to collide forcefully with a random pedestrian heading the opposite direction, sending them both sprawling towards the ground in a heap. Link immediately sprung to his feet, looked down at the ground to apologize to-

Revali...?!

The Rito champion glared up at Link painfully, but quickly composed himself. “Well if it isn’t Hyrule’s favorite ‘hero,’” he sneered at Link as he dusted himself off and climbed to his feet. “Unruly and uncouth as ever it seems...”

I don’t have time for this.

Link made a move to the staircase entrance, but Revali stepped in front of him. “Looks like you’re in a hurry.” He said, as he crossed his wings and grinned. “Why don’t you just simply… fly wherever you need to go? It’s much faster after all... Oh, what’s that? You can’t. Right...”

Link stood in front of Revali, staring blankly and offering no response. Revali spread his wings out majestically and shook his head. “Isn’t it ridiculous? Here I am, able to soar gracefully to wherever I am needed at a moment’s notice, unmatched in mobility, speed and strength. My combat prowess is superb, I’m well-versed in all weapon disciplines and yet... they chose you, in all your inability, to be the one who saves our fair land.” He turned away briefly, crossing his wings and scoffing as he did. “What a joke.”

Link looked away himself, staring at the large window next to him as Revali continued his pointless monologue. The castle’s main road was at least fifty feet below. A large tree swayed back and forth along the castle wall near him.

Link shrugged. Eh. Why not. He jumped out the open window.
“Your silence speaks volumes,” Revali continued. “Just admit it, you don’t deserve to be the chosen one...” He turned his head back to face-

No one.

Link flew threw the air just outside the window, diving steadily down towards the nearby tree. He’d done this hundreds of times before. He just needed to grab the nearest branch, swing around, and-

*Oops. Missed it.*

He continued to plummet towards the ground at breakneck speed, bracing himself for the landing. But at the very last-second he reached out with his right arm, managing to grab one final branch. It bent downward, breaking his fall briefly, before abruptly snapping under the intense pressure. He was sent straight to the ground, landing painfully hard on the road below with a loud crack. Somewhat dazed, he looked down at his right ankle and groaned internally. It was twisted awkwardly, likely fractured.

*Now what?*

“It appears... that old habits simply never die...” A gentle, feminine voice sounded off from behind Link. His blood instantly froze. He slowly turned his head around, held back a wide grin.

A figure stood above him, accompanied by Daruk and cloaked in a black shawl. It was quite a good disguise, he had to admit. But there was no mistaking her voice, her height, her skin color... and her piercing yellow eyes that seemed to shimmer and shine through the darkness of her hooded face.

Mipha pulled back at the hood and smiled warmly. “Greetings, Master Link. It is good to see you. Might I offer up a healing hand?”

Link looked around, saw that Daruk was the only other person present, and smiled lightly. “Ah, *ahem,* hello Lady Mipha,” he said, playing perfectly off of her formal demeanor. “That would be quite appreciated indeed.”

Daruk silently stared down at the pair, and Mipha immediately crouched down in front of Link and began to heal him. It was an innocent gesture, entirely professional. To the untrained eye, there was nothing ulterior about it. Yet as he looked on, Daruk felt the entire atmosphere around him subtly change. It was imperceptible, barely noticeable. But he knew.

For just a split second, in that very moment, Link and Mipha were the only two people in the entire world.

“I’ll catch up with you two at the Champion’s meeting,” Daruk said. “I... think I left my scarf back... um, somewhere.” He wanted to offer a wink, thought better of it, and continued up the castle pathway on his own.

Mipha finished up her healing, took her hand away from Link’s ankle. But she didn’t move.

Link spared a glance both ways, saw that nobody was around. Grinning widely, he calmly reached over and placed his hand atop Mipha’s head.

Now alone with the person most dear to her, Mipha could no longer contain her own incredible excitement either. She dove onto Link, and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck in a warm and loving embrace.
The late afternoon quickly gave way to evening, and darkness settled in swiftly around Hyrule Castle. Lit torches bathed the halls and tunnels in their orange glow, lighting the way to the throne room of the castle - the location of the meeting of the Champions.

Link made his way to the throne room, leading several units of soldiers under his command. They were the first to arrive, quickly lining up around the outer perimeter of the huge room.

Mipha arrived next, offering a respectful nod to Link as she entered. Zelda and Urbosa followed shortly behind, and the three stood in the center of the room to mingle for a bit. Link saluted his soldiers, then headed over to join his fellow Champions. The designated meeting time came and went, and Daruk and Revali still had yet to arrive. Fortunately, the king himself also seemed to be running late.

Mipha and Link spared a quick glance at each other before turning away. They stood there calmly for some time, staring straight ahead at the empty throne above them. A brief lull settled into the room, and an awkward silence followed. The mood felt somber, almost eerie, as the glowing torches mounted on the walls caused countless amorphous shadows to bounce and sway across the dimly lit room. It was quite mesmerizing, though it did little to break the tension that was starting to grow throughout the assembly.

Sensing something was off, Urbosa finally spoke up. “Daruk, I can understand being late. That’s typical. But Revali… hmmm…” she paused in thought for a second, then she smiled. “Ah! Knowing him, he’s doing this on purpose... waiting for the right moment. Which means…” she turned her head to face the large windows high up towards the tall ceiling of the enormous throne room. “…He should be arriving right about…” she snapped her fingers. “…Now.”

One of the windows suddenly burst open as Revali darted inside the throne room, flipping several times, before landing on his feet just in front of Mipha. He spread his wings dramatically, staring down at her with a cocky grin on his face. “Well hello there!” he said. “I… have arrived.” He bowed his head in Mipha's direction. "And I must say, you look quite ravishing tonight!"

CRAAASH!

The main doors to the throne room were blown off their hinges as Daruk hastily lumbered his way inside. “Sorry I’m late guys,” he said, panting. “I got lost.” He bent over with his hands on his knees briefly as he caught his breath, then he made his way over to the rest of the Champions. He looked up, saw that the king himself was still absent. “Looks like I lucked out though,” he said. “I think King Rhoam got lost too!”

A chorus of laughter sounded out from the soldiers standing around the room, but they quickly composed themselves. Meanwhile, a large frown had grown across Revali’s face from the very moment Daruk had entered. He seemed quite angered by his entrance being spoiled by the unruly goron, and he crossed his wings and stared daggers at his fellow Champion.

“And so, the great oaf himself appears,” he sneered. “As always, without even a fraction of my considerable elegance.” He waved the tip of his wing in the air for emphasis. “I swear, you carry yourself with all the grace of a drunken cow.”

“Ooooh…” The guards around them began to chatter among themselves. Link considered commanding his soldiers to be silent, but he found himself wanting to see just how this whole thing would play out.

Daruk shrugged. “Oh, save it for the comedy club, Revali. I’ve used toothpicks bigger than you.”
“Ohhhh!” The guards began to break rank, holding each other back as they tried to contain their excitement.

“That’s enough, boys,” Urbosa suddenly said, crossing her arms and staring at Daruk and Revali. “We will be in the presence of the king soon, and we must show our respect.” She shrugged. “You’re a bit too old to be sizing each other up anyway.” Disappointed, the soldiers began to straighten up and return to their positions. Urbosa turned away, closed one eye, and stared back at them with a smile. “Besides… I once defeated three voe tougher than both of you combined… with nothing but a writing quill.”

“OOOOOOOH!” The guards erupted in cheers and shouts, spilling over each other in mock fainting spells and raucous laughter at Urbosa’s burn. Link didn’t bother trying to reign them in, as he too was holding back his own laughter. Even Zelda herself was gigglng quietly to the side, vainly trying to compose herself. Revali, Daruk, and Urbosa then turned to face the meek and quiet Mipha, awaiting her own response. But the Zora princess held up her hands in mock defeat - after all, she didn’t have a single mean-spirited bone in her entire body.

But then she looked around carefully, noticed the expectant eyes of everyone around her...

“I… um, well…” she stood up straight, stuck her chin out.

“I… can swim much faster... than any of you!” She lightly punched the air in front of her.

“...Boom.”

“SNRKPH!” Link snorted loudly, while the other champions stood in awkward silence for a brief second. Finally, all three began to laugh boisterously in unison, along with Zelda and the other guards. Their laughter continued for several moments, just as the king finally entered the throne room, accompanied by several of his generals.

“AHEM,” Rhoam coughed loudly. The sound echoed throughout the large chamber. But other than Link, Zelda, and Mipha, the other Champions didn’t hear him. It was only when the other three noticed that they were the last ones still standing that they finally realized their grave mistake. They quickly gathered themselves, snapped to attention, and took a knee in respect as the king began to address them.

“First, I would like to extend the warmest of greetings to our welcomed guests, the Champions of Hyrule!” He extended his arms as he spoke, and the Hylian soldiers present all began to clap politely in unison.

“I must also congratulate you for a job well done,” he continued. “With the divine beasts in working order, we are now that much closer to being prepared for the return of Calamity Ganon. And all the more important, given the sudden resurgence of monster sightings around the land, which I believe portend his arrival…” he gestured in Zelda’s direction. “Princess Zelda? If you would.”

She stood up straight. “Yes, during my travels with the Hylian Champion, we encountered a variety of hostile creatures that have not been seen in several centuries. The Yiga Clan has also been sighted with greater frequency all over the land. I imagine our fellow Champions can corroborate this information…”

Daruk nodded. “It’s true. Seen a bunch of nasty creatures all over Death Mountain recently. Same with the Yiga. And also, when Link and Zelda stopped by before, Death Mountain actually rumbled! Hasn’t happened in a long time. I think that’s a pretty clear sign too…”
“Thank you Daruk,” Rhoam said. “It has become clear that our efforts to prepare must increase considerably. Our Sheikah advisors continue to uncover new technology every day, and I’ve requested that we ramp up such activities. As for our military…” he waved to his left, summoning one of his generals nearby. “…General Krant here has suggested we also bolster our defense force. According to reports, these monsters have been growing bolder with each passing day, and it’s only a matter of time before they begin invading our cities as well…”

“Indeed,” Krant said, now standing at attention next to Rhoam. “As such, and with approval from our king of course, we have made the decision to begin sending Hyrule’s Champions out on patrol. We feel that it would be good for our people’s morale to see their heroes in action up-close. We also feel it would benefit us if you built a bit of… team chemistry. So to speak.”

The Champions all looked at each other, smiling awkwardly. Link remained stoic, fighting back the urge to roll his eyes. This was a blatant show of propaganda, through and through, and the king wasn’t even trying to hide this fact. Still, Link supposed that if they were at least doing something productive, it wouldn’t be all that bad.

Meanwhile, Mipha processed the news and found herself fighting back a small smile. After all, if the Champions were to begin traveling together on missions, then this could mean that she would finally get an opportunity to spend a bit more time with Link!

“However-” Rhoam said, interrupting Mipha’s thoughts, “I must make the announcement now... that Captain Link and Princess Zelda will not be accompanying you.”

Mipha’s joy shattered instantly.

“Zelda’s training must continue, as we have yet to unlock her sealing power. She and her appointed knight must visit the Spring of Power in Akkala as soon as possible. It is our hope and prayer that she will finally provide us with the missing piece we need to feel confident about our preparation. They will set out shortly after the Champion’s Celebration tomorrow.” He cleared his throat. “Speaking of which-”

Zelda blushed in anger. She couldn’t believe her father was putting her on the spot like this, and she felt incredibly ashamed at her failure once more. Urbosa began to reach over to comfort her, but resisted. She didn’t want to embarrass Zelda any further in front of the king...

“-about the Celebration.” Rhoam crossed his arms and stared out at the Champions. “Eight o’clock in the morning, sharp. The Imperial training grounds are being prepared as we speak, and we anticipate quite a large audience from all over the land. There will be a parade, some weapons demonstrations, a bit of sparring... and a nice little surprise at the end, of course.” He grinned. “What better way to instill hope in the people of Hyrule, than to show them the sheer strength of our military... and of course, our mighty Champions?”

General Krant appeared to be beaming at the King’s statements. It occurred to Link that the whole thing was probably his idea in the first place. Krant was a rather proud soldier, and he would relish any opportunity to show off Hyrule’s military might to the general public.

“You will each be receiving an itinerary of the morning’s events, though you will not be required to study. Advisors will be on-hand to guide you through the proceedings. All we ask from you, is that you don’t somehow shed all of your considerable talent overnight!” This mild joke produced laughter from the room, but the king raised a hand to silence them.

“And I believe that’s all we had. You will be briefed on your first assignments after the event tomorrow. Any questions?”
Yes, Link thought, scowling slightly. Why are we wasting so much time with this? A quick glance over at Mipha's expression proved that they were thinking precisely the same thing.

“Very well then.” Rhoam said. “I expect to see you all there early tomorrow.” He turned to leave, but looked back as he departed, his voice echoing through the enormous throne room. “Oh, and do try to lay off the silly teasing, if you would. You are a team after all!”

Daruk, Revali, and Urbosa stared at each other and sneered.

The attendees were all quickly dismissed from the meeting, dispersing back to their respective chambers for the night. Accompanied by Zelda, the Champions soon found themselves back in the common room of the royal suites they were staying in. As usual Link and Mipha stood quietly on opposite ends of the room, hesitant to interact with so many others around. Also as usual, Daruk and Revali began to exchange hostile pleasantries with one another.

“I don’t get you at all, Revali,” Daruk said. "I think it’s a great idea!"

Revali rolled his eyes. “I suppose someone so easily amused by the simplest things would certainly think that way,” he said.

“You callin’ me stupid?” Daruk asked.

Revali stepped back, placed his hand across his chest. “Why Daruk, I wouldn’t dare make light of someone’s cognitive limitations. And certainly not yours, specifically.”

“So it's a yes then,” Daruk said, pounding his fist into his palm and grinning menacingly.

“Now now boys, you heard the king.” Urbosa said, wrapping her arms around both of their necks. “We need to play nice with each other for the time being.” She looked to either side at both of them, then shrugged. “Besides, we have an entirely different matter to settle anyway…”

“And what’s that?” Daruk asked.

She crossed her arms, grinning deviously. “What's our plan for tonight? A night on the town? Yeah? Sounds good to me!”

Daruk laughed. “I dunno, after Revali’s near-death experience the last time we went out, I'm not sure he can handle it!”

But Revali didn't take the bait. In fact, he actually grinned back. “I think that is a splendid idea!” He turned towards Link, who stood awkwardly off to the side wearing his trademark stoic expression. “And perhaps our Hylian hero over here would like to join us this time. After all, it was his seventeenth birthday a few weeks back!”

Urbosa smiled widely. “Really? I had no idea!” She bowed her head respectfully. "Then I offer you a belated birthday greeting, Master Link. And with that, it seems we definitely have cause to celebrate tonight! All the more reason to join us, hmm?”

"Absolutely!” Revali said. He said this as if he had something incredibly sour in his mouth. "You deserve a nice night to... let loose and relax, don't you think?"

Link just shrugged and stared blankly at Revali. The wily Rito really wasn't half as clever as he thought he was. This uncharacteristic kindness was just as phony as his typically excessive bravado, and it was clear to Link that he probably had something sinister in mind for the night - some
underlying motive for dragging him out of the castle under the guise of celebration.

But it hardly mattered. He had no intention of joining them anyway. Though he was now legally considered an adult, he was still a few years under the legal drinking age. There was also the issue of his military curfew, which still applied to him when he was present at Hyrule Castle.

*And besides all that,* he thought, *I've got some other plans in mind for tonight...* His eyes shifted to Mipha, who briefly met his gaze before they both turned away. Yet again, it seemed they were both thinking the same thing at the same time.

“There is of course, the problem of Link’s age,” Revali said. “He’s still too young to drink after all. Perhaps a fake identification would—”

“Actually, I can help with that!” Zelda interjected. “Give me a bit of time, and I can pen a formal letter granting him official leave. And I can promise you that any decent bar in town would be loathe to deny an official pardon from the royal family...”

“It’s settled then!” Revali cried, spreading his wings dramatically. "Link shall be accompanying us tonight!” If Revali had nostrils, Link figured they’d be flaring in devious excitement by now.

“Yes!” Daruk said. “This is gonna be a real blast!”

“Indeed!” Zelda said, smiling. "I just wish that I could join you...” She turned to face Link. “But it will be good for you to spend time with your fellow Champions, I believe. Especially since...” her smile faded slightly, “...since this will be the last time we will be seeing them for awhile. So!” She brightened up again. “Please go out... and have some fun in my stead!”

Link shook his head. But Zelda was having absolutely none of it.

“No, no, no, you’re not getting out of this one. In the entire time I’ve known you, I have yet to see you enjoy yourself in any way.” She looked away briefly. "Well, other than when you're eating I suppose..." she mumbled. "Regardless! I will not allow you to decline.”

Link shook his head again. An angry scowl appeared on Zelda’s face. She placed her hands on her hips and puffed her chest out.

“*Ahem!* Fine then. As my appointed knight I hereby command you to go out there and have yourself a good time!”

Link frowned slightly. This was dirty, pulling the royalty card on him like that. Seemed he had no choice now. He cringed internally at the thought of spending the entire night wasting time doing something so incredibly juvenile, but he supposed that at the very least, he could avoid drinking altogether and simply act as a de facto chaperone for his fellow Champions.

*They’re probably going to need one anyway...*

He looked up, saw that Zelda was still waiting for his response. And he finally nodded, much to her delight. “Excellent. *Now* it’s truly settled,” she said.

“And how about you, Mipha?” Revali said. The Zora princess snapped back to attention, having been deep in thought as she considered Link’s plight. Her eyes narrowed when she realized it was Revali who was questioning her.

“*Lady* Mipha,” she corrected.
“Ah yes, my apologies. Lady Mipha, will you be joining us tonight-”

“Yes!” she cried out, causing Revali to recoil slightly with joy and surprise. Mipha's eyes snapped back to Link for a split second, then back to Revali. “Er, I mean, certainly. It would be my pleasure to accompany you all. Let us take good care of each other, okay?”

“All right!” Daruk shouted. “Link and Mipha?! And here I was thinking I was gonna get stuck with these two again,” he said, pointing back at Revali and Urbosa with his thumb. Urbosa playfully wrinkled her nose back, while Revali simply ignored him.

“It should be quite a fun night indeed,” Zelda said, as she made her way to the main door of the guest suites. “I'll have Link's pardon letter prepared and sent to your chambers within the hour.” She stood in the doorway, looking back at them all. Quite like her father, Zelda's voice echoed back through the chambers as she took her leave. ”But I must warn you. Do try to stay out of trouble, if you can help it. After all… you'll want to keep your reputations as Champions well-intact, right?”

Urbosa spared a glance at Daruk, then she shrugged lightly.

“Well... that sure sounded like some obvious foreshadowing, wouldn't you say?”

Chapter End Notes

Next is Memories of Mipha Part 9: Hylian Miscreant.
Another silent night began within the warm confines of Hyrule Castle, with most of its inhabitants turning in early in preparation for tomorrow’s hotly anticipated Champion Celebration. Princess Zelda, however, remained wide-awake inside her bedroom, having just sent one of her attendants out with Link’s pardon letter. Before settling into her bed for the night, she sat at her desk and wrote in her diary in careful reflection of the events of the day.

"Father scolded me again today. He told me I am to have nothing more to do with researching ancient technology. He insisted that I focus instead on training that will help me awaken my sealing magic. I was so frustrated and ashamed I could not even speak. I've been training since I was a child, and yet... Mother passed the year before my training was to begin. In losing her, I lost not just a mother, but a teacher. Mother used to smile and tell me, "Zelda, my love, all will be well in the end. You can do anything." But she was wrong. No matter how I try or how much time passes...the sealing power that is my birthright evades me. Tomorrow I journey with Link to the Spring of Power to train. But this, too, will end in failure. Such is my curse."

Zelda paused for moment, considering what she’d written. The solemn frown on her face shifted abruptly into a mild scowl. She tore out a blank page from her diary and continued to write on it.

“...No. With all due respect to father… I believe that traveling there would be an utter waste of time. I have already sojourned to the Spring of Courage during my travels with Link, only to be met with more failure. I have a duty to my people - to Hyrule. Those duties include my commitment to the Champions that I have selected, the very people who will save this nation. With my failure to awaken the sealing power inside of me... I believe that they are our last hope. Therefore, I shall instead accompany them on their assigned missions. I will not be telling father.

Wish me luck.”

She sighed, set her pen down, and walked over to her closet to change into her nightgown. A small smile grew on her face as she considered her new decision. It was outright rebellion against her father, to be certain. But at least this once, for a brief moment, she finally felt like she was in control over her own life.

Meanwhile, just a ways down the hall from Zelda the Champions were each sitting in their respective rooms in the royal guest suites in preparation for their night on the town together. Despite Revali’s protests, they’d decided it would be best to alter their appearances in order to blend in better with the massive crowds sure to be present. They didn’t want to cause a commotion with their presence there after all.

Urbosa applied some makeup, let down her incredibly long hair, and chose a more conservative top and sirwal to wear. Revali donned a feathered fedora hat and trench coat, being sure to clean and straighten each and every one of his feathers in order to look his best for the evening. Daruk… did absolutely nothing. Mipha sat in front of the mirror in her room, staring at her reflection for a while. Finally, she simply reached for her hooded shawl, pulled it over her head, and nodded to herself.

Good enough for me.

She quickly exited her suite, and waited in the common room with Daruk for the others to finish.
Urbosa joined them next, but Revali seemed to be taking an especially long amount of time to get ready. Finally, he emerged dramatically from his suite, wings outstretched.

“How do I look?” he said with a confident grin.

“Like a serial killer,” Urbosa answered. “Anyone seen Link?”

Daruk shrugged. “Well, he had to go all the way back to the guard’s chambers to get changed. So he’ll probably be awhi-

The door to the royal suites creaked open slowly as he said this, and Link himself quickly entered. He walked over to the Champions, standing in front of them with a dead stare across his face. The Champions all looked at each other, then back at Link. And then they burst into laughter.

He was dressed in a mildly oversized high-waisted pair of blue pants, lent to him by his friend Lieutenant Relk. His maroon shirt was tucked into the waistband, and he had donned a small, unbuttoned blue vest over it. On his head he wore a large red newsboy cap. But ultimately, it was Link’s face that stole the show.

Just under his nose... was an enormous, fake, curly moustache.

“You must have strained pretty hard to grow that thing so quick!” Daruk said.

“You look utterly ridiculous,” Revali said.

“You’re one to talk…” Urbosa said. “Though I do have to agree…”

“What?! I think he looks awesome!” Daruk said. “Like some kind of carpenter or plumber or something!” He chuckled loudly as he said this.

Meanwhile, Mipha was the only one who had refrained from laughing. She hardly understood Hylian fashion, considering she rarely ever wore any clothing. So she actually found Link’s outfit to be pretty neat - especially his dashing new moustache.

“Anyway. Looks like we’re all set,” said Urbosa, waving around Link’s pardon letter. “Shall we go?”

The others raised their arms in unison.

“Aye!”

Soon, the Champions had exited their room and began to make their way down the winding mountain path around Hyrule Castle. Urbosa took the lead, with Daruk and Mipha following closely behind. Revali walked behind them, complaining about being unable to fly ahead to their destination. Link himself brought up the rear, occasionally staring up at Mipha, who looked back every now and then to catch a glimpse of him. Unfortunately, Revali seemed to think she was actually looking at him instead, and offered a friendly wink or a smile each time she glanced back. After a few instances of this, she finally gave up and simply stared straight ahead the rest of the way. But the damage was already done.

Along the way, the group encountered several patrolmen, who paid them no mind. Link had already informed them of their plans, including his disguise, so they simply nodded in acknowledgement as they passed by. Even a surprise visit by General Krant was quickly dispelled by Zelda’s letter, though not without several pointed observations about Link’s silly getup.
The royalty card, indeed, Link thought, as Urbosa handed him the letter to read through. What a powerful thing…

“So I was thinking,” Urbosa said, “that we could check out this new place in town. It just opened, and it’s fairly low-key.”

Daruk shrugged. “Y’know, it really doesn’t matter to me where we go. The stuff your kind drinks all might as well be-”

“-water to you?” Urbosa finished. She grinned. “Actually, I chose this place partly with you in mind. They claim to serve a drink that can even knock a goron flat on his rear-end.”

“Ya don’t say…” Daruk said, scratching his chin. “Then I accept this challenge!” he pounded his fist into his hand. “What’s this place called?”

“The Merry Moblin Pub,” she said. “A fitting name, if you ask me, given our plans for tonight.”

“And you are quite sure that it is relatively… obscure?” Mipha asked, quietly. “I would prefer not to be accosted once more by delirious fanatics, if it can be avoided.”

“Absolutely,” Urbosa replied. “This place is deep in the back alleyways of Castle Town, pretty much out-of-sight. Even without our disguises, I’d imagine we’ll be able to keep a low profile without issue.”

“I see,” said Mipha. “I will say now, however, that I shall be limiting myself to only one or two beverages for the evening. I have only brought along a handful of rupees for this trip…”

Urbosa shook her head. “Sounds like a wasted opportunity to me.” She slowed her pace briefly and patted Mipha on the shoulder. “After all, I shall be picking up our tab this evening. So feel free to take advantage!”

“...If you say so.” Mipha said, quietly.

“You certainly don’t have to tell me twice!” Revali said. “Urbosa is quite loaded after all. Although, Mipha-”

She turned and raised her brow at him slightly.

“Er, Lady Mipha, I would certainly love to buy you a few drinks myself. If you’d allow me. After all, it would do well for our… camaraderie to get further acquaint-OOF!”

Revali stumbled mid-stride, having somehow gotten his legs tangled up with Link’s. He glared briefly at the young Hylian, then resumed his march. “Right… so what say you?” he said to Mipha, winking.

She fought off the desire to grin at Link’s ‘accident,’ then she responded. “To be honest, I feel that excess alcohol consumption is merely a crutch for more… delicate personalities to step out of their comfort zone, and is hardly needed. Would you not agree?”

“Oh, uh,” Revali grew mildly flustered, unsure of how to respond. “Yes, you are absolutely correct, Mi- Lady Mipha…”

“That may be true,” Urbosa said, finally ending the conversation. “Booze is entirely unnecessary for bonding… but it certainly makes for a far more hilarious night!”
The transition from the bright, sunny day to the darkness of night did little to quell the enormous crowds gathering throughout Hyrule Castle Town. In fact, it seemed like the population in the square had somehow doubled instead since their arrival earlier in the day. Fortunately, the masses slowly thinned out as the Champions all made their way through the dark back streets towards their destination. This area was far less vibrant, and certainly less glamorous than the more modern, clean-looking town square. The buildings were deprecated, decayed by the passage of time. Trash and grime littered the street gutters around them, and several stray animals ran to-and-fro across dark alleyways.

The dimly-outlined shadows of pedestrians bounced around the group as they walked, enhancing the sense of unease growing inside both Link and Mipha’s chests. It wasn’t that they didn’t feel safe - after all, this was nothing compared to the numerous dark nights they’d spend camping in the surrounding Zoran mountain range back at the domain. No, their unease was instead produced by their anxiety at being stuck in a public place for so long, on a night where they would have much preferred to quietly stay in.

“Guess you weren’t kidding when you said this place was out-of-sight,” Daruk said. “Pretty spooky back here.”

“Don’t tell me… that you’re afraid of a little darkness…” Urbosa teased.

“Trust me, it’s not the darkness I’m afraid of,” Daruk said. “Gah!” He nearly jumped out of his skin when a dog began barking at him from behind a nearby apartment window. Urbosa noticed his startled expression, but decided it best not to say anything. It would have been perfect fodder for Revali’s teasing, and she was not in any mood to put up with any of that tonight.

Fortunately, Revali hadn’t noticed Daruk at all. He was too busy eyeing up Mipha, observing her tense posture. “There’s nothing to fear, my lady,” Revali said to Mipha, completely misreading her mood. “I’m here to protect us if any trouble should-”

“Lady Urbosa,” Mipha spoke over Revali, “How much farther now?”

Up ahead, Urbosa paused at a street corner, turned, and grinned.

“Well my friends, it’s actually right... here.” The other Champions ran up to Urbosa and looked down the open street to their left. And they gasped.

An enormous, red, snouted head protruded from above the doorway of the large pub wall in front of them. It was a giant model of a tusked moblin, complete with piercing, beady eyes and a single horn protruding from the top. Link vaguely wondered if the head itself might have actually belonged to a real moblin at some point.

They sure went a little overboard with the theme here, he thought to himself. Guess my definition of ‘low-key’ is a bit different from Urbosa’s-

“I think we may differ a bit in our definition of ‘low-key,’” Mipha said to Urbosa.

But the Gerudo Chief simply laughed, maniacally and playfully. “Welcome... to the Merry Moblin Pub!” she said, arms outstretched. “Shenanigans await!”

One by one, they began to enter the pub as a goron bouncer stood outside, cross-armed, scanning each of these strange new guests. Daruk entered first, then Mipha, then Revali, then Link-

“Wait,” the bouncer snarled. “Get back here.” Link backpedaled animatedly and stood in front of him, while Urbosa walked up alongside to assist.
“Nice try, wise guy. But even with that phoney moustache, you still look way too young to be coming in here...”

Urbosa glanced down at Link, rolled her eyes, then pulled a handful of silver rupees out of her pocket. Next to her, Link unrolled Zelda’s pardon letter, the official seal of the Royal Family glaring menacingly from its spot in the center of the cloth-paper.

“...Right this way, please.”

As he entered the pub, Link’s first observation was how dimly lit the main room was. The next thing he noticed, was that the inside of the place wasn’t nearly as elaborately decorated as the outside. In fact, it was quite mundane. Not that he was complaining.

Despite it only being about nine o’clock in the evening, the place was already bustling with a large number of clientele, all in various stages of inebriation. The Champions briefly glanced around the enormous room in search of a place to sit, before finally making their way over to the nearly empty bar counter. Urbosa took her seat first, followed by Daruk, then Mipha, then Revali - who stepped blatantly in front of Link to do so - and then finally, Link himself.

Urbosa handed the bartender a massive cluster of rupees for the tab, then immediately ordered herself the Noble Pursuit - a mixture of hydromelon juice, crushed ice, and fruit-based arrack served in a glass bottle.

Revali ordered the Dragon’s Roost, which amounted to a mug of dark stout beer into which a shot of spiced whiskey and red cream liqueur was dropped, glass and all.

Mipha, desiring something relatively lighter than the others, ordered herself a simple glass of Zoran brandy.

And Link requested a glass of water. He found it mildly difficult to drink with his fake moustache on, but he managed somehow.

Drinks now in-hand, they sat there for some time and attempted to make light conversation. Daruk’s order - the goron special apparently known as the Magma Chamber - took some time to prepare, so he simply sat there empty-handed for the time being. Link glanced over at Daruk and found himself wondering how the poor bar stool was holding up his enormous goron friend. It soon shattered, immediately answering his question.

“Well Lady Mipha,” Revali said, as Daruk scrambled awkwardly to his feet in the background behind him. “How about that drink?”

Mipha glanced around Revali to make sure Daruk was okay, then she took another small sip from her glass of brandy. Finally, she looked up at the Rito Champion. “Ah, well, perhaps when I finish this drink… I will allow it. It may be a while, however.”

“Oh by all means, take your time!” Revali said. “The night is young!” He waved his wing across the air in front of him dramatically, almost causing Mipha to snicker quietly. But she withheld. After all, knowing him he’d probably think she was laughing with him rather than at him.

SLAM!

“PAH!” Urbosa pounded her bottle back on the counter, gasping with satisfaction. “Not quite as good as back home…” she turned to the Hylian bartender, “but you make quite a worthy Noble Pursuit my friend! How about another?”
“Comin’ right up, babe,” the bartender said, winking, as he prepared another drink for her.

Revali took a generous sip from his mug, then spared a glance over at Link, who sat quietly on the stool next to the wall behind him. He was still sipping on his glass of water, staying quite sober indeed. Revali’s smile faded slightly, but he began to hatch a new plan in his head. One way or another, he’d get this silly Hylian drunk before the end of the night...

“Got an order for a Magma Chamber?” Someone called out from the back. Soon, a pair of bar workers waddled in, hauling an enormous barrel between them. Daruk’s eyes widened at the sight, and he gestured over at them. They quickly slammed the barrel down at his feet and took their leave. “Good luck,” they said as they departed. “You’re gonna need it…”

Daruk bent over and picked up the barrel. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about,” he said. “Back home, this might even qualify as ‘small!’” The presence of the drink itself had already drawn the attention of most of the bar-goers, who all laughed mirthfully at Daruk’s joke. Before long, a chant of ‘chug, chug, chug, chug’ had started, courtesy of Urbosa, as a crowd of people surrounded Daruk. He punched a hole in the lid, and was now busy pouring the mystery beverage down his gullet in a steady stream of pure gluttony.

Behind Revali, Link shook his head in amusement before reaching over to the nearby pitcher of water to pour another drink. Revali himself stared at Daruk with disgust, then rolled his eyes as he turned to Mipha. “And people wonder why I call that old brute ‘classless,’” he said. “Bah. His gluttonous mannerisms are nearly as egregious as Link’s...” His expression morphed into a sleazy grin. “Anyway... how are you fairing, my lady?” he asked her. Ready for that drink yet?”

Mipha suddenly realized that Revali was speaking to her. “Ah, I am sorry Revali, it appears my glass somehow keeps filling itself up on its own!”

Revali glanced down at her glass, which was now filled with some sort of clear liquid. He shrugged. “Not to worry, my dear,” he replied. “The next one.” He took another sip of his drink-

PBBBBTTTTTHH!

-Only to spit it out abruptly. He stared down at his own glass with utter revulsion. “What in Hylia’s name-”

Just outside of Revali’s line of sight, Mipha placed the salt shaker back on the countertop.

In the background, Link nearly fell off his stool in quiet laughter.

After Daruk finished his third Magma Chamber for the night, showing no signs of slowing down, the pub settled into a more quiet state as people found their seats again. Up on the stage opposite of the bar, several musicians began to set up their instruments. They appeared to be a three-piece house band which featured a lute player, a cellist, and percussionist with a small set of drums which had been collected from all across the land. Conspicuously absent, however, was their vocalist who was apparently out sick for the evening.

The band began to play, and Urbosa immediately cringed at the sound of it. Their music was fine, that wasn’t the issue. The problem was that they were playing a song from her home country - one which sounded quite anemic without a singer. So without missing a beat, Urbosa took a swig of her bottle and made her way to the stage, drink still in-hand, suddenly belting out the tune on her own. The entire bar stared at her in wonder, as her surprisingly powerful voice filled the room with warm, beautiful tones. The band winked at her in appreciation, their performance now invigorated by this welcomed newcomer. Daruk quickly obtained a much smaller drink of his own and made his own
way over to the stage to take in her performance up-close.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the bar, Mipha nervously spun a glass of water around as she observed the scene in front of her. She had obviously grown to dislike Revali by now, in spite of her kind nature. But so far, through everyone she’d met in her entire life, she had never once developed true hatred for even a single person. Now, sitting at the counter here in Merry Moblin Pub, watching Revali begin to harass Link incessantly for remaining sober, she found herself dangerously close to losing her streak.

“Don’t you think it would be a shame to waste Zelda’s favor like that?” Revali said, waving his mug of stout beer around. “Come on… It’s only a friendly wager, Link. A simple contest of alcohol consumption...” he grinned deceitfully, forcing Mipha to look away in sheer irritation.

I don't hate him I don't hate him I don't hate-

“Unless you simply aren't man enough to take me on!”

I hate him.

Mipha looked back over at Link, who seemed to hesitate briefly. The young Hylian stared down Revali for several moments. Finally, he pounded the counter with his fist, then pointed at Revali’s drink once the bartender took notice. Link quickly received a large mug of his own, which he chugged down in seconds before placing it back on the table - all before Revali even knew what happened. Link’s cheeks grew flush as he pounded the counter to demand another. His eyes narrowed, his mouth curled into a wry grin as he stared coldly at Revali, who snapped back to reality and hastily finished his own drink, demanding another one himself.

The challenge was accepted. The battle was now on.

Mipha palmed her forehead in disbelief.

In the background, the band continued to play song after song. Urbosa remained on-stage, keeping pace with them without strain and improvising wherever needed. Soon, the center of the pub was filled with couples who began to link up and dance to the sounds of the lively music. Mipha stared after them in quiet curiosity, trying her hardest to ignore the idiotic battle between Rito and Hylian raging next to her. Several ladies approached Link to ask for a dance, but he was too busy maniacally chugging alcoholic beverages to care. Still, these gestures seemed to irritate Revali further, despite several Rito females asking him to dance as well. Mipha sighed, continuing to do her best not to stare at the two, instead peering into her water-filled glass with a solemn smile.

If I had come here alone with Link instead... she thought to herself, I wonder... if he would like to dance with me...

She dwelled on this thought for a moment, then shrugged. Ah well. I am not much of a dancer anyway. She finally allowed her eyes to wander back to Link, did a quick count of the empty glasses on the counter in front of him, and sighed again. After a brief moment of contemplation, she tapped the counter and signaled the bartender for a more potent drink.

This... is going to be a long night, she thought.

It didn’t take long. Twenty-three enormous drinks later, and Link easily had Revali on the ropes. They’d moved their battle to a nearby table away from the bar, filling its surface with glass after glass much faster than the Rito waitresses could possibly remove them. A crowd had circled the young Hylian and his Rito opponent, cheering each one on and roaring with laughter at the entertainment.
Revali was wavering, swaying back and forth in his seat, while Link only seemed slightly more red in the face for his troubles.

Link stared Revali down as they both received their twenty-fourth drinks, and he shrugged, gulping it down without a second thought. Revali did the same, holding the drink high up in the air, when suddenly he choked. The entire mug splashed down on his face, drenching him completely. He finally collapsed face-first into the table, sending several empty mugs cascading to the floor below. Link briefly held his fist up in triumph to cheers and adulation around him, but he quickly placed his hand back down and sighed.

It was, after all, mostly a pyrrhic victory. He actually found himself embarrassed to be seen in such a pitiful state in front of Mipha, though he was pretty much too far gone to do anything about it at this point. He hesitantly glanced through the crowds and over to the counter where she remained seated, expecting to see a piercing glare of disapproval from her.

But as he caught sight of her, he nearly dropped his glass to the floor in shock. She was seated there, red in the face, swaying ever-so slightly. A quick count of the drinking glasses surrounding her, and Link realized the Zora princess had actually somehow matched him drink-for-drink. And was currently in the process of ordering yet another.

She returned Link’s glance, offered an uneven smile, then turned her attention to the next drink which was slammed on the counter in front of her. She held the large mug up in Link’s direction in a mock toasting gesture, and Link returned the favor. As the group of onlookers dispersed from around him, Link began to stand up from his seat to make his way over to her. But much to his surprise, Revali twitched slightly, and began to rouse his head up from the table.

"He’s still alive?!" Link thought.

“So tell me you… silly Hylian, - HIC - just…” he burped loudly. "Just... what is your… relationship with Mipha?"

Revali’s slurred words finally betrayed his true intentions. Link realized that this had been the wily Rito’s plan all along - to get him drunk enough to spill the beans on all his ‘secrets,’ probably to be used against him someday. Link grinned at this. Now it was his turn to finally mess with Revali.

Well, it seems the shoe is on the other... turntable, that's been... um... he shook his head in drunken confusion. Whatever.

“Oh, you know…” Link said. "She’s just… someone I plan on eating alive later. I got… an appetite for fish after all."

Revali raised an eyebrow in confusion. Then he rubbed his temples absentmindedly. “Hold on a minute… so…you’re...”

“What about you?” Link interrupted. “What’s your story? Tell me... the most embarrassing experience... you’ve ever had.” His words were surprisingly more slurred than he expected, but Revali seemed to understand him just fine. The Rito Champion grinned awkwardly, eager as always to share information about himself to anyone who asked.

“Well let me tell ya…” he slurred. “There was this one time... “ Link spared a glance up at Mipha, then he shrugged. He decided he’d go over and talk later. They had all night, after all, so he could spare a few minutes.

He turned his head back up to Revali, who was rambling on with some story about soiling his pants
when he attempted to pull the Master Sword several months prior. “And ya'know what,” Revali said, “that was pretty... tough - HIC - to scrub out that night!”

Link smiled, sat back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

Yep, I think I can spare a few minutes indeed.

As Mipha sat idly, finishing her final drink for the evening, she saw a pair of Zora begin to make their way over to her from out of the corner of her eye. They quickly approached her and began to make small-talk. Based on their slurred accents, she figured they were likely from one of the rough-and-tumble domains out at sea.

The first one was tall, drunk, and ugly. A large scar was evident across his left eye, and he walked with a slight limp. She glanced over at his buddy, who wasn’t much to look at himself.

Still analyzing... still judging... she thought. I really need to stop.

The scarred Zora seemed friendly enough at first. He ordered a drink for Mipha, which she politely declined. But as he slid the drink over to her, she could clearly see him swipe his hand over the top of the glass. A small bit of powder burst in the air above it, but quickly dissipated into the liquid below. She figured a less-observant Zora might have fallen for this blatant drugging attempt quite easily.

But she was, of course, chosen as the Zora Champion for a reason.

Mipha tightened the cords around her black hood in slight retreat. These guys weren’t backing down, egging her to at least try the drink. Mipha finally appeared to relent, but her hand grazed the side of the glass, knocking it straight to the floor.

“Ah, my apologies-” she said, “allow me to clean that-”

Link looked away from the rambling Revali again, and finally noticed the pair of drunk Zora now accosting the Zora princess. There were several other mature Zora women around the pub, but he noticed they weren’t getting nearly as much attention as Mipha seemed to be.

Seems she was right, Link thought to himself. Zoras do prefer sleeker builds after all...

A part of him wanted to move up and assist her, but he also knew she was quite capable of taking care of herself. So he decided that he’d just have to sit back and simply keep an eye on her for now. He took a sip from his mug, red faced and smiling. Revali, who had now dropped off the conversation after fading in and out of consciousness, noticed this and attempted to do the same. Despite being unable to even sit up straight at this point, he was not about the give up the fight. Where in... Hylia’s name... is he putting all of this?! Revali thought angrily. He was dangerously nearing the blackout zone, but there was no way he was going to let this silly Hylian best him in a drinking contest of all things-

Link suddenly shot to his feet, knocking over his stool with a loud bang. Revali looked up and scowled himself. The first Zora, the one with the scar across his eye, had placed a hand on Mipha’s thigh, moving in closer to whisper something to her. The look on the Zora princess’s face indicated that she was not at all pleased with what she’d heard.

A cold, dead gaze suddenly settled in across Link’s face. By this time, Revali had also unsteadily hopped on his feet, chugging the remains of his drink and slamming it on the table. Silently, he and Link spared a drunken glance at each other, nodded, and began to make their way over to Mipha
with haste.

“Hey, where ya think yer goin, eh?” one of the Zoras said, pushing Mipha back down in her seat as she attempted to leave. “Can’t leave ‘til we figure out how yer gonna... make up for wastin’ dat drink!” He winked at Mipha, who stared back with a bewildered expression. “Don’t worry,” he continued, “we’ll take good care of ya. I gotta couple other ideas ya might be.”

“Excuse me.” Feeling a tap on his shoulder, the scarred Zora spun around. Staring back at him was the source of the voice: one stone-faced, inebriated, blue-eyed Hylian.

“You've made a mistake.” Link deadpanned.

“Huh?”

BLAM!

Link’s fist slammed straight into the center of the Zora’s face with the force of a cannon blast, knocking out several of his razor-like teeth and launching him clear over the counter into the liquor shelf behind him. Link struck him so hard that his long tailfin lashed back and whipped his buddy in the side of the head, sending him careening off in Revali’s direction. Revali spun on his feet, landing a roundhouse kick in the second Zora’s abdomen and dropping him to the floor in tremendous pain.

Noticing the commotion, a large group of the Zoras’ friends swept in from around the bar and charged straight for Link and Revali, shouting obscenities as they approached. Link and Revali turned to face them, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a bewildered Mipha.

“First one to get hit... loses...” Revali slurred. A punch nailed him in the side of his head the moment the words left his beak.

“Can’t win ‘em all I guess...” Link murmured back. His uppercut sent Revali’s Hylian attacker sailing over a nearby table, and into a pair of aggressors barreling towards them. Revali kicked back up to his feet, slamming another attacker in the chest as he did. The pub’s patrons began to whoop and holler as the fighting broke out. Noticing this, the house band began to play one of the more energetic songs in their repertoire to suit the mood. Daruk laughed loudly, turned, and shook his head at Urbosa. “Told ya,” the Gerudo mouthed at him, as she continued to sing loudly along with the band, toasting with Daruk for good times.

Link and Revali got to work, fighting off roughly a dozen attackers of various races in a choreographed dance of incredible violence. Hylians, Rito, and Zora alike were numbered among the fighters, and they all seemed quite relentless in their attack. But it soon became abundantly clear that they stood no chance - even against a pair of severely drunken warriors.

Link took a staggered fighting stance, caught the kick of an attacking Rito, then countered with a sweeping kick of his own. Revali leapt over him, landing a haymaker in the face of the tripped Rito then spinning around with a back-winged strike on a nearby Zora fighter. Link blocked a punch from another Hylian nearby, twisted his arm awkwardly, then dislocated his elbow. He blocked another punch from a different Hylian fighter, only to catch a kick square to the side of his head from another. Link staggered to his left but recovered quickly. He lunged forward and tackled the Hylian into a table, knocking him out cold and splintering the table into hundreds of pieces.

“Link,” Revali said. Link turned, just as Revali kicked another fighter in the rear, causing the man to stumble in Link’s direction. Link leapt in place, landing a side-kick into the chest of the stumbling attacker and sending him back in Revali’s direction. The Rito Champion quickly head-butted the man, finishing the job. Link and Revali nodded in respect at one another, then turned to resume their
fighting.

The scene unfolding in the bar was absolute chaos. Bottles and glasses flew around the bar from patrons and attackers alike, and the rousing music only enhanced the frenetic mood. Link and Revali continued to work in-sync, making quick work of the fighters in their immediate vicinity and only absorbing a handful of strikes here and there. But before long, a loud female shout sounded out from the crowd.

“He’s got a knife! Look out!” Behind the pair, the scarred Zora who had accosted Mipha earlier was lunging straight in Link’s direction, ready to plant his blade in the small of Link’s back. Revali noticed this, and prepared to hold him off when-

CRASH!

The scarred Zora suddenly launched backwards from his spot, flying through the large glass window next to the entrance of the pub. Link spun on his heels, eyes widening.

Mipha stood there, arms outstretched to her side at the tail end of a throwing motion. On her blushed face, she bore a cold, detached, dead expression that Link had never before seen on the small Zora princess. She glanced back at Link, raised her brow in acknowledgement, then leapt from her feet to land a flying kick into the face of the Zora’s friend before diving through the shattered window after the first one.

Link prepared to chase after her, when another shout roared from behind the bar. “OUT! GET OUT!” It was the bar’s owner: an angry, imposing goron. “I knew it was a mistake lettin’ you scumbag Champions into my bar,” he snarled. He drew a crossbow from under the bar, trained it directly at Revali. “You hurt my friends! I oughta kill ya where ya stand. OUT!”

Around Revali, several attackers began booing and jeering angrily.

“Yeah, get out ya losers! You ain’t welcome here!”

“You’re nothin’ but garbage!”

“Champions? They’re the Champions?”

“Yeah right, they ain’t savin’ nobody any time soon!”

“Has anyone… seen my teeth?”

Revali scowled. “Fine… by me!” He slurred, through his haze of drunkenness. He dropped the Rito fighter he’d been choking out, patting his hands together in exaggerated fashion. “I won’t continue… - HIC- to service a place… that waits on degenerates like these guys anyway…” he kicked the Rito he dropped straight in the gut, then crossed his arms and sneered. “Isn’t that… right Link?” He looked to his left to smile back at...

No one.

Outside the bar, Link rushed over to Mipha and the Zora she’d just thrown through the window. She was kneeled down on the man’s chest, beating him senseless in the face with blow after blow. The Zora man was a bloody mess now, and Link actually felt a sense of pity for the poor guy. However small.

He approached Mipha, gently patting her on the head. Recognizing the gesture, she finally relented. She climbed to her feet, dusted her lap off, then stared up into Link’s eyes. He could see the tears
welling up in her face - not from fear or from sorrow, but from sheer rage.

“He was... trying to kill you,” she stammered, “he was-

“I know,” Link muttered. He wanted so badly to hug her, to hold her close and calm her, but decided not to. “Are you… okay?”

She wiped the tears from her eyes, then smiled her usual gentle grin.

“Never better… though perhaps my… liver might not agree with the sentiment. And yourself?”

“Fine.” He rubbed the side of his bleeding head, off which an errant glass bottle had ricocheted during the chaos. “But I… think we ought to head back to the castle… as soon as possible.”

Mipha nodded at him, then briefly glanced back at the pub. The snarling statue of the Moblin’s head stared back, as if it were attempting to scare them off itself. She paused for a moment, then sighed loudly.

“Did we... lose?” She slurred, turning back to Link. He stared after her for a minute, somberly. And then he spoke.

“No…” he finally said, averting his eyes. Behind him, Revali was tossed out of the pub like a bag of trash.

“...But I can't say that we won either.”

The house band finished their show for the night, and a renewed sense of calm soon entered into the pub as workers began cleaning up the mess their recent ‘guests’ had left behind. Covered in sweat and grinning, Urbosa flopped herself at a table with Daruk, who sat on the ground to avoid breaking yet another chair.

“Nice job up there,” Daruk said. “Seems you got the smooth voice of an Eldin Ostrich in those pipes of yours!”

“Not entirely sure that’s a compliment,” Urbosa said, wiping her brow with a cloth from her pocket. “But I appreciate it nonetheless!” She looked away for a second, then began to comment on the crazy scene from earlier. But she was rudely interrupted by one of the instigators nearby.

“Can you believe those guys?” the injured Rito said, hobbling up to take a seat at the same table. “The Champions ain’t all they’re cracked up to be, eh? Comin’ in here and startin’ a ruckus like that. But we took care of ‘em just fine!”

Urbosa sipped from her Noble Pursuit, then shrugged. “I’m not pointing fingers… but it seems to me that they weren’t the ones who started it.”

Daruk pointed at the Rito’s injured arm. “And it seems to me that you guys were the ones who got ‘taken care of!’”

“Bah, who cares,” the Rito said, flexing his busted shoulder. “This ain’t the place for that either way. Don’t need that kinda trouble…” He looked up, recognized Urbosa as the singer from earlier.

“Really, we could use more people like you two in here! Just a couple regular folk out here to have a good time right?”

“Right…” said Daruk.
“Right...” said Urbosa.

The inebriated Rito raised his glass in Urbosa and Daruk’s direction. “Forget the Champions!” he shouted. “Let them all die in the Calamity!”

“Yeaaaah!”

His friends all raised their glasses, echoing his toast. He stared at Daruk and Urbosa expectantly, and they both finally raised their glasses-

-and dumped their drinks on the surprised, sputtering Rito. They stood up, began to make their way to the exit.

“Keep the change!” Urbosa yelled to the bartender. “You’ll need it for repairs, after all!” She turned her attention back to Daruk as they exited the doorway of the Merry Moblin, for the very last time. “Let’s find a new place, hmm? Night’s still young,” she said. “I know of another pub, claims to serve a drink that will really rock your world, pardon the pun. That is, if you’re up for the challenge!”

Daruk laughed loudly in response - mostly at her timely pun. He was a sucker for those.

“Promises, promises,” he said, grinning back. “You’re on.”

“And... Muzu chased Sidon away... thinkin’ it was ‘im the entire time!” Mipha said, swaying and laughing.

Link laughed heartily in return, wiping a tear from his eye. “He always was pretty... salty, wasn’t he?” he slurred. “Great job though. Seriously.” He gave her a loose thumbs-up as he staggered forward with his steps.

“Well... I did learn... from the best after all,” Mipha said with grin.

They were making their way across the bridge back to Hyrule Castle, joking and laughing on the way. On her face Mipha wore Link's fake moustache, having caused him to nearly die laughing the moment she stuck it on. He’d thought to ask her if Zora actually possessed anything equivalent to a nose, but had decided it wasn’t an appropriate time to ask.

Behind the pair, Castle Town still burst with energy and life; but the two were more than happy to leave all the noise behind and finally get this blessed opportunity to enjoy each other's company uninhibited. The sound of music from a concert in the town square echoed faintly through the air, causing Mipha to smile warmly at her dear Hylian companion.

“I have a question for you... if you don’t mind.” She carefully tore the fake moustache from her face, tossing it into the moat below.

“Shoot.”

“As you probably know... we Zora aren’t much for dancing. From what I’ve observed... is it... quite popular among Hylians?”

Link shrugged. “Yeah, I suppose it is. I’m not particularly fond of it myself though. I have two left feet... and one of them is on backwards!”

Mipha giggled at Link. It was so great for her to see him back to his old self, even if it was only the
result of a temporary drunken stupor. “I see. For us Zora… social events usually involve…
synchronized swimming of some kind.” She grinned slyly at Link. “But unfortunately, I have two
left flippers!”

Link laughed at Mipha’s joke in kind, much to her joy. She paused briefly before continuing.
“Though I must say I do find dancing quite intriguing…”

Link said nothing, as they continued to make their way up the path back to Hyrule Castle. After a
brief moment of silence, Mipha spoke again. “Link-” she began, reflecting vividly on all of the
dancing couples back at the Merry Moblin Pub. The Hylian Champion turned his head her way,
staring back with eyes so bright and loving-

...and so blue...

-causing Mipha to choke on her words for a second. The music from the square continued, the
images of dancing couples still swirled around her mind. “I was…” she continued, “well, I was
just… wondering... if perhaps you’d like to-”

“Ooooooohhhhhhh,” Revali moaned in pain behind them. He suddenly staggered over to the side of
the bridge, puking up what remained of his drinks down into the moat below. Mipha stared after their
fellow Champion with a look of genuine pity, sighing quietly as she did.

“We… really ought to... help ’im the rest of the way,” Mipha muttered.

Link shrugged. “Sure.”

Revali was petulant and self-absorbed, insufferably so. His very presence was often a source of
tension and irritation for the two of them. But he was still their comrade. And as demonstrated by his
actions tonight, he was indeed an honorable man at his core. Even if his intentions were always so
painfully obvious...

Together, Link and Mipha each grabbed one of Revali’s wings and propped him up on their
shoulders. With their welcomed assistance, he began to limp his way up the winding mountain road
leading back to the guest suites of the castle.

“This reminds me of... your first stay back at the domain… all those years ago…” Mipha said. Link
noticed she hardly struggled with Revali’s weight on her shoulders. He supposed it should have been
no surprise, given how incredibly strong of a swimmer she was.

“I can swim much faster than any of

you!” Link chuckled slightly at the memory.

“How so?” he asked her.

“Well… after every one of my father’s... infamous banquets…” she mumbled, “it seems there was…
always the inevitable soldier who… overdid the liquor a bit. Usually Seggin…”

Link burst out laughing. “That’s right…” he said, glancing at Revali’s face for a second.
“...Although, we didn’t usually have to dodge their projectile vomit… when we helped them get
around.”

Mipha giggled, but said nothing. She offered to heal Revali in order to at least minimize the
damaging effects of alcohol on his thin body, but he outright refused. Seemed he was still far too
proud to look weak in front of anybody.

“We’re probably… going to be reprimanded by the king for causing a scene before his big event…”
Link muttered.
“Well that’s hardly unusual for us...” Mipha said. “Back at the domain it... seemed like we always got in trouble together... at every turn!” She paused for a moment in contemplation. “I... miss those times.”

Link shrugged. “Well if I have anything to say about it,” he said, grinning, “there will be... plenty more times like that to come. Once this is all over.”

Mipha smiled back, and a brief lull in the conversation set in as they drew closer to the entrance to the guest suites of Hyrule Castle. Revali was now entirely passed out on their shoulders, snoring loudly as they carried him along. Another innocent question, born of simple curiosity, was lingering heavily on the tip of Mipha’s tongue. So she finally just spit it out.

“Link… tell me… about your recent travels.” Mipha said. “What do you think… of the princess?”

Link raised an eyebrow at her sudden bluntness. “The princess huh? Well...” He paused. “To be frank... she’s amazing. She’s loyal, joyful, warm, and... incredibly kind.” Link looked straight at Mipha and smiled. “I have never met anyone like her... in my entire life. I can safely say, that she’s become... quite dear to me.”

Mipha nodded. “I... see. Thank you for being so honest.” Somewhat crestfallen, she began to regret asking him the question in the first place. But Link’s next words caused her to immediately reverse her opinion. She blushed profusely, due only in small part to her inebriated state.

“Hmmm? Oh... it’s no problem at all,” Link said. “…Princess.”

They eventually made it back to the royal guest suites, Revali in-tow. They were quite grateful that he was passed out, as his moaning would likely have woken up half the castle. After placing him in his bed with a glass of water, Link took the time to escort Mipha to her own room.

They entered in, and Mipha spun around on her heels to stare up at Link. She smiled, then pulled him into a hug - one which she held for perhaps a little bit too long. Not that he seemed to mind. Finally, they pulled away. Link turned to leave Mipha’s room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

He stood there for a couple of minutes, just staring through the common room at the open window in front of them. I’ll give those guards a piece of my mind about those windows later, he thought to himself.

He continued to stand there for some time, in quiet contemplation, before finally making his decision. He took a deep breath, turned to face the door, and grabbed the knob to push it open again. As the door swung open, he flinched mildly. Mipha was still standing there, having taken a deep breath of her own before attempting to pull the door open herself.

They stood there and stared at each other for a moment.

Then they burst out in awkward laughter.

“There’s still… something we haven’t done yet...” Mipha said, shyly.

She quickly pulled Link back into the room and shut the door behind her.

“You were right about that drink,” Daruk said. “I think it actually might have made me tingle a little bit on the inside...”

“Ha, well, I’m glad it wasn’t a complete disappointment after all!” Urbosa said, as she swung open
“Don’t mention it,” Daruk whispered, as they carefully made their way through the common room to their respective suites. They walked quietly, the silence utterly deafening as they took their careful steps. But they both paused as they passed Mipha’s room.

Did they hear… grunting? Quiet voices reverberated from the room’s interior. Female and male. Daruk and Urbosa glanced at each other awkwardly.

“We’d… better leave them alone.” Daruk said. They both nodded at each other, then slowly began to walk off in the direction of their respective rooms...

“…Wait…”

They both backpedaled to the door in a flash, pressing their heads against it in order to hear better.

“This is wrong,” Daruk whispered.

“I know. Isn’t it great?” Urbosa whispered back.

Quiet voices continued to emanate from inside of Mipha’s room...

“No no Link… you’re gripping way too tight. A bit gentler, if you please.”

“Why? It feels so much more natural this way…”

“I’ve told you many times before… you mustn’t force things. Just flow with me…”

“Mmmmm…You’re right. Okay…."

Their voices drifted off suddenly, forcing Urbosa and Daruk to lean in even further in order to hear them. It seemed Link and Mipha were speaking to each other in quiet whispers now, perhaps hoping not to draw attention to their… extracurricular activities-

CRUNCH!

The door suddenly exploded inward, ripping off the hinges at the force of the combined weight of Daruk and Urbosa. They both toppled into the room, quickly scrambling to their feet and shielding their eyes.

“Sorry, sorry!” they said. “We didn’t mean to-”

“What’s wrong?” Link asked, eyebrow raised.

“Can we help you?” Mipha asked. The look on her face was one of pure, sincere innocence.

Daruk and Urbosa slowly uncovered their eyes, then exhaled in disappointment. Link and Mipha stood in the center of the suite, each clutching tipless spears as they practiced combat maneuvers together.

“Sorry, we uh... just thought….” Daruk said, “Well, with the sounds… that perhaps you were doing something a little more-”

Link glanced over at Mipha with a bemused smile, and he suddenly burst out laughing. After a few seconds, even Mipha herself giggled a bit at this.
Urbosa and Daruk stared awkwardly for a while, then calmly backed out of the room, picking up the door and quietly attempting to shut it behind them.

The intruders now departed, Link and Mipha quickly got back to work.

It was now four o’clock in the morning, just an hour or so before sunrise. Link found himself waking up on the floor of Mipha’s suite, right next to her bed. He exhaled deeply in surprise, but quickly calmed down. He hadn’t intended on falling asleep there of course - after all, their combat practice was meant to be quite brief. But their long conversations had carried on deep into the night. Just as they always had, an entire lifetime ago.

Above him the Zora princess slept soundly on her side, arm loosely dangling down in Link’s direction below. He stared up at her for a moment, admiring the quiet stillness of her moonlit face. Then he reached up to gently squeeze her hand. He could have sworn a smile grew on her face as he did, but he figured he was just imagining things.

He climbed to his feet and rolled Mipha over onto her back. He grabbed her blankets, which lay askew next to her, and carefully pulled them over her to tuck her in for the short remainder of night that was left. Quickly gathering his things, he began to creep carefully out of Mipha’s room, hoping not to draw anyone’s attention with his departure. The last thing he wanted was for his fellow Champions to get suspicious of his overnight presence.

It was a struggle, attempting to open the door silently after Daruk and Urbosa’s destructive entry before, but he somehow managed. As he began to exit the doorway, a quiet voice sounded out from the bed behind him

“Link…” Mipha mumbled.

He froze. His head turned back to the half-asleep Mipha, and he smiled warmly.

“I’m here.” He said. “What is it?” He trained his ear attentively to her words, which carefully left her lips with just short of a whisper. “Someday, Link…” she began, hesitating briefly in her languid state. “…Would you like to… dance with me?”

Link stared back at Mipha’s bed, right into her piercing yellow eyes which cut brilliantly through the darkness as always. And he grinned back at her.

“It would be… my pleasure, Lady Mipha.” He shut the broken door carefully behind him, as a sighing Mipha wrapped herself tightly under the warm blankets, melting contentedly into the mattress of her bed.

"This is fantastic! Thank you all for coming! We hope you enjoyed the parade! Up next, we have our weapons demonstration, featuring high-tech weaponry developed by the one and only Sheikah Tribe!”

Ever one for the spotlight, Purah relished this opportunity to act as the master of ceremonies for the Champion Celebration. She smiled widely at the crowd, whose lukewarm response hardly filled her with any sort of confidence. She turned to face the Champions behind her.

“This is a disaster!” she said, through her ear-to-ear grin.

“You’re telling me…” Urbosa said, rubbing the side of her head absentmindedly. Her migraine had yet to go away, and it showed in her body language. Seemed the Noble Pursuits she consumed the
previous night hadn’t been as up to snuff as she’d originally thought.

But it was true - the Celebration had been a complete mess thus far. Not only had the parade been disorderly and disorganized, but it seemed word of the Champion’s activities the previous night had quickly spread like wildfire through the populace. Thousands of people were gathered in the stands surrounding the imperial training grounds, many of which offered loud jeers and insults at the Champions as they passed by in the earlier parade’s congregation.

The weapons demonstration, now in full-swing, was going well enough at least. Though this phase of the celebration only featured Hyrule’s finest soldiers, wielding their newly-developed Royal Guard weapons courtesy of the Sheikah. Their forms were a bit awkward and sloppy, but Link quickly barked orders at his men, whipping them into shape in the eleventh hour as they snapped to attention and smoothed out their otherwise dull performance. The crowd roared in cheers at Link’s command, and Mipha had found herself happy that he was at least getting the respect he deserved - even if a few boos still permeated the audience here and there.

Up above the main stage at the center of the grounds, King Rhoam frowned at the scene. He’d already chewed out the Champions severely for their disrespect shown during their night on the town. He was especially furious at his daughter Zelda for condoning their improper behavior, and had informed the Champions that he would expect better of them during the Ceremony.

So far, he was rightfully displeased.

And to top everything off…the Rito Champion Revali was missing in action. He’d already been absent for the parade, and now was still nowhere to be seen during the weapons demonstration. And with the main act about to start - the Champion’s sparring session - his absence was becoming all the more obvious.

“Line up!” General Krant barked at his men. Link cringed internally at the snarling voice of his senior. He knew that of all the people there, Krant was likely the most embarrassed with what he was witnessing thus far. The Hylian soldiers all took their formation in a multilayered circle around the Champions, who began to line up in front of each other. With Revali gone, Link was forced to take his place as Mipha’s first sparring partner-

“Begin!”

-But at the very least, this meant that their practice in the wee hours of the morning hadn’t been a waste after all.

They quickly launched into their battle, Link versus Mipha, Daruk versus Urbosa. It was slow-going at first, especially in the case of Daruk and Urbosa. Despite their natural chemistry as friends, it seemed their fighting styles did not at all complement each other. Though it was a non-contact spar, they frequently made contact anyway, knocking each other around and producing a handful of minor injuries in each other. Nonetheless, the crowd seemed to be quite pleased with this development.

Meanwhile, it was Link and Mipha who truly stole the show. Despite having likely drank more alcohol the previous night than the entire crowd combined, Link and Mipha still managed to salvage their sparring performance in the most brilliant of ways. They flipped and dove and spun, feeding off each other in a delicate dance of spearplay. Their strikes barely missed the mark, intentionally, producing oohs and ahs from the now-jubilant crowd.

Their show of talent truly captivated the stunned audience - especially once Link drew the legendary Master Sword from his back. His spar with Mipha continued, and this time it was clear that she was outmatched. In this simulation, Link landed numerous killing blows on his Champion counterpart,
and Mipha found that she simply could not keep up with him - even at her peak of spearmanship. He was a prodigy, a genius at his craft.

And she adored him all the more for it.

The sparring demonstration began to come to a close, but the cheers and shouts in support of Link and Mipha quickly morphed back into jeers and cries of anger. A dark silhouette appeared against the sun, making its way quickly to the site of the Champion Celebration.

It was Revali, flying crookedly through the air as he descended abruptly towards the center of the Imperial Grounds. He mistimed his landing badly, however, and collided forcefully with the ground in a tremendous crash landing that produced peals of laughter from the populace.

The boos continued in earnest, especially from the witnesses of the barfight the previous night, as Revali limped over to where Mipha and Link stood. They were still in shock at Revali’s dramatically ill-timed arrival.

“This is your fault!!” Revali said, pointing at Link. “If you hadn’t overdone it last night, as I should have expected you would, I wouldn’t have found myself fighting just to drag myself out of the bed this morning!” Mipha scowled at Revali. After all they’d done for him… this was how he treated them? She began to open her mouth to defy his accusation, when the King suddenly stood up in his chair, shushing the crowd. The Champions quickly reassembled, taking a knee in front of the King.

“It is my sincere hope… that you have all enjoyed today’s demonstration. Minor quirks and all!” The crowd laughed in response to the king’s jovial mood, which was clearly masking the internal rage boiling inside him.

“And with that, I turn it over one last time to our delightful hostess, Purah…”

“Thank you, my liege!” Purah shouted, moving back to the center of the stage. “We have… one more surprise for you~!” She winked at the crowd, then pointed to the north entrance of the Imperial Grounds. “If you would all please turn your attention to the north gate, we Sheikah have prepared something…~special~ for your entertainment. So without further ado, I-”

SHOOM!

A massive blast of superheated plasma shot through the air just above Purah, melting her hair tie. Her hair exploded outwards around her shoulders as she hit the deck, staring up at the source of the blast, which had exploded off the walls of the Imperial Grounds behind her. Large chunks of stone shot out from the impact point, injuring several people and causing an incredible frenzy.

“Take cover! It’s out of control!” Robbie shouted from the north gate. The Champions all looked up at the north entrance, and there they saw it - the guardian stalker that the Sheikah had been working on yesterday. Its long, segmented legs scrambled around the ground frenetically as it barreled its way directly towards the Champions. Its malfunctioning singular eye flashed blue and red in a strobe effect, its head swiveled to and fro as it scanned the area around it and prepared to charge up yet another laser blast in order to incinerate every perceived enemy in its vicinity. The thousands of people numbered in the crowd began to cry out in shock and fear, scrambling around to either depart swiftly, or to get a closer look. Sheikah attendants immediately grabbed King Rhoam and Princess Zelda, dragging them back towards the audience in a hasty retreat. The Sheikah Poet himself grabbed Zelda’s hand as he guided her towards the nearest exit. But she let go, refusing to simply abandon her fellow Champions out on the battlefield.

“Where in Hylia’s name are you going?!” the poet called after her.
“To help my friends!” Zelda responded. She pulled up the lower half of the skirt of her dress, and began to run towards the Champions, while the frightened poet could do nothing more than look on in wonder. Zelda linked up with Purah, and together they began to sprint full-on in the direction of Hyrule’s finest warriors...

“Daruk!” Urbosa cried out.

“On it!” he replied. He dove between the Champions and the charging guardian, holding his hands out as if preparing to catch the robot himself. The guardian quickly unleashed its incredible laser blast, training it directly at Daruk. In a split second, Daruk smashed his fists together, producing his trademark red force field around himself. The guardian’s blast ricocheted off the shield, then straight into the sky above. The plasma blast burned a hole through the clouds above them in a puff of steam.

With this deflection, all of the Champions sprung into action. Revali crouched on the ground, producing a whirlwind around himself through which he rocketed to the sky, raining bomb arrows on the now-confused guardian stalker.

Link, Mipha, and Urbosa took a shoulder-to-shoulder fighting formation behind Daruk, who immediately charged after the guardian, colliding with it forcefully and pushing it back several yards. He began to lay into the thing, denting its surface with his powerful strikes-

“Don’t destroy it!” Robbie yelled from nearby. “That’s precious technology!”

“Well, what do you expect me to do?!” Daruk yelled back.

“Just… hold it off I guess-WHOA!”

The guardian fired a laser straight at Robbie, cratering the ground just a foot away from him. Eyes wide, he immediately took cover within the hole.

The guardian then focused its attention on the trio of Urbosa, Link, and Mipha in front of it. It went completely berserk, flailing its legs about in front of itself in an effort to slice its new targets into ribbons. The trio fanned out, parrying every single strike from the razor-sharp legs of the stalker in near-perfect sync, wowing the crowd with their skill.

As the whole thing played out, the audience members who had attempted to depart began filling the stands again. Even the angry, jeering bargoers from the previous night found themselves filled with pride and excitement as the Champions worked together to save them all from this violent, rampaging mechanical beast.

Meanwhile, the stalker had lost interest in Daruk and Revali, who used the opportunity to strike. Daruk, in anger, charged the stalker once more, grabbing one of its back legs and pulling hard. His grip was so strong that he inadvertently tore the entire leg off, sending him rolling backwards towards Robbie. Above him, Revali soared down and hovered above the stalker as it charged up yet another laser blast. He drew a regular arrow from his quiver, nailing the thing dead in the eye and disabling its laser temporarily. However, this only bid them a few seconds of time to get into position for their counter-attack.

It was enough. Link and Mipha lined up behind Urbosa as the guardian quickly recovered to charge up its next strike.

“Steady… steady….” Urbosa said. “NOW!” The laser blast rocketed from the eye of the guardian, straight in Urbosa’s direction. With perfect timing, she used her Daybreaker shield to deflect the blast right past the guardian towards Daruk. Seeing the blast heading his way, Daruk used his shield to
deflect the blast one more time. The plasma struck the guardian from behind, knocking it into a forward roll onto its back. Revali flew down to the ground, creating another gale in front of Link and Mipha, who had leapt past Urbosa for the next strike. Link took the lead, spinning on his heels and onto his back with his legs in the air. Mipha leapt onto his feet, and Link kicked her high up into the whirlwind, which launched Mipha into the air just above the guardian. With her gleaming Lightscale Trident, Mipha crouched in midair, aiming the tip of her weapon straight at the guardian’s eye. She buried her trident deep in the robot’s lethal optics, disabling it for good-

-Or so she thought. The guardian wasted zero time recovering, climbing to its feet rapidly and spinning its head, launching Mipha off at high speed. Fortunately, Link was there to catch her, and the two stood side-by-side, weapons in-hand, as they stared down this mechanical beast that was beginning to seem utterly invincible-

“Urbosa!” The Champions all turned to the sound of Zelda’s voice. She and Purah were running after them as fast as possible, producing a cry of shock and worry to the public.

“Urbosa, your lightning!” she continued. “You have to use it!”

“Huh?” Urbosa said. “This thing is practically indestructable… what’s that gonna do?” She looked up, parried yet another laser blast skyward. Mipha and Link continued to block strikes from the stalker’s legs, Revali rained arrows from above, and Daruk tugged at the thing from behind in a fruitless effort to slow it down.

“It’s weak against electricity!” Purah explained, as she and Zelda finally ran alongside Urbosa. “You’ll fry its circuity with your attack! Do it now-”

“Wait!” Robbie cried out. “All that work… Urbosa, please reconsider- WAH!” Another laser blast nearly struck Robbie again as he took cover in his hole.

Urbosa frowned solemnly at the Sheikah scientist, placing her hand on her hips.

“Sorry Robbie,” she said, whipping her hair back and snapping her fingers. “Safety first.”

A massive bolt of lightning struck down from the heavens, zapping the guardian and frying it from the inside-out. It sputtered and twitched, gears grinding loudly inside its tough chassis, before exploding violently in a ball of fire. The spectacle produced a cry of celebratory cheers from the audience, who began to flood the imperial training grounds to congratulate their Champions.

Hearing the ruckus, King Rhoam quickly returned to the stage from his hiding place. And he beamed. He watched as each Champion was hoisted into the air by the crowd, paraded around with glee to the sound of chanted names and joyful cheers.

“Well... this wasn’t quite how I expected this to play out…” he said, smiling. “But I suppose if this is what we can expect from our Champions… perhaps Hyrule has nothing to fear after all!”

Nearby, the Sheikah Poet finally caught up with Princess Zelda in the crowd. He attempted to ask her if she was all right, but she was entirely distracted by the scene in front of her. She stared carefully straight ahead of her, right at the Hylian Champion, who found himself bashfully tossed through the sea of people. His arm was linked loosely with the Zora Princess, who herself appeared quite humbled by all the attention they were receiving.

The poet frowned. He had seen the way Link and Mipha seemed perfectly in sync during the Champion celebration, their bond quite evident to anyone with the incredible attention to detail that he possessed. Yet Princess Zelda continued to stare after her Hylian Knight in wonder, tearfully
smiling with her own observation of the subtly close bond between him and Lady Mipha. She found herself acknowledging the sobering realization… that she could never in a hundred years hope to even touch such a bond herself.

The poet’s heart broke instantly for Zelda in that very moment. Because he also realized… that no matter what, his dear princess was going to continue loving that ignorant Hylian miscreant just the same.

Once the Celebration ended, the Champions all gathered in a small stone gazebo just outside of Hyrule Castle. It was the mid-afternoon now, and they were spending one last moment together with Link and Zelda as they prepared to set off on their first mission without them.

“I tell ya, those formal shindigs really take it outta me,” Daruk said. Link stared blankly at Daruk. I don’t know if I’d call that whole thing a ‘shindig…’ he thought, but I suppose in a sense, it was certainly a lively party just the same…

“Hmmph, so this is the Sheikah Slate, eh?” Said Revali, nearby. He held the small slate between the fingers of his large wings, examining it closely. This was the first time he’d had a chance to really look at the thing up-close, so he thought he’d take the opportunity to see just what it could do.

“It is,” Zelda said. “Apparently there are more uses for it than we originally thought. Sadly, we’ve yet to decipher all of its secrets…”

Revali dropped the slate in Mipha’s hands, giving her a chance to look over it herself. She’d seen the thing earlier, as Zelda had used it to diagnose issues with Vah Ruta during her last trip to the domain. But this was the first time she’d actually gotten to hold it. It was surprisingly light, in contrast with its heavy stone-like appearance.

“The princess showed me something strange recently,” Urbosa said, leaning her head to view the slate in Mipha’s hands. “Somehow, it can create true-to-life images…”

“Oh wow,” Mipha said, quietly. “I would love to see it.” She stared up at Zelda with a look of curious wonder. “Um, princess… May I ask a special favor of you?”

She turned to glance at Link behind her, and the other Champions followed suit. They knew precisely what she was thinking. With Link and Zelda’s departure from the group, it would be nice if they all could get a picture together. Something for the two to remember them by in the coming weeks.

A few moments later, the Champions found themselves all gathered in a small group, side-by-side. Purah stood in front of them with the Sheikah Slate in hand, as she attempted to frame everyone into the shot.

“All right!” she said. “This spot should work nicely! Keep your eyes on the Sheikah Slate, everyone~!”

Revali stood on the far left of the image, followed by Urbosa. Both of their arms were crossed as they attempted to look as intimidating as possible for the shot. The massive Daruk filled in the entire background, while Link stood to the back left of Zelda, who herself stood in the center of the shot. Mipha stood nervously on the far right, slowly shuffling in closer and closer to Link, but hesitating in her efforts.

“Daruk, can you crouch down a bit?” Purah asked. “You’re as big as Death Mountain!”
“Oh…” Daruk carefully squatted down, as the Champions turned to look up at him.

“What’s with the glum face, princess?” Purah teased. “Gimme a big smile!” Urbosa placed a comforting hand on Zelda, knowing she was feeling quite saddened by her upcoming fruitless trip to Akkala with Link. As everyone was distracted by Zelda, Mipha took the opportunity to hobble ever so slightly closer to Link’s side.

“Revali, move your tail closer to the group…”

“Ugh, fine!” he scoffed.

“Mipha, you look so tense! Deep breaths, okay?”

“Right!” she held her hands up to her chest, breathing deeply as she tried to let go of her anxiety. She’d never done anything like this before, and really had no idea what to expect. Her close proximity to Link also made her a bit nervous, as the two of them attempted to appear mostly indifferent to each other’s presence in front of the others.

“Stay just like that! Here we go!” Purah messed with the zoom functionality of the slate, framing in the shot as perfectly as she could.

“Smiiiiile….” The entire group began to grin awkwardly, and Purah finally took the snapshot with her classic gesture-

“Click, snap~!”

At the very last minute, Daruk reached out with his enormous arms, pulling all the Champions close together in a tight embrace. And just like that, they’d taken the most awkward photograph the Sheikah Slate had ever snapped.

“And that’s that!” Purah said. “Thanks everyone!” She winked at them all, before tossing the slate back into Zelda’s hands. Revali turned and scoffed at Daruk’s previous gesture, while Link and Mipha blushed mildly, having rubbed up against each other quite suggestively due to the goron’s efforts.

“I’ll be seeing you all at the Great Plateau soon!” Purah said. She turned to Zelda. “And you as well, Princess. I’m looking forward to our research!”

She took her leave, and the other Champions quickly turned to Zelda in a state of confusion. She rubbed the back of her head sheepishly, a gesture that she’d picked up from all her travels with Link.

“Right…” she said. “So it appears... that there’s been a change of plans. Due to a last-minute decision, Link and I shall be accompanying you all on your upcoming assignment after all…”

“What?!”

Off to the side and out-of-sight, Mipha couldn’t help but grin at this revelation. It seemed that in the end... she’d get her chance to spend more time with Link after all. She looked over at the Hylian Champion, who briefly returned her stare, bearing a small smile of his own. As usual, it seemed they were both thinking the same thing at the same time...

The dream faded, as it always did. This time, quick and seamlessly. The orange glow of the afternoon Hyrulian sun faded to the blue darkness of the Gerudo Desert night, as Link felt himself grasping, reaching for anything to pull him back into this wonderful vision-

Link glanced around the moonlit room, located deep inside the guest suites of Gerudo Palace. He
took a deep, tearful breath, as he poured through these newly recovered memories which overloaded his emotions - as they so often did.

Suddenly, a chime rang out from the Sheikah Slate, which was propped on his bedside near him. He turned on the screen, and saw a blinking icon he’d never seen before. After tapping it, a series of words flooded the screen.

‘From Purah’ the letters said. ‘Link, I was recently perusing the photo archives of my slate, when I found something you might find… intriguing, to say the least. I’ve attached it to this message. Enjoy!~

-Your snappy friend, ~Purah~’

Another blinking icon was present at the end of the message, which Link tapped with haste. Immediately, a picture filled the screen of his slate causing Link to cover his mouth in surprise. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes as he scanned the image before him.

It was the very picture the Champions had taken together, over one hundred years ago. Purah’s timing could not have been better if she’d tried.

Link’s fingers traced the screen of the slate, eventually stopping at the image of Mipha. It couldn’t compare to the vividness through which he recalled her in his visions… but for now, it was certainly enough. He sat there, staring at Mipha for what felt like an eternity. But the tears quickly stopped.

He powered off the slate, staring up at the bright, glowing moon above him.

_Hope sure looks pathetic in hindsight... doesn’t it?_ he thought to himself.

Yet despite his sorrow, a small ember of hope was still growing inside his chest anyway. A feeling of light and happiness gently eased its way into his very soul, comforting him. Empowering him. He hadn't truly felt this way since before his encounter with Mipha's spirit back inside of Vah Ruta.

“Somehow…” he finally said out loud, to nobody in particular. His classic, boylike grin, seemingly lost in the throes of sobering adulthood, etched its way across his face.

“Somehow, some way, Mipha… We will find a way to be together again.”

"I swear it."

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to OnePunchFan for lending me the idea of the “princess” conversation. This was, without a doubt, the funnest chapter I have ever written. I unleashed everything I had onto it, emotionally. And I hope you all had as much fun reading it as I did writing! It’s also, at nearly 13000 words, the longest chapter so far to boot. So much for pacing myself!

Anyway, we now find ourselves entering the Goron arc. And the roller coaster ride that is season two continues in earnest, with Chapter 31: Rivers and Homes, coming at you soon.

Thanks, as always, for reading.
Rivers and Homes

Chapter Notes

And I'm back! The last few months have been quite a whirlwind but I'm happy to be revisiting this story. I have admittedly been interested in other things apart from Zelda, and as such haven't been invested in writing this story much at all. I sincerely apologise for that. But in general, when I write these chapters, I want them to come from a place of personal interest rather than doing it as a chore. I feel I'd be doing you all a disservice otherwise. At any rate, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Urbosa’s ethereal spirit stared out in the distant horizon, Hyrule Castle appearing as nothing more than a speck from her vantage point atop Vah Naboris. Her Divine Beast sat on a high mountain just east of Gerudo Desert. Its head was trained directly at the swirling mass of dark malice known as Calamity Ganon as it prepared to take aim with its ludicrously powerful laser beam.

Its telescoping legs lurched forward, maneuvering it into a crouched position. The ear-like appendages on either side of its robotic face rotated forward and extended outwards, generating a large orb of glowing red energy between them. With a massive burst, a red energy blast shot out of the orb, eventually colliding with the cloud of dark malice surrounding the distant Hyrule Castle. A low, menacing wail seemed to emanate from the dark cloud, echoing across the landscape.

“Nabooru…” Urbosa said out loud, as she made her way to the top of Naboris’s head and crossed her arms with pride. “…Legend of the Gerudo, celebrated over ages…” she glanced down and smiled at her Divine Beast, now back in her rightful possession due to Link’s efforts. “And you, who were named to honor her - you are a legend as well. Isn’t that right, Naboris?”

The beast shuddered slightly, as if acknowledging her praise.

“The bitter essence of defeat from a century ago still sits upon my tongue,” Urbosa continued. “But that is now in the past.” Her face scowled in slight disgust. “It was written that Calamity Ganon once adopted the form of a Gerudo. And that… will make this victory all the more satisfying. I like that. Now… I can take this personally…”

She continued to gaze out in the distant horizon in solemn reflection of the inevitable war still to come. With two of the four Divine Beasts now back in the hands of the Champions, Calamity Ganon’s efforts to resist would surely escalate from this point on. However, she truly hoped - and indeed, she believed - that Link would ultimately find a way to destroy him once and for all.

“Once we’ve established a lock on that thing… it will be up to Link to keep Ganon occupied until the moment we unleash our strike.” She grinned to herself with pride, practically licking her lips with glee.

“That moment… is going to be so delicious!”

“I don’t suppose you intend to argue with me about sticking around again, huh?” Link stared up at Paya, grinning, as she sat upon her newly-acquired rental horse. They were at a crossroads now, two
weeks into their journey through Hyrule field, and the Sheikah warrior now seemed unsurprisingly hesitant to depart from his side.

“I um…w-well, no. I don’t,” Paya said. “I’ve already made my decision after all…” She bit at her lower lip, hoping in vain to conjure up more appropriate parting words for the occasion. But she was simply unable. “I think… that I would just be a hindrance to you from this point on anyway,” she finally said, with a hint of sadness.

Link closed his eyes and shrugged. “I see. Don’t get me wrong Paya, I… appreciate everything you’ve done. Truly I do. But the last thing I want is to put you in harm’s way. Again.” He averted his eyes briefly as he spoke. “I think it’s in your best interests to get back to Kakariko... I’m sure you’re needed back home.”

In their two weeks of travel, it was understood between the two that Paya would be departing. In spite of her rather impressive performance back at the Yiga Clan hideout, the young Sheikah ultimately realized that she wasn’t truly prepared to assist Link in his remaining journey after all. She felt completely out of her league, and admittedly overwhelmed by everything that happened inside Vah Naboris. But more than that, there was something else she needed to do anyway - something she felt was for more urgent than continuing to get in Link’s way any longer. She stared down the winding road that would lead her back towards Kakariko Village, and she sighed as she recalled her encounter with Mipha’s spirit back in Vah Naboris.

“Please… watch over Link for me…” the ghost of the Zora princess had said, way back inside Vah Naboris. Paya shook her head at the memory. It seemed that, in the end, she wouldn’t be able to keep her promise to Lady Mipha after all.

Link continued to stare quizzically at Paya, who seemed suddenly preoccupied by her swirling thoughts. Despite all they’d been through in their brief time together, Link himself also struggled to find the right parting words for Paya. And with her sudden silence growing all the more awkward, Link simply decided he’d try to break the tension with a bit of lightheartedness. He smiled at her warmly.

“By the way… I have one last question for you, before you go.”

Paya’s snapped back to the present and turned to Link with a shy smile. “Y-Yes, What is it?”

Link’s eyes narrowed to a slight sneer. “Why… did your parents decide to name you ‘Paya’ anyway?”

Paya offered up her own mild sneer in return. “Ah, well, Link. That… is a secret to everyone!”

But Link just stared blankly for a while in response. It seemed her efforts to be cheeky flew right over his head. Eventually he shrugged, rolling his eyes as he did. “Ha, I’ll bet it’s actually because you’ve got some kind of papaya-shaped birthmark on your butt or something!”

Paya’s face instantly turned radish-red. And Link’s eyes widened with realization. Seemed he’d hit the nail on the head, so to speak. *Oops.*

Paya abruptly bucked at her horse’s ribs and began to ride away in embarrassment, leaving a bewildered Link in the dust behind her. But after letting him stew a bit, she finally offered a parting wave in his direction, which he happily returned with a relieved smile.

Soon, the rapid gallop of Paya’s horse slowed to a steady trot, and she turned her attention back to the road, growing lost in her thoughts of Mipha yet again. Truly, her encounter with the Zora
princess - not to mention her experience of the distant memories Link had shared with her - had left quite an indelible impact on her. Paya’s heart ached for the two, and she lamented all that they’d lost in the wake of Calamity Ganon’s attack a century ago. But her mind quickly turned to the ancient Sheikah texts hidden away inside Impa’s home. There were piles upon piles of documents and artifacts, most of which had not been examined for several decades in the wake of the great Calamity. She’d begin her research there.

_I might not be able to keep my promise to Lady Mipha_, she thought. _But perhaps… I can help Link in some other way…_

Finally content with her decision, Paya rode confidently down the road, eventually appearing as no more than a distant speck to Link. And once she’d finally disappeared, he immediately walked back towards the nearby stable to check on Epona one last time. For a small fee the stable owners had agreed to watch over his horse for the time being. After all, he felt it would be far more efficient to simply teleport to his next destination now that Paya was gone.

Link produced a handful of apples from his bag, feeding them to Epona as he brushed her silky mane. “It’s okay old girl,” he said to her. “I’ll be back soon.” Epona neighed back in acknowledgement, licking Link’s face with her large tongue before returning to her meal. Link patted her head one last time, then walked back from the stable fence towards the road behind him. He whipped out his Sheikah Slate, made a few taps here and there, and his finger soon hovered over the shrine of Ne’ez Yohma. This particular shrine was located deep inside a place that he’d longed to visit again for quite some time now, ever since his encounter with the elders back on the desert island where he’d previously met his demise:

_Zora’s Domain._

It was finally time to return home.

Link glanced around himself and made sure the area was clear. But before he could press down on the screen and begin to teleport, something nearby caught his eye. Link turned his head, his eyes widening with the shock of familiarity.

He saw… a walking tree. One that vaguely resembled a portly, mustached man. It was the same plant-like creature that he’d seen on his way to Kakariko months before.

Except this time, it was _speaking_ to him.

“Yahaha! It’s you again!” the creature said. “Can you see me??”

Link stared after the strange treelike being for a few seconds. Then he shook his head.

“’Nope.’”

He abruptly tapped the Ne’ez Yohma icon on his slate, causing him to erupt into a shower of blue sparks and swirling lights.

And then he was gone.

A familiar feeling of weightlessness settled into Link’s being as his body dematerialized, teleporting rapidly through the ether in the direction of Zora’s Domain. His thoughts were scattered, disconnected. Visions of his newly-acquired memories swirled through his mind, filling his heart with endless joy and bottomless sorrow.

And suddenly there was silence. Nothing but darkness surrounded him. He tried to gather his
thoughts, but there was nothing. But he found himself enjoying it, really. For one merciful, fleeting moment he knew only peace. Contentment, quiet, serenity, and-

“G-GWAAAAAH!”

Link opened his eyes. The sound of rushing water and shouting suddenly filled his ears, as a familiar scene of the carved blue stone and tiled floors of Zora’s Domain crossed his eyes.

And in the center of the chamber he now found himself in was… a startled goron?

“Where in Hylia’s name did you come from?!” The goron said. “I was just examining this… weird-shaped building here and then I-” He stared after the topless Hylian before him, then quickly put two-and-two together.

“Ahem, sorry about that. Uh, the name’s Reagah. Good to meet ya!” He extended a hand in greeting, which Link returned with a smile.

“Ah, well Reagah, I… am Link. And I…”

“I already know!” the goron interrupted, with a laugh. “You’re all anybody talks about around here!” He glanced around the large, flooded room and shrugged. “Besides, it’s rare to see your kind around here. Figured if any Hylian was visiting here, it would be you!”

“I see,” Link’s arms found their usual place on his hips as he examined the goron. This was the first one he’d encountered in-person since waking up from his slumber. Although Reagah was a bit smaller than Daruk had been, he was still quite an imposing specimen indeed. Link briefly glanced up. Atop the goron’s head was a tall, gray clump of hair tied in a band. On his back was a rather large knapsack, nearly twice as big as Link himself.

Which means…

“I take it you’re a traveler?” Link offered.

“That’s right!” Reagah said. “And a bit of a fighter, to boot! Was actually… recruited by Sidon a good while back. Cuz I can touch shock arrows. But I also weigh… well, a lot. Ha ha! So he decided I was too big to carry on his back. Pretty mean of him to say, right?”

“…Actually, I’d say that’s pretty accurate,” Link deadpanned.

“Rude!”

“Also accurate.”

“Ha! Well, anyway,” Reagah continued, “I was exploring the area for a long while and eventually decided to make my way up here after all. But by then, ‘ol Vah Ruta was already tamed! Looks like you beat me to it!”

“Sorry about that…” Link said, insincerely. He paused for a moment, then decided he’d change the subject. “Are you from Goron City? I’m… actually headed that way next, Vah Rudania is my next target. Can you give me any information that might help me out?”

“Goron City? Born and raised!” Reagah replied. “As for information… hmmm…” He scratched at his large chin absentmindedly. “Well, it’s… uh, super hot there. Unlike here…”

“That’s a given…” Link said. “And…?”
Reagah stared at Link for a moment, then shrugged. “That’s all I got, sorry! It’s been a while since I’ve visited home. A long while. Afraid I don’t know much more than that.”

“I see. Well... nice meeting you Reagah. See you around…” He began to make his way towards the stairs, when his new goron friend suddenly shouted from behind him.

“Wait, wait! Hold on, I think I do have something…”

Link spun on his heels, staring back up at Reagah.

“There’s… something I heard about in my travels,” the goron said. “Some kind of ancient tech lab, just east of Death Mountain in the Akkala region. I heard they might have something there that can keep your kind from getting… well, incinerated by the heat. Might be a bit of a longshot though…”

Link stared at the ground in thought.

‘Akkala’…? Ah… that’s right…

He recalled that Zelda had mentioned that region as the location of the Spring of Power in his recent memories. And though his recollection of the past was still rather fragmented, he knew deep down that he’d been to Akkala before, all those years ago.

Well, well! Looks like I have several reasons to head that way now… he thought.

Reagah noticed Link’s blank stare, holding up his hands defensively. “Sorry about that... Link. I know that’s probably not really helpful to you-”

“Oh no, it’s a big help! Seriously!” Link paused for a moment, considering Daruk’s typical greeting in these situations. “Thanks for the tip, brother!” He reared his hand back, then slapped Reagah’s backside with all his might.

“OUCH!”

As expected, it didn’t take long for word of Link’s return to spread like a tsunami through the confines of the Domain. Link silently made his way to the throne room, making sure to offer a wave or greeting to any of the dozens of Zora who ran over to greet him with excitement. He couldn’t help but notice the conspicuous absence of the elders of the Zora council, however. He’d have to question Dorephan about that later.

“Link! My boy, it is so good to see you!” The booming voice of the Zora king echoed, as always, through the chamber of the throne room as Link arrived. The curious group of Zora all departed to give Link some space as he offered a courteous bow to the king. But Dorephan waved him off.

“Now now, you know you can spare the formalities around me,” he said. “You are family, after all!”

“Wahahaha!” Dorephan laughed heartily at Link's statement. “Well, about that…” He motioned his hand as he spoke. “Now that Vah Ruta has been tamed, the elders of the Zora council saw fit to resume our annual conference with our fellow domains. It has, after all, been several decades since we last made any contact…”
Link frowned slightly. He’d been looking forward to seeing the elders again, especially after their last encounter on the remote island where he’d nearly met his demise. Still, he found himself relieved that the group had indeed made it back to the domain safely.

“Link…” Dorephan said, his mood suddenly changing to match his. “I heard all about your terrible ordeal on the island. And I must offer my sincere apologies. If we had only considered your emotional state after taming Vah Ruta, perhaps you’d.”

“Not at all,” Link interrupted, shaking his head. “I’m sorry to have caused you to worry, with my disappearance and all. I wasn’t in a good place, and I… well, I’m much better now. Let’s just chalk that all up to my… teenage hormones acting up.” He grinned widely, producing yet another chuckle from the great king.

“Aha! Well, then we shall let the past be the past. And I have to say… it’s good to see you in great spirits again…” he waved his hand in the air in front of him, causing Link to turn his head behind. Just outside the throne room, an enormous group of curious Zora stood by. They stared back with expectant, hopeful eyes. Link swallowed nervously as he caught sight of them. He knew what was coming.

“I found it necessary to check on your mood…” Dorephan explained, “...before opening the floodgates again!” At this, the rush of Zora swept into the room, crowding around Link and showering him with a jubilant cheer.

Much to Link’s surprise, the enormous king himself suddenly stood up from his throne. His head rose higher and higher into the air, practically touching the large domed ceiling of the throne room. He towered over Link, staring down at him with warm glee.

“As you likely should already know, it is quite customary for a new fiancé of the princess of the Zora… to have a formal banquet held in his honor. Is it not?” He slowly crouched down to one knee, placing his large hand gently on Link’s shoulder with a wide smile across his face.

“Welcome home, my son.”

With the announcement of the banquet in Link’s honor, scheduled to take place later that evening, Link suddenly found that he had a bit of time to kill. So he first made sure to complete the trials within Ne’ez Yohma shrine, having not had the time to do so during his last visit. After a brief stop at a small statue of the goddess Hylia to pray, he made his way over to Dento’s empty workshop. He quickly lit the forge and began to work of repairing his ceremonial trident.

The work was difficult, and he found himself sweating profusely from the heat of the forge. But as he repeatedly beat his hammer against the heated metal of the trident, he found the monotonous work to be rather meditative in a strange sort of way. He pounded away in a frenzy, throwing every ounce of his frustration and heartache into each strike. His well-toned muscles glistened and flexed with every pound. His grunts echoed loudly throughout the interior of the Domain, occasionally drawing the attention of one of the dozens of Zora scurrying to and fro as they hurriedly worked to prepare the market area for the banquet. Fortunately, they knew better than to interrupt this frustrated Hylian Knight in the middle of his work. And as Link continued on into the afternoon, he nearly missed the looming presence sneaking up just behind him.

“Not to be rude,” Link said abruptly, without bothering to turn around. “But there is something I really need to finish before tonight’s banquet. So if you don’t mind, I- OOF!”

A pair of large, red-finned arms wrapped around Link’s torso from behind him, lifting him high into
the air. A crackle of familiar, powerful laughter filled Link’s ears as he spun his head around to face the sharp-toothed grin of…

“Hello!”

...the Zora prince Sidon.

“Warmest greetings, my incredible and wonderful friend! Or should I say, my brother?” Sidon said, still clutching him tightly. “It’s quite lovely to see you again!” He dropped Link to the floor with a splash, and the Hylian boy spun on his heels to shake Sidon’s hand. “Same to you, Sidon! It’s good to be back…”

Sidon smiled. “The moment I heard of your arrival I swam straight up the river at near light-speed to greet you!” He peeked his head Link, staring back at the lit forge and clutter of tools behind him. “Though it appears I’ve interrupted your work. Might I ask what you are working on?”

Link glanced behind him. “Ah this… well…” he gulped loudly. “During my travels in the Gerudo Desert, I seem to have seriously damaged the ceremonial trident. As well as… Mipha’s armor.”

“You what?!” Sidon’s face curled into a furious scowl as he pointed a clawed finger directly in Link’s face, causing him to raise an eyebrow. “How could you?!” Sidon shouted. “Those items are so incredibly precious to us Zora, and you disrespect my dear sister’s name by destroying them without care?! For shame, my brother…”

Sidon’s eye twitched slightly, betraying his true emotions. And finally, his angry facade cracked abruptly as he erupted in boisterous laughter. “A-haha! I jest, I jest!” He placed a hand on Link’s shoulder. “These are weapons and armor after all,” he said, gesturing towards the work bench. “I’d be more furious if you weren’t using them at all! Though I’m disappointed that Mipha’s handywork wasn’t up to standard…”

Link exhaled quietly. “I see… for a split second there I thought you were actually angry. Your acting is pretty awful, by the way…”

Sidon rolled his eyes, then laughed again. “Oh Link, I could never, ever be mad at you! Especially for something so trivial” He stretched his arm out in his trademark pose and grinned. “I mean…have I mentioned how incredible you are? And how thankful I am? Because you are! And I am!” He paused for moment, then crossed his arms. “Actually Link, there’s a reason I came to see you. I wanted to show you something…” he reached into the bag he was carrying, rummaging through its contents carefully. “We were recently going through some of Mipha’s old things. We’d left them alone for many years after her disappearance. I suppose that we… wished to refrain from invading her privacy in the hopes that she would someday return to reclaim them…”

Sidon briefly paused his search, staring out at a distance waterfall for a while, and Link was surprised to see a pained expression cross the normally upbeat Zora prince’s face.

“Ah I… well, that’s actually… inaccurate,” Sidon said. “The truth is… my father and I simply weren’t strong enough to face the reality of her demise. However!” He turned to face Link, wiping a tear away from his eye. “With your recent return, and with the knowledge of Mipha’s spirit watching over us now… we finally gathered up the courage! There were many things we found, mostly letters and such, but one thing stood out. It’s… aha! Here it is!” From the bag, Sidon produced a small, nameless book. He opened the cover, showing Mipha’s signed name on the first page.

“It’s her diary! Who would have thought she’d actually kept one!” He approached Link, placing the book in his hands forcefully. “And after consultation with my father… we decided that we’d like you
to have it! Given that you’re her fiancé now, I believe it is rightfully yours.”

Link reached over and carefully took the book from Sidon’s outstretched hands. He spared a glance at Sidon’s face, surprised to see that the brave Zora prince was actually crying.

“I’m sorry, Link,” Sidon muttered. “It’s unbecoming of me to show you such a side of me, but…. I miss her. Truly, I do. It has been so long since her passing, yet it only feels like a few days have passed since then.”

“You and me both, my friend,” Link said. He reached up and held Sidon in a strong embrace, which was gratefully returned. After a brief moment, Link pulled away and began to examine the book. As he flipped through the pages, a smile settled onto his face.

“You know…” he said, “I wonder how Mipha would react if she found out I was looking through this…”

Sidon paused for a moment in careful thought, then flashed a sharp tooth grin. He balled his fists, softening his expression. “Don’t read it!” he suddenly shouted, in the most feminine voice he could muster. Despite the circumstances, Link found himself laughing uncontrollably, for what felt like the first time in decades.

As the sunny afternoon gave way to night, Link continued to work on his damaged equipment. Sidon joined in on the work, and even the members of the Bazz Brigade slowly began to file into Dento’s workshop. Their guard shifts completed, they too began to assist Link with the heavy repair work. And in no time, it was all finished.

“That was way harder work than I expected,” Rivan said, wiping his slick forehead with his arm. “Sure am glad I stuck with the military, instead of becoming Dento’s apprentice. I’m not cut out for blacksmithing at all.”

Gaddison rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re not exactly a top-notch guard either. Didn’t I catch you napping on the job once?”

“I-it was one time!” Rivan shouted, as Link and Sidon laughed loudly in the background. “And ol’ Sergeant Seggin never let me hear the end of that one anyway. I’ve paid my dues.”

“Yeah well, you still owe me for that!” said Bazz, as he helped Link put Dento’s tools away. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it was to convince my dad not to force you to swim two hundred laps around the Domain. Again.”

By the workshop entrance, Rivan’s purple-scaled daughter Dunma held her hands up in quiet acknowledgement of her father’s shortcomings. Link held back a snicker at this.

“Okay okay, fine,” Rivan said. “Can we please stop talking about this? You’re making me look like a total idiot in front of Link…” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly as he said this.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Gaddison said, “looking stupid is pretty much second-nature for you.” She pulled Rivan into a headlock and began to rub his head with her fist playfully. “You don’t need our help for that!”

As Gaddison and Rivan continued to fight, Bazz walked over with Link to examine their handywork. “Not a bad job, if I do say so myself,” he said. He carefully rubbed his black hand over the chest of the Zora armor. “With the extra plating, this thing’s sure to last several lifetimes.” He lifted it up and tossed it to Link, who quickly donned the armor in one smooth motion.
"And I’m quite glad to see that Mipha’s scale is still intact as well!” Sidon said. “Though I’m told that the white scale is one of the toughest substances in all of Hyrule!”

“Be that as it may, I hope I won’t be testing the limits of that any time soon,” Link said. He patted his armor down and crossed his arms. “I’ll be sure to take better care of this going forward…” As he glanced around the room, he smiled at all of his old friends. “Anyway. I want to thank you all for your help. It really means a lot. I have to say… it’s been a pretty lonely road so far… and it’s honestly a comfort to be able to be here with you again. Even if it’s only for a short while…

“Aw, don’t get all sentimental with us now!” Gaddison said, releasing her headlock on Rivan. She walked over towards Link, towering over him as always, and patted him gently on the head. “We still have a full night to catch up with each other! After all, there’s nothing in all the world like a crazy Zora banquet! Just have some fun with us, like old times!”

“Exactly,” said Bazz. “In fact, you’ll be positively sick of us by the time morning comes! I doubt you’ll ever feel lonesome again after another wild night with this bunch.”

To this, the Bazz Brigade all laughed loudly in unison. Link even managed a friendly smile as well. And yet… he struggled to shake an awful feeling that was brewing deep inside of him. He couldn’t quite put a finger on it… but it seemed that some part of him was incredibly restless. It was as if he somehow didn’t belong here anymore. As if too much time had simply passed him by, and simply thrown him by the wayside. He quickly shook the feelings away.

“Well Link, if you’re ever truly feeling lonely,” Rivan said, “my daughter Dunma over there is still single…” He gestured with his thumb towards the rather unassuming purple-scaled Zora still standing nearby.

Dunma’s face curled into a look of pure horror.

“Excuse me?!”

“I am honored to have the privilege of addressing all of you. Not just as a friend… but as a member of your family.”

The assembly grew quiet as Link began to speak. After several minutes of poking and prodding, he was finally convinced to speak to the expectant crowd of Zora gathered together for the evening’s feast. And although Link had certainly inherited his father’s affinity for spinning stories, he’d initially found himself at a strange loss of words. But after a bit of silence and contemplation, he continued to speak.

“The pain I feel from Mipha’s death is deep. But it’s something I’ve really only had to deal with for a few months now. I can’t even imagine what an entire century of heartache feels like…”

He stared up at Mipha’s statue above him, its likeness of his dear friend producing a genuine smile in him. And he continued.

“I can offer you very little in the way of comfort. But just know this: I loved her. Just as I love all of you.”

The crowd of Zora all sighed happily with pleasure at Link’s words. The feeling was, of course, perfectly mutual.

“Meanwhile, I have a responsibility now, to right the world of all its wrongs and to atone for past mistakes. I want you to know that I will defeat Ganon once and for all, and see this thing through to the end. No matter what it takes. I want you to know… this is not the end of all things, but the
beginning of something beautiful and exciting. And with that…”

He held his glass up in a toast.

“To Mipha,” he said.

“TO MIPHA!”

The feast began in earnest, with native Zora delicacies of raw fish and snails as well as several barrels of expensive liquor being passed around the table like clockwork. After a while, Link’s voracious appetite finally caught up with him and he found himself gorging on plate after plate of delicious food - much to the delight of his Zora brethren. As the night wore on and the drinks flowed like rushing water, the joyous feast inevitably gave way to boundless drunken shenanigans.

*Like father like son, I suppose,* thought Link, as a greatly inebriated Bazz spouted off playful invitations to fight towards anyone within earshot. A split second later, Bazz found himself on the ground, tapping out of a painful armbar courtesy of Link - the only person both brave and sober enough to challenge him in such a state. After several violent wrestling matches with some of the Zora army’s other strongest warriors, the competition quickly moved to the enormous lake below Zora’s Domain, where furious swimming matches became the main event of the evening. In a fit of insanity, the drunken Bazz even dared to challenge King Dorephan himself to a race. He was promptly tossed aside in the King’s wake like a leaf against a tidal wave. It seemed old Dorephan still had some incredible power behind his equally incredible girth.

The evening gave way to late night, and the tight-knit members of the Bazz Brigade each took turns telling stories and reminiscing of days long past. Link told them of his travels, his struggles, and his hopes for a brighter future. They listened with honest and earnest intent, riding the tale of Link’s adventures like a trip on the back of a flailing Molduga. Link couldn’t help but laugh at the fact that, after all these years, his friends were still the same old suckers for a well-told story.

But before the evening was over, Link abruptly bid his friends an early ‘good night,’ helping the drunken Bazz up off the floor. He felt a somber sense of déjà vu as he helped walk the poor Zora guard back to his quarters to sleep. After all, it was quite reminiscent of all the times he’d done the same with Bazz’s father, Seggin - but with the glaring absence of a certain red-finned Zora girl helping to bear some of the weight on the other side.

A bed had been prepared at the inn, courtesy of Link’s old friend Kodah. Knowing this, the tired Hylian decided it best to turn in early for the night. Having previously regained his vivid memories of the Champion’s night out in Castle Town, he felt that he’d experienced enough drunken misadventures for an entire lifetime. Even if those escapades had taken place over one hundred years prior.

But instead of passing out from his exhaustion, he tossed and turned for hours, unable to get even a wink of sleep. His mind raced with his recollection of the events of the day, and he mourned the fact that he’d spent most of his time back in the Domain feeling out-of-place in a strange sort of way. And as the hours went on, the commotion outside of the inn gradually faded to the calm silence of night. The mesmerizing sound of flowing water overtook his mind, eventually focusing his thoughts on memories long past. His mind began to replay the aftermath of the experience in the Merry Moblin all those years ago. He recalled the warmth of his conversations with Mipha, the soft feel of her outstretched hand, the look of her sleeping face bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, and the heartache from his past now lost to the merciless passage of time.

He suddenly jumped to his feet, pulled his newly-repaired Zora Tunic on over his head. He knew he
wasn’t about to get to sleep anytime soon. And the stillness of the night only seemed to prolong his pained reflection of his recovered memories. So he began to make his way down the watery paths of Zora’s Domain, hoping to focus his mind on his next objectives.

There were now two more Divine Beasts yet to reclaim: Vah Rudania of the Gorons, and Vah Medoh of the Rito tribe. With any luck, he’d be able to tame them rather quickly, and then set out on his ultimate mission of exacting vengeance on Calamity Ganon. But if his previous encounters thus far had been any sort of indication, luck most certainly was not on his side at the moment.

Clutching Mipha’s Diary, he carefully thumbed the soft cover in contemplation. He’d put off reading the thing for a while, and still wasn’t quite sure that he should. But after some careful consideration he decided now was as good a time as any.

So much for taking my mind off her… he thought to himself. He took as seat right there on the wet ground, and began to read the moonlit words of his dear friend, Lady Mipha.

“An outsider came to stay with us at the domain today - a Hylian child of only ten years of age. He is the son of the our deceased friend, the Hylian Captain. The child’s name is Link, and he made quite a first impression. He was curious and full of energy, with a ready smile. Are all Hylian children that way? One thing that surely sets him apart is his swordsmanship, which I hear is exceptional. He has even bested adults. He must be somewhat reckless, however, just like his father. He was covered in bruises and scratches. Wishing to be helpful, I attempted to heal his wounds for him. The way he curiously looked up at me with big, round eyes, was absolutely adorable. But it pains me to say that I was unable to heal him. It seems my healing magic is still yet unstable. Perhaps soon I will be able to figure out why.”

“Link has been staying with us for quite some time now. It feels as if his height increases roughly an inch per day! And with it, so too grows his recklessness. He nearly died attempting the infamous dive off Shatterback Point. But something incredible happened in the aftermath. I discovered the true extent of the capability of my healing magic. His impact with the surface of the water had surely left him crippled for life, that much had been certain. I have healed countless soldiers in the past, and never had I dealt with so severe an injury as his. Yet there he now stands, good as new and reckless as ever. I believe… that I have now discovered precisely what triggers my abilities. And to be quite honest, I am not so sure what to make of it right now.”

"A Divine Beast was excavated from Zora's Domain. This one is called Vah Ruta. The first time I laid eyes on Ruta, I was surprised by how cute it was. It's so big and round, with a long, awkward nose. According to the Sheikah who found Ruta, Divine Beasts require someone worthy to control them. It's fun to imagine someone piloting this enormous beast in the distant past. I wonder who will have that honor next."

"The King of Hyrule and his daughter, Princess Zelda, paid special visit to the domain. The princess asked me if I would agree to pilot a Divine Beast. She told me she needs my help to face the Calamity. My heart knew at once what to do, so I agreed without reservation. Calamity Ganon must not be resurrected. If he is, there is no way to ensure the safety of my people, or of anyone. I do not know what will happen. All I know is that if there is anything I can do to help, I must try. I must protect Hyrule. Upon my acceptance, we quickly met with the Zora council to discuss the selection. After much deliberation, Father finally gave his blessing for me to be Ruta’s pilot. He believes that the threat of the Calamity can no longer be ignored. The Zora must play their part. He seemed on the brink of tears when he made me promise to return unharmed. My eyes burned with tears as well, so I simply nodded. Seggin could hardly look at me. Muζu left partway through. I feel awful for putting them through this, but I must do what I can to help Link. I could never forgive myself otherwise."
Speaking of which, Link came to visit the domain! The timing could not have been any better. It feels like forever since he was here last, but it has only been about two years. He no longer resembles the child I first met. He is now an accomplished knight. I am so proud. However... He doesn’t speak as much anymore, and smiles even more rarely. He is still the kind soul I knew, but something has changed. I asked him if something had happened, if something was wrong. He told me of his experience at the Knight’s academy, of the intense bullying and suffering he endured, simply for being associated with the Zora. And it seemed even he was surprised by his own silent demeanor. After a couple of days he slowly regained the energetic and youthful nature he once possessed. Still, there is an air of distance that persists around him, and a growing weight of responsibility that appears to weigh heavily in his heart. Perhaps it is his newly acquired height, but I feel he is ever looking past me, into the distance beyond...

“Link and I decided to go camping together. It had been ages. While we sat together in our favorite cave, we heard an unusual noise outside. Link insisted I wait behind, but I stubbornly stayed. Suddenly, a Lynel attacked us! I was struck by a shock arrow during the fight, sure that we would both meet our end. How silly of me to doubt. With a sure hand and a fierce gleam in his eye, Link helped me to defeat our foe. His spearmanship was swift and graceful. I was fascinated by the beauty of his movements. Though I should have been terrified, I could not help but feel safe in the presence of my dear friend. His kindness and determination to help those in need... His strength and skill... My heart is drawn to his. I am doomed.”

Link closed his eyes for a brief moment. A mixture of sorrow and joy flooded his heart, and he couldn’t help but feel guilty for violating Mipha’s privacy like this - even if he already had Sidon’s blessing to do so. It was almost as if the Zora princess was right there in his head in that very moment, blushing with embarrassment at the thought of this nosy Hylian violating her innermost thoughts.

Still, his morbid curiosity ultimately got the better of him. So he wiped a small tear from his eye and continued to read.

“Link visited us for the third time, and something unforgettable happened. I experienced something wondrous, a beautiful moment in time I shall treasure forever. I am grateful to the princess for allowing me some time alone with Link inside of Vah Ruta. I felt that I was finally able to break through his silent, stoic demeanor. For a brief moment, the weight of our responsibilities melted away in the peace and silence of that single night together. I saw a flash of the boy I once knew, the confident grin of the man I love. And I even managed to get a few measurements in the process as well! Perhaps I will finish crafting the armor sooner than I thought.”

“Today was the Champion Celebration at Hyrule Castle. It was an honor to take part. However... Honestly, I do not remember much about it, other than a brief interruption by a rampaging ancient Guardian. Link and I were, after all, rather... exhausted from the previous night’s activities - courtesy of Urbosa. Though I was shocked then by our relatively high tolerance for alcohol, I do not think I am too eager to recreate such an experience any time soon. Still, Link and I shared yet another unforgettable moment together. I just hope that the next time will not require such high levels of drunkenness!”

“Today, my white scale came in. I have officially come of age, and am a fully realized Zora adult. As such, I can finally complete that special armor for Link! I am confident it will fit him perfectly. The Champions have been traveling all across the land together. There have been numerous opportunities to present the armor to him, but... well, we keep getting interrupted by a certain blue-winged Champion. And even when we have some time to ourselves, I do not seem to possess the nerve to propose! So I am beginning to wonder... should I really go through with it? According to the old legend, long ago a Zora princess fell in love with a Hylian swordsman. Perhaps there is
“Linny! Is that you? What are you doing up so late?!”

Link shut the book instantly, placing it carefully inside his bag as he climbed to his feet. Kodah was approaching him from down the path, a look of worry apparent across her face.

“Ah Kodah, it’s nice to see you,” Link said, nervously. He hoped she hadn’t caught a glimpse of what he was reading, but it seemed she was quite preoccupied with her own worries. “Is something wrong?” he asked her.

“Oh I, um, it’s no matter. I don’t want to bother you with something so minor, I’m sure you have better things to-”

“Spit it out,” Link said. It was rare to see Kodah in a state outside of her usual bubbly self. Something was definitely wrong. “I’m more than happy to help,” he said, “if there’s anything I can do.”

Kodah paused for a moment, then offered a pained smile. “Okay, if you insist. It’s… my daughter. Finley. She’s…” she paused for a moment, “well, she’s gone missing. Ever since the banquet, I’ve been up all night searching for her.” She looked away, scoffing mildly. “For her to go somewhere without telling anyone… I swear, she must get that from her father!”

Link frowned. He’d met the young Finley at the banquet, but only briefly. She was a small Zora, especially for her age, but seemed to act more like an adult than her own mother at times. Still, for her to be missing without telling anyone was not quite unlike Kodah herself. Link decided not to point that out.

“I’m sorry to hear that…” Link said. “Although… I seem to recall her saying something odd last night. ‘I want to find a prince of my own, just like Lady Mipha!’ or something like that…”

“Really!” Kodah said. “Then… hmmm… I wonder… if she's on her way to the Bank of Wishes again. That silly girl…”

She stared down at the now-puzzled Link, and shrugged. “Linny… I hate to ask this of you, but would you mind checking downriver for her? I don't doubt that she can handle herself, but if something has happened to her, then-”

“I'm on it.” Link said, flatly. “I'll let you know right away if I find anything.” He spun on his heels and began to walk towards the entrance to the Domain. “It’s safer if I go by myself anyway, what with all the lizalfos out and about.”

“Oh Linny, thank you, thank you!”

Kodah watched as Link disappeared into the darkness, sighing to herself with a smile.

“Just as gallant as I remember you…” she said, to nobody in particular. She stared up at the nearby statue of the late Zora Princess and shook her head.

“You sure are lucky, Lady Mipha.”

It seemed Kodah’s suspicions were correct. After making his way downstream, encountering a few shock arrow-wielding Lizalfos along the way, Link finally found young Finley loafing around the Bank of Wishes on the shoreline of the Zora River.
“Carry… my thoughts… to him…” she whispered, scarcely noticing the Hylian Warrior quietly floating down on his glider behind her. She appeared to be praying to a small red cylinder in front of her - one which carried ornate gold etchings across its surface.

“Excuse me-” Link began, as he folded up his glider and began to approach the red-scaled Zora girl. Startled, the young Finely spun on her heels and gasped.

“Oh! You surprised me! I didn’t expect to see anyone out here so late!” Link rolled his eyes at this. Blissfully ignorant, just like her mother, he thought. If I’d been a Lizalfos instead….

“Do you have a wish for the water fairy as well, Link?” Finley asked. She examined him up and down and shook her head. “Oh, never mind. I suppose not. If you did, you’d have a letter to send!” She paused for a moment, then smiled. “Wait, does that mean you’re… a servant of the water fairy?”

Link shrugged. “I’m pretty much everybody’s servant these days. So I guess that’s right.”

“Oh really!” Finley said, crossing her arms bashfully. “How lucky!” She swung her small hips from side to side as she stared up at Link. “If that’s the case, I have an important request for you! Once I release this,” she patted the surface of the red cylinder behind her, “I’d like you to follow my love letter and get to know whoever picks it up. Once you do that, please report back to me so I can find out what kind of person he is…”

Link glanced downstream, then back at Finley. Why not just go yourself, lazy girl-

“But my mom always tells me not to venture too far out.”

“Your mom doesn’t even know you’re out here,” Link deadpanned. “If you’ve gone this far, might as well finish the job, right?”

Finley frowned for a moment. “Y-you… do have a point there.” She rubbed her small chin with her hand for a moment, then grinned. “Okay! If you’ll escort me to wherever this letter goes, then it’s a deal! Although, I have nothing to offer you as a reward-”

“Don’t worry about it, let’s just get this done. Ready?”

Finley nodded. “Ready!” She kicked the cylinder straight into the water, and the pair was off.

As expected, the two soon encountered a variety of monsters in the river, including octoroks and lizalfos. Fortunately, Finley was quite agile in the water, and she did her best to stay out of trouble as Link dispatched their enemies with relative ease. They continued following the letter floating swiftly downstream, passing through small forests, under bridges, and through narrow canyons. And in no time, the pair found themselves floating through a massive wooden fortress above the river - the same fortress where Link had first encountered Sidon several months prior. Dozens of zombified lizalfos - courtesy of Ganon’s blood moon - lingered above on the planks of the floating fortress. But they seemed to take no notice of the armor-gladi Hylian and his little Zora friend floating in the water beneath them.

Soon, the red cylinder containing Finley’s love letter was beached on the bank of a small pond, just
underneath a tree. There, a strange traveler sat by a small campfire, the letter now in his hands. So engrossed by the letter’s words was he that he didn’t notice Link and Finley approaching him from the water.

“Hello there!” Link said. The traveler glanced up, and Finley quickly dashed behind Link’s legs, peeking out shyly from the side.

“Oh hi!” the traveler said. He climbed to his feet and approached Link. “The name’s Sasan! I’ve been camped out here for a little while now…”

Link looked the man over and shrugged. He was dressed plainly, with a simple blue collared shirt and white pants. His hair was short and brown, his ears long and pointed like most Hylians. His eyes were incredibly beady, and Link found himself almost having to squint in order to see them properly. In short: he wasn’t much to look at.

But really, Link thought, who am I to judge?

Link shook his hand. “Well Sasan, I… am Link. And I…” he glanced down at Finley behind him. “…Am a… servant for the water fairy?”

Sasan laughed out loud. “Well, Mister ‘Water Fairy,’ or whatever, I have a random question for you. You ever been to Zora’s Domain?”

Link couldn’t help but laugh out loud at the question, much to Sasan’s surprise.

“You could say I’m acquainted with the place…” Link said with a grin. “In fact, I’ve been following this letter down the river from there to make sure it ended up in the right spot…”

“I see, I see,” replied Sasan. “So is it pretty far from here?”

“A short ways up the river, actually. Why do you ask?”

Sasan approached Link and crossed his arms. “Well to start, I want to thank you for delivering this letter to me! I’ve been corresponding with a lovely Zora by the name of Finley, giving my replies to travelers heading to the Domain.”

Link raised an eyebrow. The man appeared to be in his thirties, judging by his face. He glanced back down at the still-hidden Finley and shrugged. In reality, she was probably in her thirties as well; even if she didn’t quite look the part.

“Well, if you’ve been writing to her for so long,” Link said, “what’s kept you from visiting her in-person?”

Sasan rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Well, the thing is…. I lied to her. I wrote that I was a buff traveler.” He flexed his small arms weakly and sighed. “As you can see… that’s a bit of an overstatement.”

“I’ll say.”

“Yeah… and she said she wanted to meet me, but…” Sasan looked away. “I can’t help but feel that she’d be disappointed with the truth—”

“THAT’S NOT TRUE AT ALL!” Finley jumped out from behind Link, running up to Sasan. “You’re… you’re… so handsome!”

Sasan’s face turned bright red with embarrassment. “You really think so? I-” He paused. “Wait, hold
on... are you... Finley...?"

"In the flesh!" she said. She was hopping up and down with sheer excitement. “I’m so happy to finally meet you! My soul mate!”

Sasan crouched down to one knee, holding Finley’s small hands in his own. Link couldn’t help but feel a bit... uncomfortable with the situation. He wasn't particularly good with mushy romantic stuff. But he continued to awkwardly observe the scene unfold in silence anyway.

“IT’s... so great to finally meet you Finley,” Sasan said. “Though I sort of expected someone... taller.”

Finley sighed. “I’m sorry... because we Zora age differently from you, I’m sort of in that annoying stage where I look like a kid... but I’m actually a young woman! I hope that doesn’t... bother you-”

“Not at all!” Sasan said. “I’m... sorry that I’m not quite up to standard myself...”

Finley giggled out loud. “Well then. If you promise to work out and build those big muscles you told me about, I promise to grow into a big, beautiful Zora! My growth spurt should be coming any day now! You’ll see!”

Sasan smiled happily. “It’s a deal! My darling...”

Link groaned loudly.

The group made their way back up the river towards Zora’s Domain. It was the break of dawn now, which meant Link would soon be making his way Northeast towards the Akkala region. But first he had to make sure this helpless couple made it home safely...

“Link, thank you so much for everything...” Finley said as they walked. “If it wasn’t for you, I’d have never met the love of my life!”

“I also want to thank you,” said Sasan, “for giving me that extra push! I appreciate it!”

Link was hardly listening, and simply nodded in response. His mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the long journey ahead, with everything he’d had yet to accomplish... and most of all, with echoes of the words he’d read in Mipha’s journal. He glanced over at the unlikely couple, then laughed to himself.

I suppose Mipha and I looked like a pretty strange pairing ourselves, way back then... he thought. With that in mind, a question began to form in the back of his head. After a moment he decided to ask it out loud.

“Finley?”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“Anything, my dear hero!”

“Does it... bother you at all that... well, I mean, with Zora lifespans and all, do you think-”

Finley held a hand up to interrupt him. “You’re wondering if it bothers me that I’ll outlive Sasan, right?”
Link nodded. “I hadn’t put much thought into it, all those years ago. So I guess I just wanted to get a
Zora’s perspective on things…”

Finley sighed. “It’s true…” she looked up at Sasan and smiled. “I will certainly live far longer than
he will… but!” She glanced back at Link. “It will be worth every single minute! And I will always
cherish the time we spent together… until I rejoin him in Hylia’s presence when I die too.”

Link couldn’t help but smile back at Finley. He found it humorous that he was taking comfort in the
naive words of a young child.

_Then again… he thought, I suppose wisdom knows no age… does it?_

Finley returned Link’s gaze. “I mean, it’s just like you told us, right?” she said. “Death… is not the
end of all things… but the beginning of something beautiful and exciting.”

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Thanks for your patience! Didn't mean for it to take so long to update, but I'm happy
we're finally moving the story along. Lots to come on the horizon, and I still intend to
see this all the way through. Here's hoping you won't have to wait as long for the next
one! See you in Chapter 32: Footsteps.

I wanted to give a special thanks to one of my readers, CapriciousCupcake55, for doing
some fanart for the story! It means a lot to have such patient fans, and I feel like his
piece really captures the feel and mood that I'm going for in this story:
Here’s a link to his deviantart as well, for those who are interested. Thanks again,
CapriciousCupcake55:
https://khodrawsstuff789.deviantart.com/art/Reflection-747078877
Chapter Notes

Hello there. I’m still alive! Hope you enjoy this new installment, and I’ll see you at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

An evening fire crackled and sparked at the small campsite situated just south of the great fiery behemoth known as Death Mountain. Here, a collection of strangers took turns exchanging stories, adding to the ever-growing firestorm of rumors regarding the exploits of one mysterious Hylian hero. Kairo, a dark-colored member of the goron tribe, was just finishing his own round of storytelling with his newfound friends - a Hylian girl named Gaile, and a grumpy old man known as Caid.

“I heard he’s already torn through the Gerudo Desert,” Kairo said, “laying waste to an entire colony of moldugas! He single handedly saved Gerudo Town! Amazing stuff.”

Gaile nodded in agreement. “He is amazing! I heard he’s a bit of a monster to boot! Seven feet tall, superhuman strength, and not to mention... dashing good looks!” She winked.

Caid rolled his eyes. “Yeah yeah, and he can shoot fireballs out of his eyes, and lightning out of his... well, y’know. I mean, gimme a break. How can you even be sure this is all true?” The old man waved a skewer of fish in the air like a sword as he spoke. “Silly legends of so-called ‘heroes’ have persisted for decades already. And every single time, it ends up being some weirdo in tights who maybe got lucky and slayed a monster or two. I’m sure this guy’s no different.”

“Hahaha!” A nearby peal of laughter suddenly interrupted Caid. “That’s amusing! Truly amusing.” The trio turned their attention to the source of the laughter: a tall, accordion-wielding Rito standing just outside the camp.

“Something funny over there, bird boy?” Caid snarled.

Kass shrugged his shoulders. “Ah, pardon my intrusion.” He walked over to the fire and sat down with the group. “But you see, there really is a great hero out there. Someone brave, bold, and far stronger than any of you truly know. You would be wise not to doubt him…”

Kairo smiled. “So you know of him?!” The goron clapped his large hands together with excitement.

Kass returned the smile. “Know of him? I’ve met him! In fact, he has already reclaimed two of the four divine beasts. I’d imagine he’s even in this area now, ready to take on the beast of Death Mountain…”

As he said these words, a light crunching noise alerted the group to a looming presence just outside their camp. A short, black-hooded stranger slowly made his way to the campsite, face shrouded in darkness. He arrived next to the fire, exhaled deeply, and crossed his arms.

“Excuse me…” the stranger began, “But do you all mind if I rest here a while? I’ve... traveled a pretty long way.”

Caid waved him off. “Ah, buzz off, little boy. We’ve already got too many weirdos filling up the
“Enough already!” Gaile held up a hand to interrupt him. “Don’t mind him, he’s just grumpy. As usual.” She held her hands open towards the stranger. “We welcome all sorts of people here. It is a public fire after all! Sit on down.”

The stranger nodded in gratitude, then took his seat on the ground near Kass. “Much appreciated,” he said. From his bag he produced a skewered hunk of meat, holding it up to the fire to warm it up. With his other hand he pulled his hood back, revealing a great mess of dirty-blonde hair. Kass began to chuckle to himself with recognition.

“Ah, and just for the record…” the blonde stranger said, with a warm grin across his face, “I’m only about five feet, six inches. The bit about the lightning bolts is true though.”

Kairo’s eyes widened. “Wait a minute, so you’re… it can’t be, are you-”

“This… is Link,” Kass interrupted, as he stood up and walked over to shake hands. “The legend himself!”

The trio’s jaws all dropped. But after a moment, Gaile was the first to speak up. “So… so… so it’s true? You’re the great tamer of the divine beasts? The hero who was sent to save us all?”

Link shrugged, taking a huge bite from his meat skewer. “I mean, I wouldn’t call myself great or a hero anything, but…” he said, mouth full of chewed food, “…taming the beasts is definitely one of my main objectives.”

Caid rolled his eyes at this. “Bah,” he scoffed. “I don’t believe it. Where’s your proof?”

Kass held up his hands and smiled. “Oh, just ignore him, Link. You have nothing to prove.”

Link finished chewing, swallowed, and dusted his hands off. He held his left hand in the air, holding it there for a few seconds. Then he snapped his fingers. Instantly, a bolt of lightning shot down from the heavens, exploding a large boulder near the group with an earth-shaking boom. The group of campers all recoiled in fear, nearly soiling their pants in fright. Link produced yet another meat skewer from his bag and began to cook it, barely staving off a half-grin as he did so.

As the group recovered, Kairo turned to Caid and sneered. “Anymore stupid questions, wise guy?” Caid shook his head vehemently.

“Actually, I’ve got one.” Link said. “Any of you fellas have any salt?”

Kairo and Gaile pointed towards Caid with a laugh.

“Hahaha, it appears the jig is up…” Kass said. “My teacher was indeed the court poet for the Hyrulean royal family, all those years ago. It’s great that you now remember him.” He retrieved his accordion from its case, playing a few notes on it before settling it on his lap. “Though I apologize that your experience with him was… less than pleasant.”

Link laughed. “Well, that’s a bit of an understatement, but there’s no need to apologize. It’s in the ancient past after all…”

The night grew still for a brief moment. The flame of the campfire crackled and flickered, bathing the campsite in the warmth of its orange glow. Crickets chirped nearby, and the snores of various travelers rounded out the chorus of sounds all around them. As the mood changed, Kass suddenly
spoke.

“He loved her, you know,” he said.

“Come again?”

“The princess. My teacher was utterly, deeply in love with her. So much so that, after the calamity, he made the choice to devote his life to passing down as many verses as he could in order to help you along the way. Once you inevitably returned, that is.” He began to play a quiet song on his accordion, filling the night air with warm melody and comfort as they spoke.

Link sighed. “That’s... a shame. I mean, it’s not like he had any competition from me really.”

Kass smiled. “...And that’s precisely why he was so very heartbroken about the whole ordeal. He knew the princess herself only had eyes for her escort, her own knight attendant. It was simply… a classic tale of unrequited love. He was consumed with jealousy, fuming that the knight was neither nobility nor royalty himself. And he dealt with it the only way he knew - with the power of song, and with loyal service to his princess. He dealt with it by choosing to help you, in spite of his resentment.”

A flash of realization spread across Link’s face.

“Wait,” he began, “So… you’re basically telling me… that your master loved Zelda so much that he was willing to devote the entire rest of his life to helping the guy he hated the most?”

“That’s more or less correct.” Kass laughed. “And... it’s beautiful.”

“No, it’s stupid.”

“...Hah! Well, I suppose love tends to make people do rather stupid things...”

Link stared after Kass for a while, then glanced down at his Zora armor and shrugged.

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Anyway,” Kass said, in an effort to change the subject, “It seems we have ourselves a bit of time to kill. Perhaps you’d like to hear another song? I know one about the ancient hero. It was researched, compiled, and eventually passed down by that… ‘stupid’ teacher of mine.”

Link shrugged. He had to admit that he was beginning to warm up to the sounds of Kass’s accordion, but-

“That depends,” he said. “Is it going to be another cryptic hint at something or other? Because I reckon I’ve had my fill of secrecy for two lifetimes.”


Link paused briefly before finally relenting with a simple nod.

“Very well then.” Kass began to play.

"The kingdom of Hyrule is a vast and storied land, Oft grasped in the palm of a villainous hand. A dark force of destruction, many times undone, Rises once again - Ganon, the calamitous one."
But hope survives in Hyrule, for all is not lost, Two brave souls protect it, no matter the cost.
A goddess-blood princess and a fearless knight, They appear in each age to fight the good fight.
Their battle with Ganon I've committed to song, To keep it through time, no matter how long.

Now begins the second verse, listen and you'll know, Of their battle with Ganon 10,000 years ago.
The kingdom of Hyrule was once a land of lasting peace, A culture of such strength and wit, that suffering did cease.
But Ganon lurked beneath the surface, strengthening its jaws, So the ancient people of Hyrule set out to help the cause.
Their efforts bore fruit in an automated force, To help avert Calamity by sealing it at its source.
Four giant behemoths for which power never ceased, Each of these titans was called a "Divine Beast."
And free-willed machines that hunted down their prey, These Guardians were built to last so they could join the fray.

To guide the beasts in battle, warriors were needed, So four Champions were pledged to see Ganon defeated.
Divine Beasts, Champions, princess, and knight, Their plan to rout Ganon was looking airtight.
And when Calamity Ganon reared its head, Hyrule rose against it, The optimism of Hyrule all the more incensed it.

Ganon raged in its assauli, boiling with hate, It gnashed its teeth and thrashed about, but it was all too late.
The Guardians kept the heroes safe through every hour... The Divine Beasts unleashed attacks that weakened Ganon's power.
The hero with the sealing sword struck the final blow, And the holy power of the princess sealed Ganon so.
And that is the story of the brazen attack, On Calamity Ganon 10,000 years back."

The song ended, the still of the night settled in once more. Kass allowed some time for the song to have its effect on Link, and then he spoke. “I’m sure... you’ve heard this tale several times by now. My apologies if it isn’t all that much help...”

Link didn’t respond immediately. Instead he stared up at twinkling stars in the blackened sky, still dwelling on the words of the song, still marveling at the sheer magnitude of what his predecessor accomplished - of what he would have to accomplish. “Well... if nothing else,” he finally said,
solemnly, “it at least puts into perspective just what it’s going to take to save this world.”

Kass studied Link’s face, hoping to glean a better idea of what precisely was going on behind the troubled blue eyes of this young Hylian. It seemed that the hero was not at all how Kass’s teacher had described him; stoic, unreadable, silent, rude. Well, perhaps the last bit was still accurate.

But the young man who sat before him was otherwise quite different than he’d expected - playful, outspoken, unreserved, impatient, and genuine. Kass wondered if his teacher had simply pegged Link completely wrong. That was certainly possible, what with his clearly biased opinion towards him. But perhaps the ache of failure and the passage of time had actually uncovered the man who’d been present inside Link all along. Perhaps, Kass dared to think, the events of the last one hundred years were carefully arranged by fate to produce the ultimate version of the hero who would rid the world of Ganon’s malice once and for all.

Kass shook his head, brought his thoughts back to the earth. If nothing else, he at least realized one thing as he studied Link; that the power of music was still very much alive indeed. Something about the song had clearly stirred something within the young Hylian. So Kass chose his words carefully, and then he spoke.

“There is… an air of heartbreak in you,” he said. “The ache of profound loss is quite evident on your face.”

Link gave no immediate response, so Kass continued. “I will not pry, as it is not my place. But all I will say is-”

“Sometimes I find myself asking what the point of all this is,” Link interrupted. He was surprised by his own words, but was still quite comfortable uttering them. There was something about Kass that left him in a disarmed, contemplative state. He figured he’d at least take advantage of the convenient soundboard before him.

“All my life, the only thing I’ve known is to fight, to struggle, to strive for victory. Maybe it’s a selfish thing to say, but I’ve been wondering more and more lately, if maybe I’m not the one who is meant to save this world. All I know is that I have this stupid sense of duty to get it done, no matter the cost. So again, what’s the point of all this? What is the true purpose of my life, of my experience, my very existence?”

Kass shrugged. “Beats me, Link. I think I’m still figuring that out myself to be quite honest.” He paused. “It’s... a long life. There will be twists and turns, moments of heartbreak and mourning, yet moments of singing and dancing just the same. And it all leads to the same place - a better end.” He walked up beside Link and joined him in his skyward gaze.

“So I can’t tell you precisely what it looks like to find meaning in this life. All I can tell you... is that you must never stop fighting, must never stop striving and growing. You must simply never stop. And perhaps, with time, you will find your answer.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Link said. “I guess I’m just finally starting to realize... that I can’t simply charge in without question and strong-arm my way through every single obstacle like I used to do...” Link rolled his eyes as he realized what he’d just said. “Ugh. I’m starting to sound like Zelda now.”

At this, Kass offered a small laugh.

“Anyway,” Link continued, “I think that, in the end, I just hope to Hylia that I have what it takes to finish what we started all those years ago.”
“You do!” Kass said. He offered a supportive clap on Link’s back as he spoke. “I swear you do. And remember, you have the faith of an entire country pushing you forward. You have all of my support as well, meager as it is.” He turned to Link, smiling down at him. “If you are ever in need of anything, just ask.”

Link scratched his chin absentmindedly, considering the offer. “Well… there is one thing.” He gestured towards a mountain in the northeast, atop which the vibrant orange glow of an unclaimed Sheikah Tower stood, piercing through the night’s darkness.

“I need to make my way to that tower in the morning, get my bearings on the area. And as you can see, I’m currently without a horse. So I was wondering… maybe you could… well, you know…”

Kass blinked. “Surely, you must be joking.”

With a yawn and a stretch, Link woke up at the crack of dawn, well-rested and ready to start the day. He found it somewhat amusing that his best sleep always seemed to take place on the rock-hard ground rather than the supposed comfort of a soft bed. But he figured it was simply in his nature to be more accustomed to overall discomfort. He hoped to break that habit when this whole thing was all said and done.

Link quickly gathered up his belongings, then made his way over to Kass - careful not to wake up the snoring strangers strewn about the camp. His avian friend was standing at the edge of the hill nearby, watching the sunrise and singing quietly to himself. Kass turned his head and smiled as Link reached up to offer a friendly pat on his shoulder.

“I’m all set,” Link said. “Did you sleep well?”

Kass shrugged. “Ah, I’m not much of a sleeper these days…”

Link nodded apologetically. “Ah, sleep deprivation. I’m all too familiar with that,” he said. "But I guess there’s really no rest for the weary. “Shall we go then?”

Without warning, Link secured his rucksack, made sure his weapons were properly secured, then hopped upon Kass’s back.

“It would seem…” Kass said, grunting in discomfort, “…that this isn’t the first time you’ve tried something like this…”

Link laughed, recalling the memory of himself and his Zora friend Gruve riding Link’s glider together - and their subsequent crash landing into the Zora river. “Yeah well, last time I was the one who ended up doing the flying by the end of it, if you could even have called it that. And I’ll just say… there’s probably a good reason I don’t have any wings.”

He thought about his own words for a moment, then sighed involuntarily. He knew that If Revali were here, he’d most certainly never hear the end of that one.

With everything in order, Kass spread his wings and took to the skies with a powerful flap. Fortunately for the pair, their flight to Akkala Tower was one without any real turbulence or struggle. Aside from a jest by Kass about Link’s surprising weight, they remained mostly silent and observant as they flew, taking in the breathtaking landscape around them. A part of Link’s heart was aching for Mipha, wishing she could see the same beauty he saw from this vantage point. But he refocused his attention to the looming mountain growing larger and larger before him.

And that’s when he finally saw it clearly: Akkala tower, his destination atop the mountain. But
something was… terribly wrong. Even in the dim light of the morning, he could still make out the piles of swirling red malice clinging to the tower's outer surface, presenting a deadly obstacle to any who would dare come close.

The tower itself pierced straight through the enormous Akkala Citadel, which at one time was the pride of the citizens of eastern Hyrule. It was now but a shell of its former self, its crumbling walls and platforms jutting out of the sides of the mountain upon which it was initially carved out of, all in varying states of decay. Most concerning for Link, however, was the glow of spotlights spiraling around the mountain, which seemed to be searching for any potential intruders. These were none other than airborne guardians, hovering about the cliff sides with their ancient motorized propellers.

Link shook his head in disbelief. “Those things… can fly now?!?” he shouted.

Even Kass himself gulped. “That’s… correct,” he said. “This is the closest I have ever been to one, however. Quite menacing indeed…” he veered right, then caught an air current which sent them high above the Akkala Tower. “Let’s seek out a safe place to land, hopefully we can avoid any unnecessary encounters. I can’t imagine we’d last very long against them up here…”

Link and Kass scanned the area, eventually swooping down and settling on a carpeted platform just in front of the main entrance to the citadel on top of the mountain. It seemed the guardians weren’t bothering to patrol the main structure, what with the oozing malice itself providing the necessary defense there.

After they landed, Link hopped off Kass’s back and looked over the immediate area. He found it baffling that this particular Sheikah tower was being defended so heavily, and it only made him all the more curious as to what happened here all those years ago. As if reading his mind, Kass spoke.

“I was told by my teacher… that the Akkala Citadel was the location of the final stand of Hyrule’s brave army after the Calamity,” he explained. “As you can see, they were largely unsuccessful. But if the legends of them are true, then I’m certain they fought valiantly to the last man.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Link affirmed. He could personally attest to the strength of Hyrule’s former military; even if they had seemed bumbling and ineffective at many times. But even at the height of their collective buffoonery, their bravery was simply unmatched.

As Link took stock of the tower before him, which was surrounded by crumbling stone walls and chambers, Kass turned to face him. “My dear friend,” he began, as he unlatched his accordion and sounded a few notes. “I have one more song for you, before my departure. My hope is that it will aid you going forward…” Link nodded and closed his eyes, and Kass began to play:

"In the valley of the ancient spring, between earth and sky,

Lies a dormant shrine where the goddess cries,

Tremendous power, wielded ever true,

Shall gain the treasure meant for you."

“Link, I will be frank,” Kass said, as he stopped playing. “This song alludes to the Spring of Power in the North Akkala Valley, which I’d imagine you’ve visited long ago in your previous life. It is guarded by the ancient Spirit of Fire, Dinraal. Seems all signs are pointing in that direction for you…” He glanced around the mountaintop, and sighed. “I wish I could provide more assistance, but alas - I’m a musician, not a fighter. Still, I have no doubt… that you will overcome whatever terrible evil lurks here.”
Link nodded. “You’ve done more than enough Kass.” He patted his avian friend on the back as he spoke. “And I thank you for your help.”

“No, no, thank you,” Kass replied, “for your willingness to lend an ear. I’ve grown used to being ignored or forgotten by most everyone these days. So I appreciate… well, your patience. And of course, your genuine friendship.”

“Likewise,” Link said with a nod. He abruptly turned and began to make his way towards the citadel entrance, ready to face whatever monstrosity lurked behind its oozing walls of malice.

“Farewell, my friend!” Kass shouted.

With a flurry of his wings, he took to the skies, and then he was gone.

Link wasted no time. With the magnesis rune of his Sheikah Slate, he pulled old sheets of metal and rusted boxes into position in front of him, allowing him safe passage over the bubbling pools of malice which formed a makeshift moat around the citadel. He climbed through a small opening in the rusted metal gate that blocked off the entrance, and soon he was inside.

Much to his surprise, there wasn’t any resistance when he entered - no floating, ghastly skull monsters, no bokoblins or lizalfos warriors. Only a couple of strange eyeball-like creatures protruding from the malice itself were present. These weak enemies were promptly destroyed with arrows from his bow, dissipating the small pools of poisonous red goo they were connected to.

The interior walls of the citadel were cracked and even outright destroyed in various spots, likely from the ancient battle that was fought here. He carefully made his way down a long hallway, careful to avoid the poisonous mounds of malice that seemed to pop and sputter in response to his presence. At the far end of the hall, he could already make out the climbable stone latticework of the Sheikah Tower, which had apparently exploded straight out of the citadel roof when Link had activated the first tower on the day of his reawakening.

This was almost too easy. To Link, this clearly indicated that he was due for an ambush at any minute.

His eyes scanned the hallway around him as he walked, searching for signs of anything amiss. He just knew that something was coming. He could sense it. It was the same feeling of dread he’d experienced each time he encountered one of Ganon’s monstrous incarnations, a sharp feeling deep down in his gut, the familiar pressure of darkness and evil pushing down on his stomach, squeezing him, threatening to snuff him out for good—

GROOOOWWWL.

Link’s stomach roared loudly, reverberating off the interior walls of the citadel.

...Or maybe, I’m just really really hungry, he thought, with an audible laugh. He opened a small pouch on his belt, producing some leftover meat from the previous night’s meal. But before he could even take a bite, another low rumble began to sound. This time it wasn’t his groaning stomach.

The malice around him began to sizzle and bubble like thick boiling soup. Then it began to move slowly in all directions, collecting itself into tall mounds around the citadel hall. Link sighed, put away his food, and quickly drew the ceremonial trident from his back. His eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched as he took up his usual battle pose. Soon, the malice around him began to form into vaguely humanoid shapes. Dozens upon dozens of armor-clad entities soon emerged, holding spears and swords of various size.
Link scanned each one, feeling some bizarre sense of familiarity. There was something about the monsters' postures, their stances, and even their gait, which seemed somehow familiar-

He gasped quietly in shock.

These were the remains of Hyrule’s soldiers, reanimated by Ganon’s putrid malice. And they weren’t just any soldiers at that. They were members of Hyrule’s Royal Guard.

Link’s old comrades.

His grip tightened around the shaft of his trident. His heart was filled with despair, with utter sorrow at his failure to save these men a hundred years ago. But this despair quickly gave way to furious anger, as he began to make his way closer to the phantom creature nearest to him.

Sensing Link’s approach, each reanimated soldier suddenly unleashed a blood-curdling shriek, deafening him. But Link didn’t dare flinch, as each one immediately charged straight after him. He focused his attention on the soldier nearest him, catching its overhead sword swing with the fork of his trident.

Up-close, he could see every disgusting detail of the results of this reanimation: pulsating red flesh composed of pure malice, bones protruding from the torso and limbs... and buried in the chest of each soldier: a large eye-like creature serving as its heart.

Link spared no hesitation. He kicked the nearest phantom in the stomach, stepped back, then speared his trident straight through the eye in its chest. The malice inside instantly lost its form, the possessed soldier’s bones falling and scattering across the floor.

Link had no time to process all of this. Another trio of sword-wielding phantoms converged on him immediately, so he crouched, then swung his trident in a sweeping circle around him, knocking the enemies to their backs. With a quick leap, he turned and stabbed one of the soldiers in the chest then rolled past it in the same motion. He began to backpedal towards the entrance of the citadel, hoping to avoid being flanked from any of his blind sides. Fortunately, it seemed these corrupted soldiers only retained their host’s fighting capability and not their capacity for tactics.

...Or so he thought. Suddenly, each of the phantoms stopped in-place, as if they were calculating their next move. After a moment, one single soldier emerged from the growing cluster. It wielded a rusted shield in its left hand and a royal guard’s sword in its right. Atop its skull was one of the few things identifying its origins: a torn and stained guard’s cap. But these features weren’t what gave Link pause. Instead, it was what this wretched thing bore around its neck.

It was a pocket watch. Lieutenant Relk’s pocket watch.

Oh, Hylia...

The phantom seemed to snarl at him through its lips which, like the rest of its ‘skin,’ was composed entirely of malice. A hollow hole was present where a nose used to be, a pair of bottomless holes instead of eyes stared right back at Link, straight down to his soul. But despite the sheer absence of facial features, the sick grin of his old friend Relk was unmistakable.

Link gritted his teeth with fury. His hands shook with seething rage, with furious regret. This was no longer just about achieving victory anymore. This was about giving his old friends the final rest they deserved - and annihilating whatever horrible entity was responsible for this cruel abomination.

Link replaced his trident on his back. He reached towards his waist and drew a long curved sword from behind him. It was the Scimitar of the Seven, Urbosa’s old weapon and a gift from Riju back in
the desert. After a hundred years of rest, the weapon would finally see its triumphant return to the glory of battle.

Link pointed the sword out towards the phantom Relk, nodding grimly. Unsurprisingly, the phantom returned the favor. This was a gesture from the pair's old days, back when he and Relk would spar daily, when Link would unleash beatdown after beatdown on the clearly overwhelmed soldier who always seemed willing to come back at Link for yet another round.

The phantom Relk screeched, then charged. Link considered doing the same, but decided to take a defensive position instead. He figured that the moment he engaged with Relk one-on-one, the remaining dozens of phantoms would instantly converge on him. With luck, he’d be able to dispatch this first opponent before that happened.

Relk’s phantom lifted its sword, leapt into the air, and swung it down for a helm-splitting blow - its host’s trademark move. Link’s muscle memory kicked in automatically. He caught the overhead blow with his sword, rolled onto his back, and with both legs he catapulted the phantom up and into the ceiling where it ricocheted and fell to the floor with a painful thud, dropping its weapons with the impact.

The skeletal creature immediately climbed back to its feet, used its hands to center its twisted head on its body with a sickening crack, then retrieved its weapons from the ground. It seemed that, in addition to possessing its host’s fighting habits, the phantom also picked up on Relk’s stubbornness as well.

Link spared a glance behind him, and exhaled loudly. At the very least, the remaining phantoms had not yet budged from their surrounding positions after all. But he knew that it was only a matter of time before they found their opening and would attempt to exploit it.

So he quickly hatched an idea. If they were all waiting for the right moment to strike… then perhaps he’d have to strike first instead.

He swung his Sheikah Slate around, frantically navigating through his runes out of the corner of his eye. By this time, Relk recovered and began to creep towards Link, this time much slower than before.

Link tapped a button, and suddenly a glowing blue orb materialized in his hands: a remote bomb. He turned his attention to the waiting phantoms behind him, heaved the bomb in the air above them, and detonated it.

The sound of the resulting explosion echoed through the chambers of the citadel, deafening Link once more. Blobs of malice and projectile bones rocketed out from the center of the mass of soldiers as Link sprinted down the hallway towards the epicenter of the blast. Unfortunately, the explosion had only disassembled the soldiers instead of destroying their cores; but at least he now had an opening. He stabbed a few solitary eyeball creatures rolling to and fro in front of him, then charged straight for one particularly large soldier in front of him.

He pulled his trident from his back and threw it forward like a javelin, piercing the tall soldier straight through the chest and knocking it to the ground as he charged after it. But a group of phantoms to Link’s right side, unaffected by the blast, began to lash out with swords and spears. He managed to slide to his left, dodging an awkward jab from one spear while parrying a sword strike at the same time. He countered the sword with a stab of his own, piercing one phantom’s chest and killing it.

After retrieving the monster’s dropped weapon, Link began to dual wield his swords, parrying strikes from all sides as he attempted to make his way to the other side of the hallway. He slid between the bone legs of a pair of phantoms charging after him, stabbing the first one through the chest as he did,
then he hopped to his feet and spun to face the crowd once more.

His back now to the opposite wall, he once again no longer feared being flanked by any of the creatures. What he feared now, however, was the possibility of their tactics changing.

...And his fears indeed came into fruition. Several of skeletal beasts regained their form and took up a loose formation before him. The spear-wielding soldiers took point, with the remaining warriors assembling behind them. They stood before Link, unleashed another phantom shriek, and began to charge towards him all at once.

But one particular soldier was sprinting faster than the others, easily outpacing their approach. It was the husk of Lieutenant Relk, back for more. Link observed with bewilderment that his phantom seemed to possess a mind of its own. In seconds, Relk had closed the gap between them and began to engage Link in a sword fight once more, well before his fellow soldiers had even arrived to back up the assault. Link easily parried Relk's first couple of blows, but he was growing tired. It was only a matter of time before he'd make the wrong move, before one hasty swipe would leave him open for a strike-

SHUNK!

Relk’s sword pierced Link’s shoulder, dropping him to the ground. His skeletal face inched closer to Link’s, bearing a twisted, menacing grin as if taunting him. But Link returned the grin himself. Relk’s face suddenly frowned as he traced Link’s outstretched left hand towards his chest, where the Scimitar of the Seven lay pierced inside. The phantom began to laugh in defeat as the malice around it melted away. And soon, the bones of Relk lay scattered across the floor in front of Link - just as the remaining soldiers descended upon him.

Link sighed in exasperation. He was now completely overwhelmed. His mind spinning wildly, his thoughts clouded with pain, he glanced up at the broken stone window just above him. Without hesitating he leaped to his feed and scaled the wall, just as a wave of spear tips pierced the ground where he’d just laid. He stood atop the windowsill, activating his Sheikah Slate again.

It was time for Plan B.

A volley of remote bombs began raining down upon the phantoms, blasting bits of malice and bone in every direction. Link regretted having to use such cheap tactics to gain the upper hand - but he supposed the gods of life and death hardly weighed any measure of fairness in their judgement. Soon, a cluster of the disembodied eyeball-like creatures began rolling across the hall, hoping desperately to regain their forms. But it was to no avail. Link began sniping each one with his bow, hoping to mop up the last of these wretched creatures once and for all.

It was then that he noticed something odd. The malice wasn’t dissipating as he’d hoped. Instead, it appeared to be pooling towards the center of the room, collecting into a large blob of pulsating flesh and bones. And from the center of the mass, a large soldier stood - the same soldier Link thought he’d dispatched with his trident earlier. His weapon still stuck out from the creature’s torso.

Link groaned loudly. I... really should’ve just stayed in bed this morning, he thought bitterly. He hopped to the ground, took a deep breath, and began shooting bomb arrows at the growing mass of malice. But it had no obvious effect.

As the mass grew larger, Link spared a closer look at the large soldier’s head at the center of the cluster. There was something he recognized about this man - the remains of him, at least. And his heart skipped a beat when he finally realized who it was. The helmet this phantom wore was one possessed by only the king’s finest general, the golden crest of the Hyrulian Royal Family apparent
across the scalp.

This was General Krant. Link’s old boss.

You too, Krant? He thought, somberly. But before he could finish his thought, a wave of malice suddenly rushed out from Krant’s body, forming tentacles and tendrils that immediately lashed across Link’s arms and legs before he could even draw his swords. They lifted him from the ground and pinned him straight to the wall behind. The boiling malice popped and bubbled, burning through his flesh like a powerful acid as Link screamed in fury and pain.

In front of him, Krant began to creep steadily towards him. He ripped the ceremonial trident from his chest and pointed it at Link, ready to slay the now-helpless Hylian with his own weapon. Link flailed against the mass, but found himself unable to pull himself free of its burning grip. The malice holding his arms and legs had nearly penetrated to the bone now. But his severed nerve endings could no longer feel it. His breath grew stilted, and then it stopped. His heart pounded furiously in his chest, and he began to black out. It was here, through tears of terrible pain and exhaustion, that Link somehow managed to find his calm.

In the center of the blackness, a warm light filled his very being. He felt a familiar presence there, the comfort of his dear friends. He saw Mipha, her ghostly face offering him a look of awful concern. He saw Lieutenant Relk, with his grim smile, offering his own brand of cocky encouragement. And he saw Urbosa, standing with her arms crossed before him. She offered her hand towards him, and snapped her fingers.

Link’s eyes opened, his vision returned. He could feel Mipha’s grace coursing through him, healing him faster than the malice could destroy him. With newfound strength, he wrestled his left hand free, staring daggers at the skeletal form of General Krant descending upon him with his trident.

He glanced at the covered ceiling of the citadel, grinning madly.

Would it work? Could it penetrate such a thick barrier? He supposed that now was certainly not the time to be doubting Urbosa’s considerable power.

Krant was now directly in front of him, rearing back with his trident. Link waited, and waited, and waited, and just as the trident stabbed forward to impale him through his head, he held his hand up.

SNAP!

A brilliant flash of light exploded through the roof of the citadel, rocking the entire mountain upon which it was carved. Chunks of rock and debris exploded in every direction as bolts of lightning pelted the interior of the citadel hall, incinerating nearly everything in its path.

Krant’s husk shrieked in pain as it fizzed and simmered with the intense heat, then it fell flat on its back. The malice around it began to disappear, dropping Link to his feet. He picked up the dropped ceremonial trident and made his way over to the remains of Krant. The old general’s skeletal face stared up at him, as if pleading for mercy. Link paused for a moment, offered a curt nod towards the creature. Krant weakly returned the gesture.

Link raised the trident high in the air, then stabbed the large eye core in Krant’s chest with every ounce of hatred and fury he could muster. One final shriek, and the creature burst into pieces, dead.

Link collapsed to the ground in a huff. Around him, the smoking remains of malice began to disappear, leaving only the bones of his comrades in the wake. He sat there for a time, in this sea of skull and bone, as dark clouds rolled above him and darkened the sky - surely as a result of the
uncontrolled power of Urbosa’s unleashed fury.

And then the storm came, bringing with it a heavy rain which poured upon Link through the gaping hole in the roof of the citadel. He glanced around the room, and with surprise, he realized he could make out the faint glow of the spirits of all the fallen soldiers now standing about, offering Link their respectful salute. Flanking either side him, the ghostly forms of Mipha and Urbosa stood by, offering their comfort.

Krant and Relk were there too, Krant with his stern grin of respect, Relk with his usual conceited smile. In their previous lives, both had spoken of going out in a blaze of glory. It seemed they had each gotten their wish.

As quickly as they’d appeared, the spirits each vanished one after the other. Only Mipha remained for just a while longer, resting her gentle hand on Link's shoulder, before she too disappeared with a rush of wind.

The relentless downpour continued in earnest. The cleansing waters washed away the dirt on Link’s clothes, washed away the blood caked on his scarred flesh, washed away the ceaseless tears that flowed down his face.

Link spent the entire day there, retrieving the bones of fallen soldiers and digging a mass grave for them. It pained him in his heart that he was unable to give each individual their own respectful burial, but he supposed this was the best he could do with the scattered remains. He’d at least managed to keep the bones of Relk and Krant together, but chose not to assign them special graves of their own. They would have wanted their final resting place to be alongside their comrades anyway, he knew.

In the day's aftermath, Link was completely exhausted down to his very core. Urbosa's Fury always seemed to rapidly drain his energy with every snap - but the effect was even more excruciating today, with the sheer amount of power he'd unleashed with it in the battle. Nevertheless, he knew he'd have to grow more accustomed to its usage if he wanted any chance of seeing his mission through. It seemed that Ganon's monsters were growing more powerful with each passing day, hoping to resist Link's inevitable progress towards taming the divine beasts and annihilating the Calamity for good.

With sheer force of will Link overcame his lack of energy, stubbornly persisting in his efforts to give his fellow soldiers the proper burial they deserved. When he finished, he offered a prayer for the poor souls who had fallen at this awful place, and then he scaled the Akkala Tower to activate it and set up camp there. Night had settled in by this time. Link finally granted himself a chance to sit and reflect. From his vantage point up in the tower, he could see an orange, serpent-like dragon arching gracefully through the skies around the towering glow of Death Mountain. This was Dinraal, the counterpart of the lightning Spirit Farosh he’d previously met in the Faron Region before. Link imagined he’d be meeting that behemoth very soon.

But first, it was time for rest. Glorious, merciful rest.

In his hand he gently clasped Lieutenant Relk’s old pocket watch which he’d retrieved from his remains in the citadel. He’d thought of burying it with the old Lieutenant, but something told him he’d be better off holding onto it in his memory. During their Academy days, Relk was always ‘borrowing’ Link’s stuff - surely he wouldn’t mind if Link returned the favor just this once.

Link turned the watch over in his hands, his thoughts drifting towards the citadel below him. He could hear the rush of wind as it howled through the broken walls and windows of this once legendary fortress. He swore he could still hear the conversations of mingling soldiers, their muted
peals of laughter, the echoes of footsteps of a time long passed.

He glanced down once more at Relk’s watch, still frozen in time, to the very moment his dear friend had originally met his demise from the malice. His eyes focused on the hands of the watch, the carefully etched numbers on its face, the cracked glass which reflected Link’s own somber face on its surface...

...then the air was still. Time itself seemed to slow to a crawl, and then to a dead stop as Link grew cold, still, steady. His eyes focused even more intently on the old pocket watch, whose hands somehow seemed to be moving on their own once again. A melodic ticking began to sound in his ears, hypnotizing him, drawing him down, down, down, into a familiar, but comfortable dream state.

And before long, he found himself standing in the grounds of Hyrule Castle once more, one hundred long years ago...

Chapter End Notes

Next up is Memories of Mipha Part 10: Hylian Warrior.

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It’s been a busy summer (and autumn!), so I apologize for how long it has taken to get this chapter out. But I think I have a valid excuse this time aside from laziness: I was applying for a Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at Regis University - and I got accepted!

I’d spent a large chunk of the summer in writing workshops, compiling a portfolio of previous original work for submission, so I didn’t have much time to focus on this story at all. But I’m super excited to take the next step in my development as a storyteller, and I wanted to extend a personal thank-you to everyone who has supported this fic all this time. Reading your feedback and your reaction to my writing style has ultimately given me motivation and hope that I might just be able to turn my love of writing into something even more in my life.

Still, I’ve got a long ways to go, so much to learn, so much to improve on... but it starts here. And I appreciate everyone who has checked in on this crazy story along the way, it means so much. And it will continue to mean so much just the same.

The program begins in January, and my hope is to wrap this thing up completely before then, if that's even possible. One way or another, however, I’ve decided that I will -not- release any additional chapters until the rest of the story is completely written. I don’t know how long it will take, but at least know that once the next update is released, it will signal that the story is completely finished and we’ll be entering the final phase towards the ending of this story that I so desperately want to reach. You can expect a marathon of chapter releases at that time.

And after all this is finally done... well, my first published book will hopefully be out in 2021, assuming all goes well! Please look forward to it. If you're at all interested, that is.

Until next time, take care.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!